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| <b>Title</b> Active Learning in Law  |
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| <b>Keywords</b> (Max 4)<br>Transition, law, active learning  |
| <b>OVERVIEW</b>  |
| <p><b>Overview, Aims and Context (the rationale including underpinning pedagogy)</b><br/>(summarise the activity in 2 or 3 sentences, max 50 words)</p> <p>Thinking and writing in law differs from other disciplines and other styles of writing and thinking (Walker &amp; Hobson 2014). In to support students in making the transition to university and developing their legal skills and understanding of law a range of active learning strategies were introduced.</p>   |
| <p><b>Description</b> (a brief description of the activity; and how you have used innovative pedagogies and approaches in the curriculum design; max 200 words)</p> <p>Over the course of the last 5 years, the module teaching team has sought to engage students in active learning. Active learning instructional strategies include a wide range of activities that share the common element of involving students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing. The module had been overhauled to embed induction workshops on legal skills development, library legal research sessions as well as legal writing clinics facilitated by alumni (professional barristers).</p> <p>New activities introduced included using Summative Assessment Strategies, for example giving an online test or quiz to measure student learning for purposes of allocating a grade. In order to encourage students to work independently some lectures were replaced by podcasts, legal films. At the end of these activities, students were required to undertake a brief assessment/test. The idea behind the ‘tests’ is that they can be used to enhance learning by focusing clearly on important learning goals rather than simply learning isolated pieces of factual information. Students were also required to engage with legal writing clinics, bringing copies of their draft essays to class. In order to encourage and support students on the module to see Law in action the funding supported a series of visits to legal institutions (Royal Courts of Justice and Stormont).</p> |
| <p><b>Design</b> (methodological approach (qualitative and quantitative evaluation); and Evaluation approach included using both quantitative (i.e. online module survey) and qualitative methods (i.e. ‘informal feedback’ and the reflective learning piece collected during the course of the module) to review the benefits and shortcomings of the new approach. Performance data (from the assessed activities) was used to ascertain the levels of attainment of students on the module.</p>  |

## RESULTS

**Findings and Conclusions:** (provide information on results/findings, evidence and conclusions)

In order to encourage and support students on the module to develop their legal writing skills we used alumni (professional barristers) as facilitators. The students recognised and appreciated the value of the clinics stating they 'found the feedback given in the writing clinics, invaluable.' The legal writing clinics also served to enhance student confidence, to foster the motivation of the undergraduate students and to help them understand how their skills development in this module can help them achieve in their other modules. As one student commented 'the writing clinics enabled me to better value the benefits of drafting and re-drafting and the risks one takes with neglecting it'. Students recognised the need to apply what they had learnt in their future assignments. Overall students clearly valued the involvement of alumni claiming 'the workshops run by Ulster Alumni were helpful, as it aided us the opportunity to ask questions about their study of law and ask for advice on any area we struggled with. They understood the initial questions first year undergraduate law student would have. ...Many aspects and skills we learnt in the module, were transferable to the other modules we were studying'.

In acknowledgment of the need to expose students to the actual practice of law early on in their studies students attended a day-long session at the Royal Courts of Justice and Stormont to observe the legislative process in action. When asked in the online module survey to identify what was particularly good about the module the students consistently identified the visits as one the best aspects of the module as they 'made what was being taught real'.

In order to support students podcasts and several online tests were introduced. These activities were designed to offer another approach to stimulating active student engagement both in and out of class. These activities did not work as well as we anticipated compounded by poor quality and technical difficulties with the podcasts, leading to accusations of the module being 'too random and lacking clear structure'. However, this did not detract from the recognition of support and guidance given to the students. As one student pointed out 'If at times the module seemed unfocused, the availability of members of staff and resources accessible in the university ensured a commitment to the students'. The online module survey echoed this with a score of only 3 for the statement that the module was delivered in a way that was clear and consistent with its stated learning outcomes. Reassuringly for the module team, receiving constructive feedback and support and guidance scored highest on the module survey with scores of 4.06 and 4.12 respectively. When asked to suggest improvements to the module a recurring theme was evident with students asking for 'weekly lectures, not podcasts', claiming that they 'did not get much from the youtube podcasts, and find attending lectures more effective'.

This introductory module, Introduction to Law (LAW116) involves a specific skill set that has to be mastered and provides an underpinning for all other modules on the degree. The module is in essence a 'gate keeper' and aims to ensure certain quality standards for

the students when pursuing their studies. It is necessary for students to both learn and practice the reading, writing and analysing skills of law whilst taking in a lot of content in semester one. Furthermore, whilst module delivery may require some changes as result of this pilot the module does provide a clear basis for further study as a student commented 'regarding the module in general, I have enjoyed my learning experience this semester. The module was effective in easing me into the world of law as a student who never previously studied the subject. The tutors were exemplary, delivering very informative presentations and constructive feedback regarding my coursework. I will certainly be using some of the skills I developed in this module throughout my course'.

Despite the concerns raised over the use of podcasts and the online tests the overall feedback has been positive and academic attainment has improved. As a result of ALL the interventions introduced incrementally over the past five years LAW116 failure rate has dropped from 26.5% in 2013/14 to 16% in 2015/16 to 12% in 2016/17. However, a key finding is that any individual module developments should only be part of a broader process and it is a case of trial and error recognising that not all interventions will necessarily work or be received favourably by the students.

## EVALUATION

**Reflective Commentary** (this should draw from your experience and identify what worked well and what were the key challenges;)

A review of the first year law student experience had been undertaken in 2009 that identified issues in relation to student engagement and belonging. These included students feeling challenged early in the programme with independent learning, high volumes of reading, feelings of bewilderment and the demands of university study. The findings of the review led the course team to recognise that there was a mis-match between staff and students' expectations in relation to the learning and teaching of the LLB programme. Following on from this, the team devised and implemented an enhanced induction process, changes to assessment strategies within introductory modules, early feedback to students, essay writing skills classes and peer support (PASS) in order to address this expectation gap. The changes as part of the Active Learning programme were part of a broader school wide process of induction and support. The legal writing clinics are now firmly embedded within the module and will continue to be a key feature in alleviating the many difficulties faced by our Law students when commencing their law studies and making the transition to university. The 'law in action' visits will also continue to be a key feature of the module. The challenges were mainly caused by the technology and glitches with podcasts; and the move away from weekly lectures created a lack of focus for students as the format was different from other first semester modules. The team will keep this module under review.

**Student Engagement (to be completed by the student partner):** Impact on learning experience and sense of belonging;

Overall, this semester 1 year 1 module did do what it set out to and students overwhelmingly recognised this indicating that 'learning to simplify concepts and explaining 'big' ideas, has been a massive personal journey'. This sums up the general

flavour of feedback given in the reflective pieces submitted at the end of the module. The module clearly assists with transition. As one student partner commented 'I have found the learning experience of this module extremely satisfying and feel like it has helped me to transition from an A-Level student to a university student by providing me with the tools necessary to do so'. Moreover student feedback illustrates the importance of the advice given by the alumni in the legal writing clinics in helping to build confidence with a student partner commenting 'receiving feedback from the legal writing session was not only convincing in the approach I adopted, but also augmented my level of confidence to tackle the coursework'. The impact on the learning experience has been significant. Evaluation and student feedback shows the importance of creating a supportive environment with appropriate mechanisms to equip students with the ability to make a successful transition to university study and to develop their confidence and motivation to study law.

**Learning Environment and Engagement:** your views on the appropriateness and effectiveness of physical spaces for engagement and virtual spaces to enhance learning.

This project focused on the introduction of a variety of active learning strategies rather than specifically examining the types of learning spaces to enhance learning. However, some of the spaces used for seminars were not easily adaptable and not conducive to group work. Furthermore, the large lecture hall used drew complaints from the students and staff. This underpins the importance of creating spaces where students and staff can engage in meaningful dialogue to enhance the learning and teaching experiences of both students and staff.

**Impact** (please provide evidence of the impact on learning and/or teaching)

The impact of the project is that students have engaged more fully with their studies though 'learning by doing.' It particularly highlights the benefits of endorsing a partnership approach, using alumni partners as facilitators for the legal writing clinics. This approach allows students to see 'possible selves' (Plimmer and Schmidt, 2007). Using alumni as partners means they can offer advice and give a clear context to the undergraduate students for future skills development. The 'law in action' visits also served to enhance students' engagement. It was anticipated that this increased active engagement with the learning process would translate into improved grades (see Hatamyar and Sullivan, (2010), who through statistical analysis demonstrate that participation in active learning sessions 'was tied to a startling boost in students' grades.'). The improved academic attainment on the module verifies this.

## **STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT**

**Transferability** (consider how this activity might be used by colleagues in other schools/faculties and if it could be developed for a further Faculty interdisciplinary learning project)

The project is aimed at all educators within the School, Faculty and university. It may be

of use to a wide range of disciplines beyond the Law school.

**Dissemination (internal and external)** (School and Faculty briefings, workshops, resources developed)

In the first instance, the findings from the evaluation have been disseminated at School (through Course Committee and School Board) and Faculty level, through FCAA, Faculty Board and FEC. We would also intend to disseminate more widely through Faculty L&T events and through the CHERP Annual Conference.

### **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**References** (using Harvard style, list literature and other resources that influenced your work)

Bonwell, C., & Eison, J. (1991) Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1). Washington, DC: George Washington University.

Hatamyar, PW and Sullivan TP, The Impact of Active Learning on Law School Performance *ExpressO* (2010) available at [http://works.bepress.com/patricia\\_hatamyar/1/](http://works.bepress.com/patricia_hatamyar/1/)

Plimmer, G and Schmidt, A (2007) Possible Selves and Career Transition: it's what you want to be not what you want to do, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 114, 61-74

Walker, S., & Hobson, J. (2014) Interventions in teaching first-year law: feeding forward to improve learning outcomes, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 39:3, 326-338

Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct 1<sup>st</sup> Report, April 1996

Module Feedback Survey, LAW116, 2015-2016

University of Ulster Learning and Teaching Strategy (2013/14-2017/18)

[http://www.ulster.ac.uk/centrehep/teaching\\_and\\_learning\\_strategy/Learning\\_TeachingStrategyPlainTextVersion.pdf](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/centrehep/teaching_and_learning_strategy/Learning_TeachingStrategyPlainTextVersion.pdf)

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**Attachments List and** attach relevant documents/images in support of project activities