

# SHOW AND TELL: A PRIMER ON THE USE OF OVERHEAD PROJECTIONS IN THE LAW CLASS

By Hilary Charlesworth and Richard Johnstone\*

Classroom teaching in law generally fails to exploit vision, the most powerful sense of the human species. The tradition of law teaching in the classroom is rather to emphasise the spoken word and to focus upon the second sense, hearing. The 'Socratic method' (whatever its precise scope), for example, relies on dialogue between teacher and student to uncover legal method and legal truths. Non-Socratic lecturing, perhaps the most common form of teaching in Australian law schools, employs only unilateral use of the ear. The written word is of course considered crucial *outside* the classroom context: the reading and analysis of cases or texts are tasks assigned in all law courses.

This article is aimed at law teachers who have not had much resort to the use of overhead projections in their classes, and who may be uncertain how most effectively to use overhead transparencies. It looks at some of the ways in which overhead projections can be used in the classroom to teach law, and then attempts to provide some practical points to assist law teachers to make their own transparencies. Our objective is to encourage the exploitation of the visual in combination with the aural by law teachers in the classroom through the use of overhead projections by sharing out (sometimes bitter) experiences.

## 1. WHY USE OVERHEAD PROJECTIONS?

Studies have shown that while approximately twenty percent of information that is heard is retained, sixty-five percent of information transmitted by sight and hearing is retained. This suggests that, even at the most fundamental level of communication in the classroom, the use of visual aids can dramatically improve the extent to which law students can understand and remember material discussed in class.

Overhead projections add variety to the teaching methods, techniques and devices used in the classroom and can, therefore, assist law teachers to stimulate and maintain interest by changing the focus of the class from the aural to the visual.

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\* Lecturers in Law, University of Melbourne

The benefits of overhead projections are not confined to increasing retention and providing variety. They can also be used to challenge and stimulate students to think in class, and to participate actively in class exercises and discussion.

Apart from their impact on learning, overhead projections involve simple technology which is easily mastered, require limited planning and can be prepared in a variety of inexpensive ways.

## 2. THE CREATIVE USE OF OVERHEAD PROJECTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM.

Good teaching involves expanding and deepening student awareness and understanding. Learning is a process which is carried out by the student, and is part of his or her personal growth. The role of the teacher is to facilitate learning. A teacher wrongly assumes primary responsibility for learning if he or she just requires the student to be a receiver of information, without actively engaging the student in thought or the testing of ideas.

There is a temptation for teachers to use overhead projections simply to convey information to passive students, who write down all that is noted in the transparency. Teachers should avoid using overhead projections in this manner, because it impedes students from thinking and questioning, and distracts student attention from everything save the contents of the projected material. A key principle in the creative use of overhead projections is, therefore, to use them as a means of complementing, reinforcing and diversifying class discussion and activities.

For example, they can be used to set out the territory to be covered during the class. A series of topic headings and class activities can be listed on an overhead transparency, so that students have a clear idea where the class is going. At the end of each topic or activity the transparency can be shown, the topic or activity completed ticked off, and the next one highlighted. At the end of the class the transparency can be used to summarise and close the class.

On a more substantive level, overhead transparencies can be used to highlight the main points that the teacher wishes to emerge from a class discussion or lecture. The points should be organised so as to guide and stimulate thought, rather than as a definitive summary of the material which students would then be tempted to record without critical thought. For example, in the discussion of a complex case with many judgments, the basic legal issues faced by the court can be noted on a transparency and discussion can then cover each issue, one at a time. The transparency helps to focus the discussion, rather than dominating student attention.

Overhead transparencies can be used effectively to assist in putting questions to the class. If, for example, a teacher wishes students to apply recently learnt legal principles to a hypothetical fact situation, the facts of the hypothetical can be summarised on an overhead transparency. The different stages of complex transactions can be numbered to facilitate class discussion. This approach has the advantage of directing the attention of students to the front of the class, and the teacher does not have to look at rows of bowed heads while trying to elicit answers to the question.

Instructions for class activities and the more complex and provocative questions can be displayed to the class, so that students can remind themselves of the instructions or question without disturbing others.

There are many other creative and stimulating uses for overhead projections in the law classroom. Complex fact situations can be simplified with the use of prepared diagrams and, if need be, maps or pictures of people or things. Concepts and ideas can often be usefully represented visually. The main steps in a transaction or court procedure, or the historical development of a dispute, can gradually be revealed to the class. Key extracts from statutes or reported cases can be projected to facilitate class discussion or to assist in the passing of information. The only limit to the creative use of overhead projections is the imagination of the teacher.

### 3. DESIGNING THE OVERHEAD TRANSPARENCY

Despite the general pedagogical advantages of using overheads in teaching, a poorly designed overhead transparency will serve only to confuse and frustrate the learning process. A transparency should be simple, readable and explanatory. It will involve time and care in its conception and its designer should be confident of what he or she wants to communicate. The design of overhead transparencies can be improved by following some simple guidelines.

#### (A) SIMPLICITY

Novices in overhead projection technology tend to want to put everything onto a transparency. There are very few printed materials that will not need modification before they are used on an overhead transparency. Whole sections of statutes, for example, are tempting exhibits for law teachers and yet may often result in a dense and confusing visual image. Each transparency should be confined to one point or idea: the mere reproduction of a particular legal text will almost invariably be too complex. The teacher must translate the idea into a visual form, rather than just throw an enlarged version of a particular set of words onto a screen. The use of symbols may help to reduce a legal notion into an

immediately accessible form. Maps, photographs and diagrams copied from books may also need to be simplified before use in a transparency.

#### (B) LEGIBILITY

The transparency must be visible to all participants in a class. It defeats the purpose of an overhead projection if transparencies are simply read out to a group to be copied down. Care therefore should be taken to ensure that the size of its lettering is adequate. Useful guidelines are that text be of at least one millimetre thickness and five millimetres in height and in the upper case; that the maximum area for information on a transparency be 18 centimetres square; and that the text be composed of no more than eight lines of six words per line. Symbols and designs may often be more legible and effective than text. The contrast between a particular image and its background should be as strong as possible and this may require delineation by hand. Colours that show up best on an overhead transparency are blue and black. Red and green should be used sparingly.

#### (C) EXPLANATORY NATURE

Teachers should carefully consider why they are using a transparency at a particular time in a class. What point is being made by it? An often observed problem in law classes is the tendency of students to want to copy down everything on an overhead as soon as it is put up. To avoid the overhead becoming a substitute for the mindless, automatic copying down to a teacher's spoken words, it should convey its message in a way that will require the students to stop and reflect. The overhead projection should not stand alone as the medium of instruction - it should be supplemented with an introduction and explanation. It should accompany and reinforce the teacher's words, but not be a substitute for them.

### 4. MAKING THE OVERHEAD

Two methods exist to create overhead transparencies. The first can be accomplished without any extraneous technology: writing on transparencies with specially designed coloured pens. The second method requires a photocopier with the ability to copy onto treated plastic transparency paper. Each method requires a different type of transparency: if a transparency suitable to write upon is put into a photocopier, it will melt; and the sheets appropriate for photocopying cannot be easily written upon. The boxes containing each sort of transparency are clearly marked by the manufacturer and should always be checked.

The advantages of the first method include the ability to create transparencies at home or at the very last minute before a class, and the addition of colour to overhead projections. The disadvantages are the

propensity of hand written transparencies to smudge over time (or to blur if they are rained on the way to class!) unless permanent coloured pens are used. Left handed writers may find that it is difficult not to smudge the transparency unless quick drying permanent pens are used. The problem of producing clear, neat lettering can be simplified by using a wide range of dry transfer letters which are now available. Diagrams can be enhanced by the use of self adhesive transparent coloured sheets or tapes, which can be cut into the appropriate shape.

Photocopied transparencies are generally more durable, and allow the precise reproduction of printed images. They can also take advantage of the enlargement feature of most photocopiers.

## 5. USING THE OVERHEAD

A newcomer to the joys of overhead projections should be wary of the possibilities of failure of technology. Sometimes you will discover that the projector has been removed from a room, and confirmation of a projector's availability is essential. It is always also useful to inspect an overhead projector when using it for the first time: make sure you know how to turn it on and how it should be positioned to focus on a wall or screen or board. If there is time, have a run through to check that all is working and to ensure that the image can be seen from all points in the room. You should also have a contingency plan in the event of a failure in the equipment. In particular you should be sure to have quick access to a spare globe if necessary. Some of the newer overhead projectors have a second globe built in to the projector.

Transparencies should be organised in order of appearance and separated by sheets of paper so that they do not stick together when you reach for them. It is helpful to have them as close to the projector as possible so that they do not get caught up with other class materials. Make a sign in your lecture notes of when you should use a particular transparency so that you do not inadvertently miss it out at the appropriate time. The relevant transparency can be placed at the appropriate place within the pages of your lecture notes so that it is at hand when needed.

The overhead projector can compete with the spoken word for the attention of students. Transparencies should not be left displayed when they are no longer relevant to the point being made in class. It is a good idea to turn off the projector at times when no transparency is being used to lessen the distraction of an illuminated board or screen.

An extremely common mistake is for the teacher to stand between the class and the projected image, so that the view of some students is obstructed. You will need to ensure that you are familiar with the spacial

dimensions of the use of overhead projections so that this problem is avoided.

The impact of a transparency may be greater if its message is not revealed all at once: for example, the top part may set out a set of facts which is to be discussed by the class and the bottom portion could contain a particular resolution of the facts to be revealed at the conclusion of a discussion. A sheet of plain paper resting on the transparency will obscure part of it. A problem sometimes encountered, however, is that the paper floats off the machine, displaying the punchline prematurely. A more durable form of masking can be created by placing the transparency in a special cardboard frame and attaching (with hinges of adhesive tape) slips of paper cut to the appropriate size that can be folded back at the right time.

An alternative is the creation of an overlay transparency - a second slide that can sit over the first and add extra information. Overlays can be particularly useful with diagrams and maps. They can also be used to show the relationships between the elements of two or more legal principles or theories. The elements of the first principle or theory can be displayed on one transparency, and the elements of the other principle or theory can be carefully placed on a second transparency so that when the second transparency is placed upon the first, the relationship between the two becomes clear. Overlays can also be used to 'flesh out' basic points noted on the first transparency. For example, the first transparency can indicate in point form, with spaces between each point, the different philosophical bases for the sentencing of convicted criminals - let us say, rehabilitation, deterrence, retribution and denunciation. A second transparency can then be overlaid to give a brief explanation of each point.

Relationships between various points may easily be clarified by comparing and contrasting specific elements, and this technique is enhanced by the use of different colours or illustration techniques.

Some overhead projections contain facilities for 'wind on' overhead projections, so that the teacher can write on the transparency during class discussion. Unless the writing takes place while the projector is switched off, this use of overhead projections is best avoided because it can cause damage to the teacher's eyes. Points raised during class discussion are best noted on a chalk or white board or similar device.

When using an overhead projection allow the class to view it for a brief moment for impact, and then describe what the transparency is trying to show. You should continue to explain the transparency while it is being shown.

## 6. FEEDBACK

Especially when first using overhead transparencies, it is important to check with your class that this technology is useful and is enhancing the learning process. After a class or two, check, by questionnaire or group discussion, what the group makes of the overhead transparencies and how your presentation could be improved. Inviting a colleague to observe you and the overhead technology in action can also provide useful feedback. You should also observe the needs of visually impaired students, and ensure that they are not disadvantaged by the use of the overhead projector.

## 7. DEVELOPMENTS IN TECHNOLOGY

There have been two important recent developments in overhead projectors which will enhance their use in the classroom. The first is the development of portable overhead projectors which can be easily carried to the classroom when needed. The second pertains to computer projection panels, which can be linked to a personal computer so that computer generated images can be projected on a screen using a standard overhead projector. In most cases no special software is required.

This technology allows neat, legible images to be produced quickly on a personal computer and projected onto an overhead screen. The image can be modified and 'built up' to take account of contributions from the class. The great advantage of this device over the use of a chalk board or white board is that the teacher can record and project class contributions in a neat, adaptable and legible manner, and can face the class during the whole process. A final copy from the personal computer can be printed out at the end of the class, photocopied, and distributed to students.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The use of the overhead projector in law teaching is an invaluable but under-utilised teaching technique. This article has attempted to set out basic principles to guide the novice in the use of this important device. Judicious use of overhead projections in the law class will add variety and interest and effectiveness to law teaching and learning.