

Online And Distance Learning (ODL) and Hybrid Learning in the Post-COVID-19 Era: A Qualitative Exploration of Effects and Challenges on Law Students

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of Online and Distance Learning (ODL) and hybrid learning after COVID-19 has changed the delivery of higher education, including legal education. This article provides a concise qualitative exploration of the effects and challenges of ODL and hybrid learning among undergraduate law students in Malaysia. Using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, the discussion focuses on cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence as key elements for sustaining legal reasoning, engagement, and academic resilience in digital and blended environments. The article adopts a descriptive qualitative and cross-sectional approach based on student-oriented reflections and selected pedagogical literature. The revision clarifies that the findings should be interpreted as contextual insights rather than causal or statistically generalisable results. It further acknowledges the need to include faculty members, administrators, and legal practitioners in future studies, and recommends mixed-method, longitudinal, and comparative research to measure outcomes such as performance, retention, advocacy skills, and professional readiness.

Keywords: Online and Distance Learning, Hybrid Learning, Legal Education, Community of Inquiry, Qualitative Research, Post-COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education is becoming even more digitally interconnected, with technology-mediated learning environments a hallmark of the post-pandemic era. The Socratic method and clinical practice are two basic elements that pedagogical approaches cannot do without to help develop the analytical and advocacy skills that future practitioners will be required to acquire. These conventional approaches are very dependent on the immediacy and nuance of the face-to-face interaction.

The post-COVID-19 period has made technology-mediated learning a permanent feature of higher education. In legal education, this transition is significant because law students must acquire doctrinal knowledge as well as critical reasoning, advocacy, drafting, negotiation, and ethical judgement. These skills traditionally depend on dialogue, feedback, and professional modelling, which are more difficult to sustain when learning is delivered passively through online platforms.

The emergency movement to remote teaching during the pandemic should not be treated as the same as carefully designed online learning. Emergency remote teaching was a temporary response to crisis conditions, whereas

effective ODL and hybrid learning require intentional design, lecturer presence, student interaction, and appropriate assessment (Hodges et al., 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020). This distinction is important because weaknesses observed during the pandemic may reflect poor instructional design rather than the inherent failure of digital learning.

In Malaysia, ODL and hybrid learning are relevant to legal education because they support continuity, flexibility, and access. However, they also create challenges related to digital access, student motivation, social isolation, feedback quality, and the development of practical legal skills. This article therefore examines how the CoI framework can be adapted to strengthen online and hybrid legal education while recognising the methodological limits of the present qualitative exploration.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a descriptive qualitative and cross-sectional design. It explores student experiences and pedagogical challenges in ODL and hybrid learning within Malaysian undergraduate legal education. The qualitative orientation is appropriate because the article seeks to understand perceptions, challenges, and learning experiences rather than to test statistical relationships.

The participant focus is undergraduate law students, selected contextually because they are directly affected by changes in teaching delivery, online participation, and professional skill formation. To strengthen transparency, future versions of this study should report the number of participants, year of study, institution type, geographical location, gender distribution, socioeconomic background, and level of digital access. These details are important because sample diversity affects the credibility and transferability of qualitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The present article is also limited because it mainly reflects student-centred perspectives. A more comprehensive evaluation of ODL and hybrid legal education should include law lecturers, academic administrators, instructional designers, policymakers, and legal practitioners. Their perspectives would help explain institutional readiness, curriculum design, resource allocation, assessment quality, and the professional relevance of online legal training.

The Pedagogy of ODL in Legal Education

The Role of Interaction in Legal Training

Legal education is interaction-intensive. Students must learn to interpret statutes, distinguish cases, construct arguments, respond to questions, and communicate persuasively. When ODL is delivered through long one-way lectures, students may lose opportunities for questioning, peer debate, and immediate feedback. This weakens the kind of active engagement needed for legal reasoning and advocacy. Apart from that, the mental and professional demands of contemporary legal practice require an educational setting that is extremely interactive and rich in dialogue. The most important and challenging skill in legal training, which is necessary in statutory interpretation, case study and legal reasoning on the whole. In the most traditional legal training, the sources of this cognitive development have become identified as Socratic dialogue and peer debate. Unlike fields of study where the primary goal is to memorise facts, the field of law requires students to actively make arguments, defend positions, and answer questions quickly. The physical classroom is an essential component in normal legal coursework, which is a large part of most educational experiences. As a result, the effectiveness of legal education is intrinsically connected with the quality of the interaction, namely, the immediacy and depth of academic discourse.

Cognitive Structure of Law Students in Malaysia

The CoI framework provides a useful structure for responding to this problem. Cognitive presence refers to students' ability to construct meaning through inquiry and reflection; social presence refers to their ability to participate as real members of a learning community; and teaching presence refers to the design and facilitation

of meaningful learning activities (Garrison et al., 1999). In legal education, these three presences correspond closely with doctrinal understanding, peer argumentation, and lecturer-guided legal analysis.

In addition, the cognitive structure of legal learning is one aspect that needs to be analysed to understand the learning vulnerability of Malaysian law students during the transition to ODL. The Malaysian education sector is an essential element in a nation's development, as it provides the human capital required for growth. However, the sudden transition towards digital delivery in the sector presents a structural weakness. Among the various manifestations of such learning experiences, pedagogical research has consistently identified interactive exposure, most commonly face-to-face argument, as the most effective.

According to the statistics, active engagement is another important aspect of student comprehension and retention. Changes in the quality of the learning environment have significant consequences for a law student's academic performance. That sudden shift to ODL meant that the constraints of internet bandwidth and platforms determined students' learning experience, rather than the design of the learning experience.

The Impact of Digital Isolation

There are serious pedagogical disequilibrium risks associated with the international shift to ODL, and a complex interaction of forces underlies these risks. They include the technological infrastructure change across regions, student motivation and digital fatigue, the home learning environment, and assessment methods.

For Malaysian undergraduate law students, this volatility translates into frequent, and in many instances, severe and unpredictable, drops in engagement. As the qualitative data show, there is a direct connection between digital isolation and low academic performance. When the physical classroom had to be closed, students who are generally active participants in a physical environment could not immediately adapt to the passive features of most online lectures.

These sudden pedagogical shifts are hard to digest and impose significant limitations on cognition and emotion. Such risks, though, can be addressed by highly self-motivated students who study independently and engage in active online networking. Passive online learning over a long period of time can easily demotivate undergraduate students, leading to disengagement, burnout, and, eventually, a drop in the quality of the legal cohort on graduation. This institutional vulnerability underscores the need for a pedagogical paradigm that will help protect these students from the estranging effects of online education.

Digital isolation was one of the major challenges reported during ODL. Students who were active in physical classrooms may become passive in online settings when discussion is limited, cameras are switched off, internet access is unstable, or lecturers rely mainly on slide-based monologues. The result is not merely lower attention, but reduced confidence in legal discussion and advocacy practice.

Hybrid learning may reduce these problems when it is designed as an integrated model rather than a simple mixture of online and face-to-face activities. Foundational legal knowledge can be introduced asynchronously through short lectures, guided readings, and quizzes, while synchronous sessions can be used for Socratic questioning, problem-based learning, mooted, client interviewing, and peer critique. This approach is consistent with blended-learning literature, which emphasises purposeful integration of online and classroom learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Slomanson, 2014).

The Engagement Barrier for Law Students

Limitations of Passive Online Lectures

The move towards sustainable and resilient legal education will require serious investment in the pedagogy. The way to train teachers to upgrade their instructional design such as, transition to flipped classes, embrace modern technological tools in education such as, go online, and manage the cognitive load associated with online instruction should be provided. However, entering this necessitated pedagogical training has been one of the most intimidating challenges confronting legal educators in Malaysia.

Much-needed dynamism is missing from online lectures, which are generally long, monotonous monologues delivered via video conferencing programs. The lack of nonverbal communication, the so-called Zoom fatigue students experience, and the physical distance all lead to a major loss of what the Community of Inquiry framework terms social presence. Without a strong social presence, students are less likely to take intellectual risks, ask clarifying questions, and engage in aggressive debate, which are necessary to master the law.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework as a Solution

This paper uses the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model to overcome these limitations. According to the CoI framework, meaningful educational experiences in online settings are achieved at the intersection of three presences: Cognitive Presence, Social Presence, and Teaching Presence.

- 1) Cognitive Presence: The degree to which learners can build and verify meaning in a sustained, reflective, and discourse. This is applied in legal education to the study of case law and the synthesis and application of legal principles to new situations.
- 2) Social Presence: The skill of the participants to identify with the community, deliberate purposefully within a trusting atmosphere, as well as form inter-personal associations by projecting their own personalities. This plays an important role in developing the discussion and peer criticism that underpin legal training.
- 3) Teaching Presence: The design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to the end of the achievement of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.

Through carefully planned hybrid learning opportunities that develop all three presences, instructors can address the engagement barriers in ODL.

The CoI-Enhanced Hybrid Learning Model for Legal Education

This article proposes a concise CoI-Enhanced Hybrid Learning Model for undergraduate legal education. The model has three elements. First, cognitive presence is supported through structured asynchronous materials such as micro-lectures, digital case notes, legal problem questions, and formative quizzes. Second, social presence is strengthened through small-group discussion, peer review, online forums, and collaborative case analysis. Third, teaching presence is maintained through clear instructions, timely feedback, lecturer facilitation, and alignment between online preparation and live legal-skills activities.

CoI element	Legal education application	Expected learning benefit
Cognitive presence	Micro-lectures, digital case notes, legal problem questions, and quizzes	Improves preparation before live discussion.
Social presence	Small-group discussion, peer review, online forums, and collaborative case analysis	Reduces isolation and supports legal argumentation.
Teaching presence	Clear instructions, lecturer facilitation, timely feedback, and aligned assessment	Strengthens engagement and learning direction.

The model also recommends a digital pedagogical coordinator or instructional support role. This role should not replace the lecturer; instead, it should assist lecturers in designing interactive activities, monitoring student engagement, supporting digital accessibility, and ensuring that online tools serve legal learning outcomes. This correction removes unnecessary comparison with unrelated organisational models and keeps the proposal focused on legal pedagogy.

Effects on Student Performance, Engagement, and Satisfaction

Qualitative feedback suggests that ODL provides flexibility, but flexibility alone does not guarantee learning quality. Students may benefit from the ability to review recorded materials and manage their own study time, yet they still need structured interaction to develop legal analysis and advocacy confidence. Hybrid learning appears stronger when online preparation directly supports live discussion and skills-based exercises.

The study cannot, however, claim measurable improvement in academic outcomes without additional evidence. Future empirical work should include assessment marks, course completion, retention, attendance, online

participation analytics, feedback quality, advocacy-rubric scores, and student satisfaction measures. These indicators would allow researchers to examine whether ODL and hybrid learning affect performance, engagement, and long-term professional skills in a more measurable way (Means et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

ODL and hybrid learning will remain important in post-COVID-19 legal education. The key issue is not whether digital learning should be used, but how it should be designed. A passive ODL model may weaken engagement and professional skills development, whereas a CoI-enhanced hybrid model can support continuity, flexibility, interaction, and legal-skills formation.

For Malaysian law schools, the practical implication is that institutions should invest in reliable digital infrastructure, lecturer training, digital literacy support, accessible learning platforms, and interactive teaching strategies. Policy support should also encourage quality assurance mechanisms that evaluate not only student satisfaction but also performance, retention, advocacy competence, and readiness for legal practice. Within its limited qualitative scope, this article contributes a focused framework for improving ODL and hybrid legal education without overstating its empirical claims.

Future research should use larger and more diverse samples from different universities, regions, years of study, and demographic backgrounds. Mixed-method research should combine interviews and focus groups with quantitative indicators of learning outcomes. Longitudinal studies should examine whether ODL and hybrid learning influence retention, academic achievement, legal reasoning, advocacy skills, and professional readiness over several semesters. Comparative studies across institutions or legal systems would further improve the external validity of the findings.

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