Adaptability with Inclusivity: Teaching International Law during the Pandemic

By:

Pawat Satayanurug

September 30, 2020

Teaching international law is now facing a new challenge as the pandemic situation caused by the COVID-19 suddenly transforms the way the world interacts and certainly the way we teach. Only a few months ago, educational institutions were forced to move their operation online, as governments began to issue restrictions on various forms of physical gathering, including in-class on-site teaching. In many educational systems, this move occurred halfway through the semester causing the sudden change from on-site to online. The Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University, where I teach, was not an exception. Online teaching suddenly became the only teaching method from mid-March until May 2020, and all stakeholders, e.g., professors, students, administrative staff, had to abruptly adjust to this “new normal” to ensure the continuity of education. With no other options, I had to move my Public International Law course online.

This online teaching experience enabled me to revisit the issues that were identified at the past TRILA conference two years ago in Singapore. At that time, participants agreed on many issues, including the rigorous nature of the field, the ineffective access to class materials, and the lack of students' interest in class activities. However, it must be noted that many of the issues discussed at the time were largely based on on-site teaching, with the idea of online teaching being regarded as something in the distant future. As the pandemic continues to take its toll resulting in the rising number of casualties, online teaching inevitably remains relevant. We, therefore, should start to (re-)identify issues of teaching international law with the new scenario in mind. In this rather short essay, I will quickly share my observation based on my experience of teaching Public International Law online during the Spring 2020 semester.

Where are the classes?

Teaching international law online requires the use of the Learning Management System (LMS). Selecting which LMS to use was one of the most difficult decisions to make. Today, there are a variety of available LMS, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Blackboard Ultra, WebEx and Google Hangout. Each of the LMS has advantages and disadvantages, so it is difficult to rank which LMS is the most appropriate online teaching platform for any particular institutions and courses. When the COVID-19 forced the abrupt change, many schools and/or professors explored the abundant choice of the available LMS and introduced many of them to students all at once. While this exploration could potentially lead to finding the most suitable LMS for a particular school or course, too many options created confusion for students, as they had to familiarize themselves with a variety of alternatives. For instance, one student could end up having to use Zoom for the morning class, Microsoft Teams for the afternoon class, and Google Hangout for the evening class. As different professors prefer different tools, the possibilities were endless should there be no restrictions on the choice of the LMS.

Do students know how to use the LMS?

For students with limited digital literacy, studying various international law courses through multiple options poses a significant barrier to education. We simply cannot assume that all students of this tech-savvy generation will be

able to self-train on the use of the multiple LMS. For instance, many students in my class had difficulties accessing and maneuvering the Microsoft Teams interface. As online teaching continues to be relevant, the school should provide preparatory sessions to familiarize all stakeholders, especially newly admitted students. Further, administrative staff should also be given proper training, so they are able to provide assistance to professors and students when necessary. In addition, to ensure consistent availability of the LMS, the school should specify a list of approved LMS, or, even better, invest in a good quality LMS instead of relying on free, publicly accessible platforms. Some LMS do charge a high fee, but this is in exchange for their quality service. If financially capable, the school should invest in more than one LMS, in case one of the selected LMS becomes inoperable for any reason, including technical issues, during the course of the semester. Ideally, the number of approved LMS should not exceed two to three to avoid proliferation.

Can students afford to study online?

Providing an effective means of education often comes with a price tag, with obtaining appropriate learning devices and proper internet packages being some of the pre-requisites. Generally, the LMS are accessible through smartphones, tablets and computers. These personal learning devices are already expensive for many students, as many of them rely solely on the limited grants given by the school for their living expenses. A lending scheme or providing a subsidy may be an immediate solution for underprivileged students. In addition, the school should endeavor to provide internet access to all students wherever they are located. Students who began studying international law from home evidently could no longer enjoy the unlimited on-campus internet access that schools typically provide. As live streaming with visual presentations consumes a significant amount of data, the unlimited internet package, despite providing sufficient data, remains so expensive that many students cannot afford it. To ensure that students are provided with or can afford the internet package with unlimited data as well as having an appropriate learning device, the school should provide a subsidy on a needs-based basis. For instance, Chulalongkorn University partnered with one of the mobile internet providers to issue special SIM cards with unlimited internet data for the entire duration of the semester. These SIM cards were available free-of-

charge for students upon their request.

How good is the Internet connection?

Simulating a virtual online classroom with active class discussions requires internet connection that is not only affordable but also of good quality. Internet connection with a strong and stable speed allows online classroom activities to be conducted in many creative methods and in a seamless and continuous manner. However, the quality of the internet becomes a major concern for students who live in areas with limited internet reception, such as in the provinces. Frequent signal interruption evidently creates a barrier to learning and critically affects the continuity and quality of education. The school should conduct a survey regarding the students' internet quality and provide appropriate assistance on a case-by-case basis.

Live or recorded?

The immediate solution to the poor quality of the internet connection is to record the live session. This solution eases the pressure on students, as they know they can re-watch the session at their convenience. This solution is also useful for students who noticed that some of their professors, who are unaccustomed to using the LMS for online teaching, have difficulties when delivering their courses. Being able to re-watch on-demand provides students with extra opportunities to formulate their understanding of the materials. While this may seem to be a desirable solution, naturally there are students who pile up their unwatched videos only to watch all of them shortly before the examination. Professors may encourage more responsible planning by specifying the period of time that the videos would be made available to watch on the LMS, so students can plan ahead the order of the videos they have to watch. To determine the appropriate period of time, the professor should take into consideration student workload, such as how many classes they have, as well as the quality of the internet. Taking the videos down too soon could affect some students' ability to properly digest the information. In addition, professors should arrange at least one live session designed for Q&A before the final examination.

Do students have access to textbooks and class materials?

Class materials that are legally available in the soft-copy format are the most useful type of material during the pandemic. Professors can easily upload them to the LMS for students to download. The hard-copy materials create greater concerns and difficulties. Copyrighted international law textbooks are known to be expensive, and many students often rely on the library copies. As students cannot visit the library due to school closures during the pandemic, the schools should arrange a book delivery campaign. For instance, the Law Library at Chulalongkorn University has delivered more than 800 books to students across Thailand and extended the return date to the end of the semester. Students are responsible to return the books at their own expenses, but the school provides subsidies on the return delivery fee on a case-by-case basis.

How to conduct a final examination online?

Just as students cannot come to study at on-site classrooms, they also cannot sit for on-site and proctored examinations. Thus, professors have to re-design the way they assess students at the end of the semester, especially in the situation when students can always access their materials. For instance, essays that ask students to simply recall their knowledge become a rather ineffective method of assessment. In addition, professors should consider setting the amount of time allotted for the examination to be proportionate with the questions' difficulty level and students' typing speed. For my class, I asked my students to identify and analyze issues regarding the application of international law during the pandemic situation, and they had 72 hours (3 days) to complete. I found that most students were able to perform quite well, and penalties were given mostly for plagiarism and misconduct. The Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University also organized several optional mock-exam sessions to familiarize students with the official online examination platform (the Blackboard Ultra). This helped reduce the number of irregularities, such as late submission due to human error, as it prevented students who failed to participate in any practice session from justifying their irregularities based on their unfamiliarity with the platform.

Reflecting on my personal experiences in light of the school's measures and assistance, I was fortunate that most of my students were able to adapt to the new learning environment quite quickly, and for students with certain

limitations, it took them only a few weeks to adapt. The only minor recommendation, as voiced by some students, is to improve the frequency and increase the methods of communication to expand the reach of the school's measures and assistance. For instance, some students were unable to receive the SIM cards with unlimited internet data simply because they did not know about it.

While I cannot speak for other institutions or classes, I believe the key principle remains that we should design an online international law class that ensures the provision of quality education. High quality education is not only determined by the methods of teaching and the selected LMS, but also the ability of students to have effective access to quality online classrooms. No matter how industrious and determined the students could be, certain technological obstacles, such as having limited access to good quality internet and to functional learning devices, pose an inescapable threat to effective learning. During this difficult time, we must not forget that there are differences among our students, and we cannot assume that every student have the same level of capability financially and digitally. We must be inclusive in our adaptation to the changes. We must not leave anyone behind.

**Assistant Dean for Legal Resources Center, Program Director for Master of Laws (Thai Program) and Lecturer at Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand; PhD (Zurich), LL.M. (Harvard), LL.M. (Cantab), LL.B. (Chulalongkorn).*

View online: Adaptability with Inclusivity: Teaching International Law during the Pandemic

Provided by Afronomicslaw