

A modest program for the improvement of law teaching

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Most proposals for the improvement of legal education have little effect on the teacher's daily round. There are a variety of explanations for this. Frequently, the discussions are too general, too high flown or too concerned with structural or curriculum problems. Generally, there will be no follow-up program which ensures practical implementation of even those ideas which are accepted as worthwhile.

The law school must start its own contribution to the improvement of teaching by defining its goals. These goals should reflect the views of staff, students and practitioners. Although individual emphases may differ, general goals of this kind are unlikely to generate much controversy among law teachers or students. This lack of controversy can be a disadvantage as well as an advantage. Teachers accede easily to such a list of goals because they sound good, are very general and no one really expects their adoption will require any substantial change in the way in which individual courses are taught.

The best way of getting teachers to focus on these goals is to ask those involved in lecturing or tutoring in a particular course to prepare a paper about their course. This paper should cover three areas. First of all, it should identify the particular goals which the teacher wishes to achieve in that course. Secondly, it should describe and give specific examples of the means by which he or she goes about achieving these goals. Thirdly, it should give some estimate of the success of the various means used.

The value of course papers would be greatly enhanced if they were discussed in some appropriate forum.

Generally, the appropriate forum might be a full faculty meeting. However, additionally or alternatively, some courses might be discussed at smaller meetings. Such meetings provide an opportunity for an exchange of views and experience on an area of vital importance to all participating.

Two of the most effective means of improving teaching would be to help teachers make a more realistic evaluation of the effectiveness of their current teaching practices and to provide illustrations of approaches and techniques which, with adaptation, they might use to improve their teaching. Good feedback is vital to good teaching. Until recently, teachers' assessment of the effectiveness of their teaching methods was largely subjective: a visceral response to such things as their own performance, student reaction in the lecture room, student reaction in tutorials and private discussion with students.

Nowadays, teachers can or should also have available to them some more objective assessments of their performance: opinions of other lecturers or tutors in the subject, opinions of other teachers who have read their course paper and opinions of a member of the university's teaching and research centre who has attended their classes.

Occasionally, law teachers at Victoria University law school 'sit-in' on other teachers' classes. Most often, these will be tutors in a subject seeking to keep abreast of new material. There is enough experience of 'sitting-in' to show that it need not disrupt the class or place undue strain on the participants. Visits of these kinds could make a major contribution towards the improvement of teaching. They improve teachers' ability to evaluate their own performance; they enable teachers to get constructive and specific advice from their colleagues; they provide the visiting teachers with a mod-

el; they provide a good basis for discussion about course papers and teaching in general; and they provide first-hand knowledge to those influential in promotions and appointments.

Universities have always assumed that teaching and research were inter-related activities, each nurturing the other and each drawing substance from the other. Today, however, some staff and student critics talk as though research, far from being the indispensable ally of teaching, is its implacable opponent.

If it is to adopt the program advocated in this paper, the law school needs to consider carefully both the form and volume of research which it wishes to encourage. It could not, of course, adopt the attitude that publications are not relevant to teaching. Nor should it suggest that law teachers should never write anything unless it can be used in law courses currently taught in their own university. What it must recognise, however, is that, if it places too much emphasis on publication, then it may be encouraging a form of research which does not help teaching. There is a need for law schools to commit to a systematic program for the review of courses and teaching. Without such a system, improvement can only be piecemeal and sporadic.