

A response to 'teaching 'dry' subjects without tears'

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In 1991 a young barrister, James Brown walked into the large M16 lecture theatre of the Dartford Campus of the then Thames Polytechnic, the forerunner to the University of Greenwich. Using a whiteboard and the simple power of the English language he started his lecture series on the law of land and property.

He opened, "*In 1066 William the bastard invaded England, defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings and here we will start.....*" The passion, knowledge and detailed understanding of his subject filled the room with interest, sowing the seed of interest that still carries me forward! Mixing legal theory, history, business application and practical story telling with the core subject, case law, the topic was presented in a relevant, future practitioner-focused style.

Does therefore the view that land law is a 'dry' and difficult subject to convey to learners expressed by Clarke (2011), represent a wider problem of conveying complex higher education (HE) subjects?

Are these subjects 'dry' to those who have become pure teaching staff, remote from the topic, rather than coming to the issue as an active practitioner/researcher holding a fuller depth of subject understanding?

The premise of Clarke (2011:3) is that for a subject such as land law, '*We have in mind a number of features which make a subject appear uninteresting and unapproachable to the average student*' and, as such, requires a special topic- specific teaching strategy to be effectively conveyed beyond the needs of any general HE taught subject. This view appears to reject the basic role of the teacher as the motivator of learning in every subject context, Petty (2009). The counter point of this paper is that the most motivated learner can be bored or turned off a subject due to poor presentation.

Every subject can be made 'dry' if conveyed in a style incorrect to the potential audience. Motivation theory suggests that any topic poorly conveyed to the learner will miss the need of the psychological learning contract, Petty (2009).

Therefore, whilst I do not reject any of the suggested teaching strategies outlined by Clarke (2011:4), I feel that the suggested learning strategies detailed in Table One (Clarke 2011:4) are wrongly grounded in learning theory. The potential pitfall within the Clarke (2011) view is that the lack of a teacher's feel for a topic within a programme may be due to the loss of contact with the application of the subject by the presenter. This loss of teaching vitality is discussed by Knight (2002) and is identified as a risk faced by everyone engaged in long-term academic practice.

The practical teaching problem identified is that not every topic within a broad programme course such as law, will fit within the practitioner's own interest or research experience. The

wider learning point is that when taken away from your own core areas of experience, the tools available to you to inspire or motivate learners will be reduced. This will then require a more formal teaching lesson plan style to be adopted. Practitioners need to be reflective in terms of their own background, experience, skills and motivations. This skills matrix approach is required at both individual and management level to ensure that a broad programme of study is covered by the skills and experience held within the team. When those skills are shown to be missing, teaching strategies should be adopted to maintain deliverable quality.

Conclusion

Everyone will be expected to teach subjects, core to a HE programme, that are not his or her own primary topic of interest or experience. It is therefore a risk faced by everyone that some lessons will need more preparation and planning than those that are their primary subject interest. But it is not the HE topic that is an issue; rather the preparation and enthusiasm you bring to the presentation.

Land law will only ever be as 'dry' as the presenter makes the topic. Given to the right person the topic can motivate a learner into a career specialism.

References

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Author Biography

Andrew Thompson is a graduate of the University of Greenwich having read a BSc (Hons) in Building Surveying. He is a member of the RICS Boundary & Party Wall Practice Panel and was part of the working group that has produced the professional guidance notes on Boundaries 2nd Edition, Party Wall legislation and Procedure 6th Edition, Rights of Light 1st Edition and Daylight & Sunlight 1st Edition.

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