Navigating our threshold concepts to enable students to overcome theirs.

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The ANU college of Law has taught the Graduate Certificate in Migration Law and Practice online since 2009. Online learning and teaching has special attractions for us a provider. We can teach asynchronously and remove geographical and physical boundaries between our students and teachers, providing access to experts from around the globe.

As providers of an online program we were aware of the need to engage teachers with new ways of teaching that moved beyond the lecture room and tutorial to asynchronous discussion forums and podcasts. We avoided any move to create an artificial 'second life' or avatar component within the course. Instead we deliberately approached our course design with the intent of providing a space for a community of learning based on the community of inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2000).

What we were not aware of was the perceptions and expectations that our students would bring to their online study. Overwhelming new students believed;

1. online study was informal
2. online study would be self-paced
3. students would not need to participate regularly
4. asynchronous meant teachers were always available
5. online study equalled a small time commitment
6. normal university policy and rules would not apply
7. online study could not include a 'practical component'.

Because of these perceptions students found it hard to engage with complex legal theoretical and practical work within the required time constraints. Whilst we attempted to rectify any impediments to engagement, we initially believed the problem was predominantly one sided. Feedback showed us that students did not 'consider themselves to be post- graduate law students'. This consideration inevitably impacted on their ability to grasp essential concepts needed to complete the course successfully.

A review of our approach found that what we had considered to be a threshold concept for students was in fact caught up in a threshold problem we were facing as both designers and academics.

We realised that in order to create an online learning community, we needed to embrace aspects of traditional campus life and infuse these into the course design. This ground breaking realisation radically altered our site design and curriculum. The very nature of online learning required us to become architects of the environment in which our students learnt.

This paper will discuss two aspects of our course design that utilise architectural and communication principles to reinvent physical spaces in a virtual world. It will examine ways we have treated the electronic interface as a both a campus and a work place that students must enter and navigate in order to engage with their learning experience and discuss how this change has altered the way we teach and interact with our students.

The way students 'see and understand their learning environment' is now one of the central pillars of our curriculum design. This allows students to identify quickly as learners and practitioners in this complex area of law, removing on of the first threshold concept students faced studying migration law online.