Air Gondwana: Teaching negotiation skills by utilising virtual worlds for an authentic learning experience

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The first year subjects *Contracts A* and *Contracts B* at the Queensland University of Technology Faculty of Law are assigned the task of teaching the skill of negotiation at a basic level as part as an integrated graduate capabilities program. Until 2008 this was done using a traditional approach involving a lecture, print materials and role plays. In 2008 the traditional approach was replaced with *Air Gondwana*, a multimedia program which is centred on the dealings of a fictional airline. Among other media, it utilises "machinima" - movies and stills created using virtual environments, in this case the *Second Life* environment and the *Flight Simulator X* computer game (with permission from Microsoft) - to create an engaging and authentic learning experience for "millennial students". *Air Gondwana* is founded upon a range of learning theory including social constructivism, Collin's "cognitive apprenticeship" model and Laurillard's model for successful learning in law.

Keywords: cognitive apprenticeship; virtual worlds; authentic learning; negotiation

Context and challenge

In the 1990s criticisms were leveled at law schools for focusing too much on the content that lawyers were expected to know, with little focus on the skills needed to be a lawyer (McInnis & Marginson 1994). The Queensland University of Technology was one law school which responded to this challenge by implementation of an integrated program of graduate capabilities. Under this program, skills are developed to different degrees of attainment during stages of the law degree. The first year subjects *Contracts A* and *Contracts B* have the task of teaching the skill of negotiation to a basic level of attainment, with the skill further developed in second and third/fourth year subjects.

Until 2008 this task was executed by use of a "traditional method" comprising a lecture, print materials and two role plays. This was well received by students but could be questioned as to its effectiveness as a learning experience. The literature suggests that effective negotiation training includes instruction, demonstration, role play and debriefing (Tyler & Cukier 2007). However in addition to addressing these ideals any alternative strategy needed to address the challenges of accommodating over 500 students each year studying in a variety of modes (full time, part time or external) and a large teaching team comprising both full time and sessional staff, not all of whom are comfortable with teaching or providing feedback on negotiation when they themselves were not trained in negotiation skills at law school. In 2008 the traditional approach was replaced by the on-line multimedia program *Air Gondwana*.

The project

Air Gondwana was designed to address the requirements of effective negotiation training within the context of the *Contracts A* and *Contracts B* subjects at QUT. The program is based on the contract dealings of a fictional airline, *Air Gondwana*. The airline is part of a larger corporate group owned by a wealthy industrialist, who entrusts its stewardship to one of his sons in order to test his business acumen. The program consists of five modules which include an on-line video that demonstrates negotiation done poorly, provides instruction on negotiation theory and practice and then demonstrates the same negotiation done well; on-line scenarios in which students practise the application of the principles of negotiation across a range of fact situations; an on-line quiz in which students practise the application of negotiation principles to a single set of facts; a face-to-face role play and a debriefing video. The instructional video and on-line exercises are provided for formative purposes while the agreement produced by the role play forms part of the students' summative assessment.

Discussion

Air Gondwana takes a social constructivist approach to learning by engaging students in carrying out tasks which lead to better comprehension . It engages students through the narrative of the airline and its various contractual dealings (Mott 1999), which are realistically depicted through the use of stills and *machinima* – video created using virtual worlds, thereby avoiding the expense of professional CGI rendering. In the case of *Air Gondwana* the virtual environments utilised were *Flight Simulator X* computer game and the *Second Life* on-line virtual world. The former was used after obtaining permission from the manufacturer Microsoft. This game enables users to apply their own liveries to the airframes of aircraft, and thereby enabled a realistic depiction of the airline and its fleet. The second enabled the depiction of interactions between characters forming part of the storyline, which in turn helped to provide an authentic experience for students. It has been recognised that the use of virtual characters to present tasks and critical information can be a useful strategy in creating authentic learning environments and allow a subject to be dealt with in a more authentic manner than if the same subject were presented in a decontextualised way (Agostinho 2006).

Accordingly, *Air Gondwana* reflects elements of a "cognitive apprenticeship" approach to learning in that it includes modelling, coaching, scaffolding, reflection, and exploration (Collins 1991; Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989). It also reflects Diana Laurillard's model (1993) for effective learning of law, which comprises the stages of students becoming familiar with key ideas and information; accurately relating the language to underlying meaning; acting on simulated but realistic situations; using feedback to modify their understanding and adjust their actions and reflect on their actions and feedback. *Air Gondwana* demonstrates that this model can apply equally to the learning of skills theory and practice.

The program is in its first year of operation. It is being well received by students, and is regarded as instructive, innovative, easy to use and a fun learning experience. Being interested in the material and having fun are powerful stimuli for learning (Bruner 1960).

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Please cite as: Butler, D. (2008). *Air Gondwana*: Teaching negotiation skills by utilising virtual worlds for an authentic learning experience In *Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology? Proceedings ascilite Melbourne 2008*.
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