

An internal impetus for change within the faculty was the feeling that there was an urgent need to improve the quality of the teaching and learning experience of both staff and students. Student feedback for compulsory courses indicated a negative student response to large lectures with low levels of student participation.

A review of how this model was working in practice was conducted. Its general aims were to take stock of the opportunities provided by seminar-style teaching, identify when and how generic skills were being taught, and to reflect on how the discrete units fitted together to constitute our degree program. Students' views were sought through a combination of surveys and focus group research.

Many staff and student concerns centred upon what was actually happening in the classroom as a result of the new model (such as difficulty in initiating, or controlling, student interaction, and assessing student participation). The majority of instructors expressed the view that the seminar model offered advantages over the previous lecture/tutorial format. Benefits included a more relaxed teaching environment, with groups offering far more scope for personal interaction, questions, and student contribution than large lectures.

While there was generalised support for the new model, students and teachers both identified some reservations. Student concerns were directed more towards what happened in each individual class, rather than the model as a whole, and reflected anxiety about their own performance and marks. Staff concerns were focused on the difficulties of putting the model into practice - how to generate (and to appropriately assess) participation, manage discussion, interact with an often sizeable group, and structure classes so that the range of desired material was covered.

Students tended to take one of two contrasting positions on the new model, depending upon the delivery style they were experiencing. Those who were experiencing the new model in a fully interactive manner expressed some resistance based on fears that they would not 'learn

enough' from discussion, while those who were receiving less interaction were often frustrated and bored. There was observably less resistance over time as students became accustomed to the different requirements of seminar-style teaching, and both students and instructors gained experience in the new format.

For some instructors, the shift in teaching culture was a fairly abrupt one, and they felt the stresses of trying to make it work in practice and to adapt both their own and the students' expectations to the new model. Generating and controlling discussion was seen as something which was not always easy.

As part of the staff interviews, instructors were asked for solutions they adopted as well as the problems they faced. This discussion generated a great many ideas and demonstrated that the new model is being implemented in a wide variety of ways. Interaction is significantly assisted when instructors know their students' names. Breaking down student resistance to discussion, whether through inertia or shyness, may require different approaches.

Given the considerable feedback relating to both the challenges faced by staff and students and the solutions proposed by staff, various recommendations were formulated which were directed towards making the new model work better in practice in the classroom. Several of these recommendations related to developing better staff training, both internally and externally.

The audit review found that the move to seminar-style teaching has necessitated a change of culture, both at the micro level of what is happening in the classroom and at the macro level of program delivery. Within the classroom there have been issues of adjustment as staff and students become accustomed to the new model and struggle, at times, to make it work effectively. Methods of didactic teaching have reflected and reinforced traditional conceptions of law as a discipline. The perceived need to find 'the right answer' may undermine students' willingness to engage in discussion-based learn-

ing, even though many admit to finding it a more interesting way to learn. What becomes clear is that, in implementing a model of learning which is unfamiliar to many students and instructors, it is vital that students be given clear instructions as to what is expected of them and the purpose of their activities.

Student-led classes and group work: a methodology for developing generic skills

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11 *Legal Educ Rev* 1, 2000, pp 81-95

The challenge for any educator is to make the process of learning interesting. In practice, this entails acceptance of the fact that the purpose of education is to stimulate inquiry and skill in the process of knowledge getting, rather than requiring students to memorise a body of knowledge. While traditional legal education emphasised the acquisition of knowledge or cognitive learning, today professional legal education must seek to achieve other goals, including the ability to use that knowledge in a legal context; and the cultivation of other social and interpersonal characteristics and qualities.

Over the last two years, an assessment task has been used at the University of Wollongong, Australia, in which students studying Torts were required to take charge of the 'teaching' of seminars. The students worked co-operatively in groups of three to five and were each assigned two weeks of classes to conduct. There was a high level of involvement on the part of the lecturer 'behind the scenes' in supporting the development of their ideas and in clarifying legal principles, but the creative processes were largely left up to them. The groups were required to submit a plan of their meetings and intended tasks, keep a record of meetings and provide a Reflective Diary at the end of the process.

The outcome became a true celebration of the creativity of our students, and illustrated how innovative assessment can be used in core law subjects to develop generic skills and to increase the

depth of student understanding of the material. Students were given free reign as to how they were going to conduct the classes. They were given a number of tasks but with one vital instruction and mission: actively to engage the rest of the class in learning. By encouraging the students to be creative and to trust their own judgments and initiatives, the classroom became a dynamic and exciting learning environment.

Students also developed skills which would be useful in a variety of work environments and were not simply provided with knowledge about the subject. These generic or transferable skills provide a basis for lifelong learning. Skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication, teamwork, and organisational, personal and interpersonal relations are not subject specific and complement students' acquisition of professional knowledge.

A key function of the group work was to develop identified generic skills. The objectives for the group exercise were principally to: create an interesting learning environment; integrate course material at a much deeper level by preparing the material for a teaching situation; provide opportunities for students to work independently with the course material; develop teamwork; develop oral communication skills; and to encourage student centred learning. In satisfying these broad objectives, there was a broad range of generic skills which were developed through the use of co-operative groups and class leadership. These skills included oral and written communication, teamwork, personal, organisational, information gathering and learning, problem solving, and information technology skills.

The group assessment item was allocated 20 percent of the total number of marks in the subject. The seminars were assessed on the following criteria: preparation of materials; handling questions; content (having regard to time restrictions, purpose and organisation); quality of contribution (clear and well researched); relating to audience (including audibility and eye contact); genera-

tion of class discussion; and overall cohesion of group.

In developing the group assessment process, a number of assumptions about learning were relied upon. First, learning is an active process and students only really learn through constructing knowledge in ways that are meaningful to them. Second, individual students learn in different ways. Third, there is value in teaching and learning in small groups. Fourth, a teacher who has the role of an authority figure in the classroom can stifle student discussion and the most effective way a teacher can increase participation is to remove himself or herself from the discussion. Fifth, it is important to encourage self-reflection so that students can identify what abilities they have and where they need to develop skills to work co-operatively. Sixth, students should be assisted to develop skills which can be useful in a variety of work environments and not simply provided with knowledge about the content of a particular subject. Finally, the best way to learn a topic is to teach it. The challenge was to create student-led classes which actively encouraged the whole class to participate.

In order to create an appropriate setting for the group leadership of seminars, a wide range of activities was provided in the early classes to give examples of ways to stimulate learning without lecturing. They included small group exercises involving case analysis and legal problem solving, asking the groups to present their solutions to the class as a whole and mooting the different sides of the case.

Once the class dynamics were established, the lecturer's role was mainly one of adviser in the developmental process and provider of feedback during (and at the end of) the project. Lectures were held in the week preceding each seminar and were intended to present an outline of the legal material in each topic so as to build student confidence with the material to be worked with in the seminars.

As part of the active learning approach, the group identifies the tasks that are to be performed and constructs a method of problem solving to perform

those tasks. Thus the groups were asked to set up their first meeting time to prepare a group plan. A number of groups developed their own problems and then enacted them on video—cleverly integrating the legal issues to be covered—and then dividing students into 'law firms' to advise and argue the cases of the numerous plaintiffs and defendants. Other students used television programs in similar ways.

The classes involved 90 students who were divided into 25 groups. Overall, student reflections suggest that most found it a rewarding and fulfilling experience. Identified 'positives' for working in groups were that members could bounce ideas off each other and learn to appreciate different ways others approached problems. A common problem was arranging meeting times around work schedules. Another difficulty was time management. Even some groups that had not functioned particularly well considered that their experience was valuable.

A number of students commented that they wished to be 'taught' in a more traditional way and some students suggested that the group work component of the course be removed. Concerns were expressed that student-led discussion was not sufficient and left them too much on their own to grapple with difficult material.

The model of group work used has many benefits as a teaching and learning strategy. The process certainly develops generic or transferable skills. Student-led classes make learning a more interesting exercise for the students. The attendance in classes was almost 100 percent, and students arrived with a sense of anticipation and excitement as the groups tended to keep as a surprise what they were going to do with the classes. Focussing the teaching and learning of the subject on group projects is an intensive teaching experience, since it requires a lot of time to be spent with students outside of classes. Embarking on such an experiment also requires much thought to be given to dealing with the many problems which arise.