

## TEACHING METHODS & MEDIA

### Supplemental instruction: students helping students' learning

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The vast and swift widening of higher education combined with a reduction in resources has led to significant curricular changes, while greater focus and weight is being given to personal and interpersonal skills development within the professional and vocational context.

On reading for a law degree today students might reasonably expect to develop their analytical or critical thinking skills, learn how to research data, synthesise and present it effectively, develop the ability to make appropriate connections and understand legal principles, as well as when and how to apply them. To reach this capability first year students have to overcome the initial difficulties of studying a totally new subject with a huge volume of material, dealing with complex data from day one, and understanding the underlying principles and policy which are beyond their current experience.

Supplemental Instruction (SI), which originated in 1975 at the University of Missouri, is a peer tutoring scheme with a difference. Rather than tutoring, which implies teaching, SI is concerned with facilitation, with its emphasis upon learning. Second and third year university students volunteer to be trained to facilitate groups of first year students on what are known to be 'difficult' first year courses, often involving concepts which students entering higher education find hard to grasp initially and resulting in higher than usual drop out rates. Research in the USA indicates that SI reduces first year dropout rates and increases grades if students attend one or more SI session.

In the UK, the Enterprise in Higher Education (EHE) program was designed to encourage among higher education

institutions active innovative teaching and learning methods, the development of transferable skills and student employability; all of which are contained within the scope of an SI program. A consortium of six universities successfully bid for funding to turn SI into a model which better reflected the UK higher education system. This preliminary study examines whether the UK findings replicate the experience of SI in the USA of increasing student grades and whether SI develops students' deeper understanding of the subject through active cooperative group learning.

Like the USA model, the core SI model in the UK is timetabled, voluntary, confidential and non-remedial. Unlike the American model, and other peer tutoring programs, however, SI leaders are not allowed to teach content, only to facilitate discussion and exploration of issues amongst the student group. Leaders are not required to attend first year lectures. They meet their SI supervisor on a weekly basis and the supervisor sits in on some of their sessions to provide feedback on their performance, as in the US. As the system evolved in different UK institutions, methods of recognition for the leaders widened from payment to academic credit or a certificate in recognition of skills developed.

The first claim for SI was that attendance at sessions could increase students' grades. Given that assessment is carried out in varied forms for each course unit, the fact that an increase in grades did occur suggests SI helps to develop greater understanding and confidence with the subject matter and promotes the students' deeper understanding of law.

SI leaders achieved better grades than their peers in the same cohort, although it is acknowledged that a number of factors may be involved in accounting for this. SI leaders were asked to fill in a questionnaire on various skills which they might have developed as a result of their role. 'Communication skills' were recognised as having markedly developed through the experience of leader-

ship, particularly when facilitating rather than teaching.

Whether SI really produces higher grades in students who attend cannot be proved in the same definitive way as it can in the USA because of their standardised testing process. However, what is not in doubt in the UK model of the program is the enthusiasm and time which students have given to this voluntary learning activity throughout the year. It is evident that the first year students are 'learning how to learn law' and beginning to make sense of the large volume of material they need to process and understand in order to make meaning. SI sessions enable that essential processing to take place. Most importantly students learn that they can learn as much from each other by processing their lecture notes and articulating their understanding with others in a supportive and encouraging environment as from their tutors. As one UCL lecturer put it, 'SI cuts the umbilical cord, encouraging and developing students as independent learners'.

The successful implementation of the scheme indicates that SI responds to the affective needs of students entering higher education: finding their place and role, social interaction, learning the language of the subject, becoming effective learners etc. The extent to which students tune in and make it their own was the most surprising and interesting outcome. Although the scheme was originally set up to support first years, the results show it is actually the leaders who gain most of all in developing and building up their personal skills of teamwork, leadership, communication, responsibility, facilitation and self-confidence, as well as built-in academic revision and seeing the course from a different and higher perspective.

Skills developed in SI, by both students and leaders alike, are all process skills, needed by all good lawyers who continue to develop them throughout life — and this is on top of the academic knowledge and understanding they gain

en route. Finally, employers are delighted to hear that students have the opportunity to develop themselves in this innovative way.

## TECHNOLOGY

### Implications of electronic developments for distance and face to face learning

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The introduction of information and communications technology (ICT) in law teaching should aim at improving quality, not at lowering costs. Through the development of interactive teaching programs, ICT has the potential to revolutionise legal education. In times when a rising student/staff ratio is threatening the quality of education, the well-planned integration of ICT into law teaching can at least ensure that the quality of courses is maintained, despite lower budgets.

The authors describe the experience in the Netherlands as an example of the extent to which these economic arguments and the educational, structural and functional organisation of universities are interconnected. There student complaints about the quality of the education they received made in response to the economic argument raised by the government that they should pay higher tuition fees induced a new policy aimed at delivering higher quality education in exchange for increased fees. Higher quality was pursued by creating a special fund to stimulate innovation and by ordering the Open University of the Netherlands (OUNL) to use at least 20% of its budget for innovative projects.

However, the new approach has some major shortcomings in its implementation, such as *how* quality is to be improved by using ICT. The authors draw on their experiences at OUNL to offer a number of statements about the implementation and use of ICT in legal education:

The use of ICT in law teaching is unavoidable, but what kind of ICT should be used, and how should it be used? The introduction of electronics is not without difficulties and requires some prior reflection. First there is the problem of logistics. A significant percentage of students still do not have a personal computer or access to the Internet. This is a vital consideration, particularly for distance teaching universities envisaging the possibility of substituting written materials with electronic.

Simply creating databases and expert systems for educational purposes is not in itself useful, but integrating them into law teaching is. Teaching how to integrate the use of databases and modern means of communication into daily legal practice demands more than simply offering entrance to databases; such means will have to be integrated into teaching programs as well. In any case ICT has more to offer than the creation of educational databases. More than just connecting campuses, if well implemented, ICT may offer students some of the advantages of distance teaching, like some freedom to choose when and where to study, without turning universities into distance education institutions.

For all universities electronics offers a more effective option for teaching general skills (for example, by means of court and client interview simulations) and specialised skills (exercises in applying rules of law in concrete cases). Especially in distance teaching, it will make it possible to supply course materials to students faster and cheaper. It can also potentially make tutoring cheaper, especially for courses which do not attract large numbers of students. Furthermore, ICT offers conventional universities the opportunity to share expertise. It opens up the possibility of offering courses on subjects about which the university itself does not possess the necessary expertise and may in this way lead to greater diversity within the curriculum.

The use of ICT can save money and at the same time improve the quality and

diversity of programs but only real integration of the use of ICT into courses will lead to quality improvement. The use of ICT in teaching will have to affect the whole curriculum.

Changing the form of a course without adapting its contents will seriously affect its quality. Efficiency and university budgets are likely to enforce some degree of integration between distance and conventional courses in the case of institutions which offer both modes. If teachers succumb to pressures to put courses onto the Internet or CD-Rom by simply feeding traditional course materials into a computer, the quality of learning will be endangered. The contents of a course needs to be changed when its form is adapted, and this will take time and cost money.

Using ICT may save money, but deciding to use ICT in order to save money endangers the quality of teaching. Most students do not like to learn from the screen, and research indicates that reading from a screen is tiring; so students are likely to print out longer text blocks. In addition many students dislike doing exercises on screen. Students need to be offered something *more*, something *better*, by the use of ICT — an improvement in the quality of teaching.

Electronics will not replace books. In the future some kinds of texts, especially those that must be up-to-the-second, will disappear from bookshelves and move to screens; but many will stay. Research indicates that users of 'electronic books' have a problem in obtaining a clear overview when larger knowledge domains are covered. A good electronic course will at least partly consist of printed materials with the electronic component being highly interactive and problem-centred. The real advantage afforded by ICT is its potential to offer highly interactive exercises, coupled with multi-media databases. Maybe it will be possible to combine these domains with exercises in general skills. In any case only interactive study materials really belong on the net. This may mean that at