I have a confession to make about this. This actually started off as an experiment that I did really just for fun. And by the end of the year last year I found that it had a lot of potential. So I’m a lecturer in employment relations and human resources. And I joined Griffith at the beginning of last year.

And my welcome to Griffith was basically taking on the largest course that we offer in our department. So 1001 is our first year survey course. It’s designed to introduce our students to the world of work and employment. And it’s a gateway to our ER employment relations and human resource major.

And like most large survey courses, we have students who are enrolled from multiple disciplines, many who don’t actually want to be in that classroom at that particular time. But we actually do offer quite a bit to these students because we talk about the world of work. And we talk about their rights at work, we talk about their responsibilities at work. And it’s often a course that students walk away from thinking I actually did learn something from that course. I did learn that I’m getting underpaid in my casual part time job. So the challenge of this course is that you have students from so many different disciplines, but it does have a lot to offer students.

When I started this course I was told that we generally enrolled between 450 to 550 on the Nathan Campus and between 400 to 450 on the Gold Coast Campus, so this is a large course. And it has many of the challenges that some of the speakers have already spoken about. It’s also a course that requires a great deal of standardisation for delivery across campuses. So this is something that I actually did struggle with to be perfectly honest with you, when I first arrived here. I think it was something from my childhood, where I was always rebellious about conformity, that I really thought oh my goodness, how am I going to keep up my own personal enthusiasm for this course? I really needed to find something to kind of keep me interested and by extension to keep the students interested as well.

I should point out that this is the course that when I took this course as an undergraduate it virtually changed my life. I wouldn’t be here had I not taken the course. So I was already fond of the course, but I really needed to struggle with this idea of standardisation. And part of this standardisation is team teaching. So there are two course convenors, one on each campus. Two head tutors and a bevy of about 30 to 40 tutors. So we need to ensure that consistency.
But I felt what was really a problem with ensuring this consistency was a lack of creativity that it afforded the teaching staff. And the lack of creativity that it afforded students in the way in which they were able to learn the content. And perhaps some of you might disagree with this, but I really felt this. So what I really wanted to do was to really engage the students. This course is really very heavily laden with politics. And current affairs and history. So getting the students from historical analysis of industrial relations in Australia to current affairs, and engaging with current affairs in a way in which students were able to read beyond the newspaper headlines, where there’s a lot of talk out there about ratbags in unions or this politician did this and they’re all ratbags and so on. So getting away from the headlines in the media, to actually looking at employment relations and industrial relations as an academic discipline.

So I thought that there were about four key challenges that I faced in this course. The first is of course engagement. And by engagement I mean by engaging those uninterested students. But also engaging students in current affairs. And learning how to read current affairs in a way that’s not sensational. So they’re able to read beyond the headlines.

But the important thing is that these students aren’t the type of students who necessarily turn on radio, ABC radio. They’re not deeply engaged with the media or quality sources of news information. So in a way I needed to engage them in quality sources of news education and then teach them to read beyond those and understand beyond the headlines.

The second challenge was to demonstrate the relevance of this class to everyday life. And I think that was pretty easy to do given the context as I mentioned at the start of the class. But I think one of the biggest challenges for me was community building. And what I mean by community building, it relates back to this idea of identity and connectedness that students so often lack in these large classes. And I was really keen to build a community of employment relations students, both within my campus, on my campus and across campuses as well.

The way in which we’ve done this in the past is through our tutorial system. So we have about 20 tutes each semester and the tutors are really great, they’re really good at building a small community within that class room. But I wanted to extend that sense of community beyond the tutorial to the lectures and beyond as well. And again, there was that personal challenge that I face in being a creative teacher in the face of standardisation. I feel creativity is very important for engagement and retention, because it often goes hand in hand with passion and enthusiasm, which I believe, as most of you know, does translate in to your teaching styles.

So the innovation was basically Facebook. It sounds really lame when I say it like that, right? Yeah, I went on Facebook to reach the youngsters. But the way in which I did this, was I actually am an avid Facebook user. I’ve been using Facebook since about 2007. And aside from the usual holiday snaps and baby photos, I have some really great friends. Friends across different academic disciplines. Friends in different spheres in the non-profit sector, in the trade union sector and some employers as well who I’ve become friends through professional networks.
And what I noticed about these friends is that they’re really great at posting news stories about their particular passion. So every morning when I wake up the first thing that I see when I log on to Facebook is actually a roll of relevant news stories from their particular communities, their particular interests. And it’s gotten to the stage, some days, when I actually don’t get to read the real news until later on in the evening because in the morning the first thing I’ve done is actually, it’s sad but true, but I’ve read my Facebook wall and all of the news is on there.

So I thought why not get students to engage through Facebook with current affairs in a sneaky way? Because this is a really sneaky way of getting students involved with current affairs, reading the news and so on. So what I did was I basically set up a Facebook group. I set the settings on private. And all membership had to be approved by myself or the head tutors or any of the other academics that were involved. I set up a code of conduct so that they would treat each other civilly. And that they would also know that what happens on Facebook is also happening in real life. In other words, virtual worlds, it doesn’t mean that they’re immune from the university student code of conduct that we have. And we expect students to abide by.

So basically what I did was I linked… every morning I would wake up, I’d find a relevant news story, I would link it to the Facebook page. And every morning the students would log on to their Facebook and they would see an employment relations discussion unfolding.

And it was really great because there were some students who were really engaged and really verbal. And actually much more comfortable with the written media rather than you know, participating verbally in class. So you had, by the end of the semester, you had students engaging with each other on this group about news stories and current affairs. And we had some really great debates.

Only about 250 students joined the group, so this is by no means holistic. But what I did was I took the discussions that unfolded on Facebook and I referred to them in lectures. So everyone knew that I had posted these stories. I also sometimes, if they were particularly relevant, I also sent them out through Black boarding, in e-mail or set up an announcement.

So the impact, there were two sets of impact. One was intended, the other was unintended. So the intended impact was that there was raised engagement and awareness of employment relations current affairs issues. And students were able to see as these events unfolded in real time. So there were a lot of stories about underpayment of casual wages, for example. So they could see that this was a relevant subject, it was a relevant topic. It was a relevant debate for them to be engaged in.

And I think one of the best things that happened was the community building aspect. We were able to get students from different campuses to talk, talking to each other on this particular Facebook group. But most importantly for me as the lecturer, who they never
saw in a tutorial class, but only in this massive lecture theatre, they were able to converse with me. They felt much more comfortable approaching me. And when I went to the Gold Coast to deliver a guest lecture they already knew what I looked like and they knew some of my opinions and so on. So it meant that I became much more accessible to the students and the students became much more accessible to each other.

And there’s a lot that I can say about the way that students engaged with each other on this page. And one of these was that it became a forum for students to ask each other quick questions about their assessments, about what happened in lectures. Or to simply do things like wish each other luck on the exam. There was something really nice about seeing students posts, the day before the exam, hey everyone good luck on your exam, and then everyone liking it. It gave a really nice sense of community.

The one negative aspect of this is that it did raise my workload. And, but you know what, I was willing to do that because it was a fun activity and I had, I was already a Facebook user myself. So in conclusion I would say there’s a lot of potential to develop Facebook as a teaching tool. I think there has to be boundaries that are set around the way in which it’s used, particularly the rules of engagement. And I think the other point is that it does require the buy in of other teaching staff. So not everyone on the teaching team bought in to Facebook. But those who did certainly made it very successful. And I’d be happy to answer any questions during the lunch break. Thank you.

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