

# Legal Education Review

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## Boer, Ben --- "Note: The Australasian Law Teaching Clinic: Its Past, Present and Future" [1989] LegEdRev 12; (1989) 1(1) Legal Education Review 145

THE AUSTRALASIAN LAW TEACHING CLINIC: ITS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Discussing the techniques of teaching is not a common part of the experience of most law teachers. We are more often concerned with the content of what we teach than with the methods by which our students learn. Those times when we do explore our teaching tend to be irregular, unsystematic and somewhat haphazard. Discussions with colleagues in other disciplines also often seem pointless — the issues of teaching law are idiosyncratic. The Australasian Law Teaching Workshop is an attempt by a group of law teachers to change these circumstances; to explore the peculiar problems of teaching law and to do so in a systematic way, with others engaged in the same endeavour and in an environment of experimentation and cooperation. This note describes the programme which, although similar in many ways to those running in the United States and Canada, has developed its own regional variations.

The first national law teaching clinic was held in Australia in July 1987 under the title of the New South Wales Law Teaching Workshop. The instructors at the first clinic were Neil Gold and Mary Gerace of the Law School at the University of Windsor, Ontario. It attracted 17 participants from a variety of law schools. As a result of the success of the 1987 venture, the Annual General Meeting of the Australasian Universities Law Schools Association requested John Goldring of Macquarie University to organise another workshop for 1988. A small committee with representatives from a number of law schools was established in late 1987. Deans and Heads of School were contacted to elicit their support and to ensure adequate funding for staff wishing to attend and other financial assistance was provided by the International Development Programme, Canberra for participants from the University of Papua New Guinea.

## THE 1988 CLINIC

The programme of the 1988 clinic is typical of the content of the clinics. It was organised as an intensive, practically oriented series of demonstrations, role plays and practice teaching segments using video feedback and discussions groups. The instructors at the clinic were Marlene Le Brun of the Faculty of Law, University of Tasmania, Richard Johnstone, then of the Faculty of Law at Monash University and now at the Law School at the University of Melbourne, Graeme Cooper of the Law School at the University of Sydney and Ben Boer of the School of Law at Macquarie University.

On the first day of clinic, an overview of the structure and organisation for the week was given and the goals and assumptions of the clinic were articulated. The first substantive session, which examined models of teaching and

models of teachers, considered the way teachers are viewed by students, using material drawn from Bergquist and Phillips' *Handbook for Faculty Development*.<sup>1</sup> Their material characterises various styles of teaching and looks at the ways in which teachers are perceived both by students and their institutions.

On the second day the question of formulating teaching objectives was examined. The purpose of formulating teaching objectives is to clarify what teachers expect students to have learned and how they will display their levels of achievement. It involves the difficult task of trying to identify and communicate what students ought to know and be able to do at the end of a particular class or sequence of instruction.<sup>2</sup>

The third meeting was devoted to learning how to give and receive constructive feedback using a series of role plays, of both destructive and constructive feedback, with the instructors demonstrating various styles. These techniques were practised in the afternoon session which was devoted to working in small groups, giving segments of a typical class taught recently. All observers were asked to give constructive feedback to each of the presenters both orally and in writing through a designed form. The objective of this session was to enable participants to articulate the goals of constructive feedback, state its characteristics and have an opportunity to practise both giving and receiving feedback.

The fourth session, on learning styles, was another hands-on session in which participants were asked to complete a standard learning Style Inventory in order to discover the particular learning style they favoured. Participants were able to discover that their learning styles diverged markedly amongst themselves and then discussed the implications for instructional design of different learning styles.

In the fifth segment, the focus moved to creating appropriate climates for effective learning. Participants looked at the atmosphere of the classroom and the use of techniques to improve the learning climate by the use of communication skills. The session looked at the way in which people "attend" and the way in which they listen, either actively or passively and canvassed a range of theoretical material dealing, in particular, with small group teaching and giving detailed examples of how small group teaching could be improved through greater awareness of communication skills.

A further section on methods and devices for teaching looked at various teaching formats — brainstorming, small group discussion, questioning techniques and the use of lectures — and also explored the range of available physical devices — blackboards, whiteboards, printed materials, overhead projection and video equipment. Although perhaps initially viewed as pedestrian, it was surprising how many participants commented on the fact that they rarely used even the most simple devices such as blackboards, let alone prepared overhead projections, and on those occasions when devices were used they were not always used effectively.

The seventh session was devoted to the preparation of formal activity plans for instructional sessions. An activity plan, a device more familiar to secondary teachers, is a step-by-step plan for teaching a particular class, stating the assumptions that the teacher has made about his or her students, the state of knowledge and skills acquired so far, the goals for that class and the preparation that would be required for it. The plan then systematically describes each component of the class including the methods and devices to be used at each stage. The idea behind writing an activity plan is not simply that teachers should have a detailed plan for each class they give, but in addition that teachers become accustomed to thinking in terms of the context in which their students are learning and then systematically integrate their teaching into that context. By writing activity plans a number of times on a practice basis, many of these matters become part of a teacher's routine and do not need further formalisation.

The penultimate day of the clinic was devoted to extensive teaching sessions. The participants were asked to present a 20 minute segment of a class experimenting with the techniques and information explored in the clinic. Each teaching segment was followed by at least ten minutes of feedback from the participants. Each participant was asked to try a few different methods (questioning, buzz groups, brainstorming and so on) and at least two devices

(blackboard, handout, overhead projection, or video). An activity plan was prepared for this portion of the session. After each 20 minute segment the other members of the group were asked to provide extensive constructive feedback by way of detailed forms looking at all aspects of the teacher's presentation. Oral comments were also invited from the participants. All the sessions were recorded on video equipment and at the end of the clinic each participant was given a copy of their teaching segment for later review, giving a more substantial portrayal of the teacher's presentation, and one which can be looked at repeatedly with a view to improving methods and interactional skills.

The final sessions of the clinic were devoted to reviewing the way in which the clinic had operated and evaluating each particular segment by way of a comprehensive feedback form for the instructors. In the final session, room was also made for an intensive discussion about special problems encountered by teachers in their law schools. Some of the topics discussed related to individual problem students who were either too shy or too talkative, problems encountered by certain teachers in lectures by immature behaviour, sexist attitudes and so on. For some participants, this was one of the most valuable sessions of the clinic.

## 1989 AND BEYOND

As a result of the very positive 1988 experience, the instructors decided that they should urge AULSA and individual law teaching institutions to support the continuation of its work. At the Annual General Meeting of AULSA in 1988 motions were passed affirming AULSA's support for the continuation and development of the Clinic and encouraging Deans, Heads and Chairpersons of all law teaching institutions in Australia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand to cooperate in establishing an appropriate infrastructure to ensure the continuation and development of the committee for the running of clinics in the future.

The 1989 Workshop will be held at Warburton, outside Melbourne, in June. In order to attract a broad a range of participants, individual letters were sent to staff in all law teaching institutions as well as to the Deans, Heads and Chairpersons. Planning is well under way.

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<sup>[1]</sup> WH Bergquist & SR Phillips, *A Handbook of Faculty Development* (Washington: Council of Independent Colleges, 1981).

<sup>[2]</sup> See, for example, RF Mager, *Preparing Instructional Objectives* (Belmont California: David S Lake, 1984).

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