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EVALUATION OF AN INNOVATIVE MODEL FOR TEACHING AN LLB PROGRAM

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& JIM JACKSON*

INTRODUCTION

In 1993 the Faculty of Law and Criminal Justice¹ at Southern Cross University developed an innovative “block or “intensive teaching” model for the delivery of the first and second years of its three-year graduate LLB program. This model represented a significant departure from the standard format for the teaching of LLB programs in Australia. In this article, we report an evaluation of the effectiveness of the model. The results of the evaluation shed light on its potential strengths and weaknesses and provide insights into what some Australian law students value in teaching and program design.

Although the block model was largely discontinued in 1996 for pragmatic reasons, it was generally found to have been a successful innovation. The findings from the evaluation should, therefore, be of considerable interest to other law schools, particularly those actively exploring options to increase their flexibility in program delivery. There is an emerging trend for law schools to offer Masters courses over short intensive teaching periods,² and to offer LLB units (mainly later-year ones) during summer semesters within time frames that are more intensive than in the normal semester.³ Staff administering

these courses should find the evaluation results especially relevant, particularly as the students undertaking the block program at Southern Cross University were all graduate students⁴ whose reactions to an intensive teaching program are more likely to be comparable with those of LLM and later-year LLB students.

The article begins with an explanation of the block model and a description of how the evaluation was implemented. The article then describes how the first cohort of students to undertake the law program at Southern Cross perceived block teaching in the first and second years of their LLB program, how they perceived the traditional semester system in the third year of the program, and how they reacted to the work experience placements made possible by the flexibility provided by the block model. Lecturers' perceptions of the model are also reported. The article concludes with a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the model. It examines the potential criticism that the block model was essentially reactionary in legal education terms, in that it may have constrained opportunities for student reflection, is addressed. While the model may have some inherent difficulties, it is argued that these difficulties can be minimised with careful planning, particularly in relation to student assessment, and that the model is potentially a highly effective and flexible way of delivering a law program.

THE MODEL

There were two distinguishing features of the block model introduced in 1993. First, it employed sequential six-week teaching blocks for the delivery of core subjects in the first and second years of the three-year program.⁵ During each of these blocks, students attended class for between 16 and 20 hours per week. In first year, they completed four six-week teaching blocks, one each for Introduction to Law, Constitutional and Administrative Law, Torts and Contracts. In second year, they completed another four six-week teaching blocks, one each for Property and Equity, Criminal Law and Procedure, Family Law, and Evidence and Procedure. In addition, they completed two three-week teaching blocks, one in first year for Skills 1, and the other in second year for Skills 2. Upon completing each teaching block the students undertook an

examination in the subject taught.⁶ In 1993 and 1994, the examinations took place immediately following completion of each block. In 1995 and 1996, a one-week swotvac was introduced at the end of each teaching block to allow students time to prepare better for their subject examinations.

Second, the timetable of the block model during the first two years of the program was arranged so that teaching commenced in January and concluded in July.⁷ This timetabling arrangement was intended to allow students to commence work experience placements in the legal industry from August onwards.⁸ During these placements the students were expected not only to obtain important insights into the practical operation of the legal system but also to finalise outstanding assignments, drawing upon their work placement setting to inform their thinking. All assignments were due for submission after mid-September, at which point the students completed their year's work.⁹

The sequential six-week teaching blocks were seen as being potentially attractive to graduates seeking to undertake an LLB course because of the opportunity each block provided for students to engage deeply with the body of knowledge and skills in a subject area. The teaching blocks were also expected to enable better use to be made of guest lecturing time and to provide staff with the timetabling freedom required to give students access to the courts and to community-based learning resources. Access to these resources was essential as a means of countering any sense of intellectual isolation because of the Law Faculty's location in the relatively small town of Lismore on the north coast of New South Wales.¹⁰

Altering the commencement date for the academic year to January was motivated by similar considerations: it would provide an opportunity for students from as early as August to undertake work experience placements that would give them exposure to legal practice outside the north coast region of New South Wales. The work experience placements were also expected to contribute to the quality of their classroom discussion, give the students valuable practical experience and improve their prospects of making a successful transition to professional practice.¹¹

A traditional semester model was adopted for the final year of the three-year program because this was the only way in which students could undertake elective subjects. Third-year law subjects

were taught concurrently, therefore, and the academic year commenced in March and concluded in October.

The block model was largely discontinued in 1996 in response to pressure mounting from within the University to have combined undergraduate degree programs involving law. There was also a view within the Faculty that the needs of high-achieving school leavers from north-eastern New South Wales who wished to study law were not being met because of the graduate entry requirement for the program. Accordingly, a decision was taken to allow undergraduate entry to combined degree programs involving law from 1996 onwards. This meant having to revert to a traditional semester model with program delivery beginning in March. The block model was not completely abandoned, however. It continues to be used for the teaching of three subjects; Evidence and Procedure, Family Law and Criminal Law. This arrangement is made possible because in all of the combined law degree programs one semester of studies is devoted solely to the teaching of law subjects.

As with the traditional semester model, the block model was established primarily in response to pragmatic considerations (concerning the need to provide timetabling flexibility, extended student access to guest lecturers, the opportunity for students to have work experience placements, and so on). It was also not formally grounded in an area of educational theory, though insights from educational theory, and from the literature on innovative practices in legal education, were certainly influential, particularly on the ways in which teaching was undertaken and on the uses made of the assessment requirements. Most staff of the Faculty were familiar with and sought to implement the “Guidelines for Effective University Teaching” issued by the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee in April, 1993; in collaboration with staff from the University’s Teaching and Learning Unit, they sought to implement practices advanced by contemporary experts on student learning such as Entwistle,¹² Ramsden,¹³ Marton¹⁴ and Biggs,¹⁵ and they discussed and drew ideas from valuable recent contributions to the legal education literature such as those by Rogers,¹⁶ Hasche,¹⁷ and Le Brun and Johnstone.¹⁸ In terms of the framework for teaching law elaborated by Joughin and Gardiner,¹⁹ the block model, which involved studying one subject at a time, represented a major change in “context” from the traditional concurrent

presentation of law subjects. Ramsden has drawn attention to the critical importance of “context” as an influence on “student approaches to learning” and “learning outcomes”.²⁰ Of general interest in the evaluation, therefore, was the nature of the impact of a block model “context” on student approaches to learning and on learning outcomes.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EVALUATION

Evaluation of the block model began in 1995 and concluded in 1996, with partial support from an evaluation skills development grant obtained through the Commonwealth Staff Development Fund. The methods of naturalistic inquiry²¹ and grounded theory²² were employed to collect and analyse the data. These methods entail “rich description” of the phenomenon under evaluation, from which “emergent themes” may be identified. The importance of exploring the setting-specific nature of individual experiences is emphasised, which is consistent with current practice in educational research and evaluation: “the single individual is not or should not be the main object of interest in educational research. Rather interest has to be focused on people in institutional settings, that is on the learner in context”.²³

The informants were 15 third-year law students and five lecturing staff who taught in the block model. The fifteen students were volunteers from the cohort of 35 students enrolled in the third year of the program in 1995. No bias was apparent in terms of the representativeness of the group.²⁴ Third-year students were selected because they had experience of both the block (in the first and second years) and the semester (in third year) models. As they were graduates of other university courses, the students also had prior experience of traditional semester models of program delivery. It was expected, therefore, that they would be very well able to make comparisons between the two formats.

An attempt was made to interview all 10 academic staff in the Faculty who had taught in the block model. This proved impossible because five of the staff members concerned were on extended periods of leave (study leave and maternity leave mainly) at the time when the evaluation was undertaken. Unfortunately, this resulted in only one of the three female staff contributors to the block program being interviewed.²⁵

The interviews with staff and students followed a set of guiding questions formulated in consultation with the Dean of the Faculty. Permission to conduct the evaluation was obtained from the Southern Cross University Ethics Committee. The students were contacted by telephone and an interview was organised at a time convenient for them. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by Helen Saenger, who assured the students of confidentiality, obtained signed informed-consent forms, and took detailed notes during the interviews. Immediately following each interview, the interviewer checked the notes and completed any sections that were unclear. Memos were made at this point to assist with the thematic analysis. Data sets consisting of the detailed notes from the interviews were then analysed for underlying themes. Responses were initially grouped according to whether they related to the six-week subjects in the first and second years, or to the semester-length subjects in third year. Using a “constant comparative method,”²⁶ similar responses were then grouped and summarised to form themes. Each piece of information was identified by interview and numbered so that a coding system of alphanumeric references could be superimposed on the content of the data.²⁷ This technique provided an audit trail which was checked by an independent observer who found the analysis was appropriate to the data and that the data corresponded closely to the information reported. The interviews with staff and the analysis of the data collected from them proceeded in a similar fashion.

To provide for the trustworthiness of the data, attention was paid to the following: (a) triangulation — information on the topic of the evaluation was obtained from two sources, students and staff; (b) persistent observation — data was collected over a five-month period during which the informants had ample opportunity to provide additional information through meetings on up to three occasions with the interviewer; (c) peer debriefing—the interviewer routinely held discussions with professional colleagues prior to interviews and during the data processing as a means of checking assumptions, clarifying interpretations, exploring meanings and probing any biases; (d) member checking—the informants were provided with an opportunity to check the results on two occasions, first when a summary of interview notes was returned to each student interviewee for verification, and second when the students interviewed were invited to check themes and interpretations

arising from the data; and (e) auditing — as reported above, an independent auditor was invited to establish whether the conclusions arising from the evaluation could be supported from the data gathered.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE BLOCK MODEL

The fifteen student informants were widely experienced in terms of educational background, having all successfully completed previous university studies in areas as diverse as arts, business, nursing, psychology and social science. They ranged in age from their mid-twenties to over fifty years. They were graduates who had decided to return to full-time studies, in most cases at considerable personal and financial cost, and they were highly motivated to succeed. Overall, they were seeking a change in career path, realising a lifelong ambition to study law or hoping to apply their legal training to their already-established professional activities in areas such as forestry or nursing.

They were asked a range of questions intended to elicit their reactions to the block model. The questions included: can you describe to me what it was like learning under the block system? what kinds of things did you do? how did you learn — can you give me some examples? what were the most valuable and least valuable aspects of the system?²⁸ From an analysis of their responses, the following themes concerning strengths and weaknesses of the block model were identified.

The principal strengths were that the model allowed for a focused approach to learning, provided a good deal of structure, gave students a contextual framework, was efficient in its use of time, and allowed for extended learning,²⁹ continuous learning, and shared learning. Some students also felt that the model required less effort in preparing for exams.

About two-thirds of the students reported that the block model was very attractive because it encouraged learning to be highly focused: “You had the ability to focus on one subject area.” Another student reported: “[It was] a better way to learn, being able to contemplate and do one topic at a time. It is more conducive to being able to understand.” Another commented: “I enjoyed having no real distractions with another topic, not robbing Peter to pay Paul.” The opportunity to focus on one subject at a time was

generally seen as having been conducive to more effective learning: “You could focus your brain on one area, and I perform better than when I have to spread it over four areas.”

Over one-half of the students reported being satisfied with the highly structured nature of the block framework. One student explained how:

In the block model there was a structure. You get organised, and get your head into the books. You start indexing, do more reading, have 9-30 to 4-30 face-to-face, go home and read for three hours for the next day. The structure was good. You knew where you were going.³⁰

The pressure to keep up with the work imposed a valuable routine on learning: “It required a certain self discipline. You had to read all the material and cases prior to meeting in a discussion group.” The structure encouraged better personal organisation: “In the block model you have to divide up the block evenly, cover ground in correct proportions and keep moving on” and “The block model gave us a structure and all we had to do was read our heads off.”

The block model was considered to provide a valuable integration of learning by about one-half of the students interviewed. The following comments illustrate what students meant by this: “You get an overall picture;” “In the six-week block learning system you get a basis, the broad umbrella;” and “In the block system it is day-to-day and you listen and everything comes together. You can see how law is interrelated in the block model.” There was a strong sense of the importance of being able to build on a framework: “It is a building process. You are building on law. A two-hour lecture was followed by a two-hour tutorial and you could clarify issues.”

For a little over one-third of the students, the block model was popular for the fact that it enabled an efficient use of time. These students felt that it was good to get individual units completed in the six-week blocks: “With the block model you were away and racing.” These students felt that, even though the six-week blocks were compressed, more was being learnt through the block model than would have been the case had the individual subjects been spread over a normal academic year. For these students coming to the University for a full day was considered to be efficient and there was a strong sense of personal achievement, especially if they had done the reading and were prepared.

One-third of the students referred to the fact that the block model had allowed for extended learning in a number of ways:

... in Evidence and Procedure we went to Brisbane two days and sat in on cases and I found that was useful. Sitting and watching law at work. That would be hard to organise in the semester system because of clashes With other subjects. Students can be taken away in the block system. You can organise things with only one subject. That was a useful thing about the block system. We also went up to the Family Law Court for one day in Brisbane. That was a benefit, seeing the law at work.

For these students, one of the most attractive features of the block model was the fact that it enabled them to have months work experience.

Other strengths of the block model were referred to by less than one-third of the students. Students commented the continuity provided by the model: “Everything flows logically” and “You have a good sequence”. This “flow of the work” was linked with being able to have continuing contact with the lecturing staff responsible for individual subjects. Staff were available on a day-to-day basis.

Another attractive feature was that there was more opportunity for shared learning. The fact that everyone’s attention was focused on one subject at a time enabled better discussion both inside and outside class: “You can assume everyone has done the reading and knows the issues. In the block model you all have the same information and the same knowledge.” For one student this shared focus meant more in-depth study of material, while for another: “It allowed you to read, make conclusions. Your ideas were modified by lecturers and other students and by the views they brought forward.”

Another attractive feature concerned revision for examinations. Several students commented that because of the intensive nature of studying under the block model the information was still recent and fresh in their minds as they approached examinations: “You could study one unit all the time and the stuff was still in your brain because you don’t need notes. You just needed a trigger. A case name was enough to trigger.”

All of the students were aware of weaknesses in the block model, though some of these were regarded as being of minor significance by the students who raised them. The main weaknesses were: the inappropriateness of the block system for some kinds of

subjects; insufficient time for study, reflection and consolidation during the six-week teaching blocks; the potential in the block system for falling behind with the work; monotony in being confined to the study of one subject at a time; and stress associated with juggling commitments.

Over two-thirds of the students reported that some subjects were inappropriate for teaching in six-week blocks because they were “too dense” for absorption in the time available. Subjects such as Property and Equity, and Constitutional Law, were considered to be especially unsuited because of the amount and level of difficulty of the material covered. On the other hand, subjects such as Criminal Law, Torts, and Family Law, which “had an overarching continuity about them”, were regarded as being well suited to delivery in six-week teaching blocks.

One-third of the students reported that the model did not allow sufficient time for study. There did not seem to be enough time to look at each individual part, to grasp some of the detailed concepts, and to “see where everything fitted. One student described how: “In the block system you rely a lot on memory, and very soon after the exam you have forgotten a lot. Not much has sunk into the long-term memory. The block system encourages rote learning and relies on short-term memory.”³¹ The theme underlying these kinds of comments concerned the rushed nature of study during the six-week blocks.

A related theme, evident in the comments of another one third of the students, concerned the sense that the six-week teaching blocks did not provide sufficient time for reflection and consolidation of learning.³² One student commented: “... I wonder how much sinks in and how much you are able to digest before you move on to the next area. Reflection time is missing in that respect.” Another reported: “There was a major topic day after day. There was no time to consolidate and I was left with a real inferiority complex.”

About one-third of the students felt that a major drawback of the block model was the fact that it was possible to fall behind very easily in the event of sickness or family problems: “The problem was if you were sick or had family problems and missed a day or two, or if you just missed reading for the three or four hours which was required each night, you would get a long way behind.” One student reported that if you missed a day it was impossible to

recoup the time and that the only chance to catch up was in the revision period: “You can go through a subject not understanding.” Another student remarked that even missing part of a lecture could prove crucial: “At the beginning of the week if you missed a lecture and it was an integral or basic concept it would throw you and you couldn’t get a grasp on the whole thing.”

Studying intensively in six-week blocks was reported by about one-third of the students as being monotonous. These students described how it could get boring if the student was not interested in the topic because the block model did not allow any other outlets for study. “Cross pollination” with other subjects was described as being absent from the block model, and there was also lack of choice. This could lead to a feeling of saturation: “If I read one more word about this topic I’ll explode. It can be interesting, but when you worked over it and over it, it gets a bit much.” The block model was felt to lack the flexibility of the “normal” situation:

You get to the point where you get tired of doing 100 pages of reading per day after 18 weeks. In the normal situation you get flat spots, you can stretch one or move onto another. In the block system you can’t juggle. You are stuck with one thing and reading all about a particular subject gets tedious. I found this the case far more last year and other people in second year have found it also. It is a definite factor in burnout.

Stress in completing the six-week blocks was a major factor for as many as one-third of the students. Two students admitted getting very sick during the course, while several others reported that they had felt socially isolated while doing the course: “Socially for the last two years I did not have much interaction at all.” Others had to juggle family commitments, attend lectures and do all the readings at the same time. One student reported that there was extra pressure on students receiving AUSTUDY in that these students could not skip a block for financial reasons. Financial support from AUSTUDY was dependent upon continuous enrolment in the blocks. The only students who could afford to skip a block were those who were financially independent. For some students the need to persist in order to continue to receive AUSTUDY had placed a lot of pressure on them and was described as an “all or nothing situation.”

When asked to comment on factors affecting the quality of their learning experience in the block model, the students promptly identified two important influences. The first concerns teaching

methods employed and the teaching context. The second concerns individual differences and the dynamics of the student group.

The teaching methods employed by staff varied. Some staff were reported as having adopted a highly structured and strongly directive approach. Others encouraged a high level of class discussion and participation, referred to by some of the students as a Socratic approach.³³ Six students provided comments on this approach. A criticism was that use of the approach allowed outspoken students to dominate in class, with the result that other students felt inhibited about contributing to discussions.³⁴ In addition, these students thought that this teaching strategy had been introduced too early in the program, and that some of the lecturers were inexperienced.

Almost two-thirds of the students commented on the teaching performances of the staff. There was a general perception that “good experienced lecturers with recent practical experience” were required for the block model to be effective in terms of student learning. Several students felt that the block model “puts a lot of responsibility on the lecturers.” One reported, for example, that:

It is thrown back onto the lecturer and their presentation needs to be clear and in point form. That way you don't have to reformulate it. It encourages rote learning. You can't recast it. You have to learn it as it is presented. This puts a lot of pressure on lecturers. It is hard on them. It is dependent on their presentation and, if they are inexperienced at lecturing, it is hard for the students and you can't understand all that well.

It was considered critical by these students that staff teaching in the block system should be well organised and adequately prepared prior to commencing a block. It was essential that student learning should be directed through the use of clear objectives accompanied by lecture outlines and summaries which focused attention on the main issues. In addition, it was helpful to students if tutors and lecturers were practically oriented and were able to present material in a way that “related to the real world.” This “real world perspective” was appreciated and described as having “contagious enthusiasm.”

The second group of influences concerned individual differences and group dynamics. Eleven students described at some length how their own individual learning preferences had affected the quality of their learning experiences in the block model. For some students, the block model was ideal because it suited the fact

that they were personally “well organised,” or “tended to be crammers anyway.” For others, the semester model was preferred because it allowed “a perforation period,” that is, it allowed time for material to be understood and integrated. Seven students reported that the dynamics of the group had adversely affected the quality of their learning. There was apparently a great deal of rivalry within the class, with some students tending to dominate at the expense of quieter and less confident students, and at times it was even difficult for lecturers to maintain control of the class.³⁵

Three students reported that their views on the block system were coloured by their early experiences as a student in the Faculty. The Faculty was newly established when they commenced the LLB program in 1993; some of the lecturing staff on the program were inexperienced; and there was limited access to the library collection because of the restricted library hours during the summer months. These students recalled also that the summer months of 1993 had been extremely hot and very uncomfortable for study.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRADITIONAL SEMESTER MODEL

Comments made by just over one-half of the fifteen students surveyed suggest that the semester model represented a substantially different context for learning. The semester model was described by these students as “an easy way of studying” and as having “a more relaxed pace.” Interpersonal rivalries among the students, which were possibly accentuated by the pressures associated with the block model, were reported as having diffused by third year. There seemed to be more time for relaxation and more time to spend with their families. There was less structure imposed on learning, and several students described how work could be “put off” or “juggled.”

The flexibility of the semester model meant that learning could be more student-directed: “It is more up to individuals how much time and effort they put into each subject.” Students generally placed less emphasis upon the importance of lecturing ability and teaching styles in their comments about the semester model, and learning was felt to depend a great deal more upon motivation and personal organisational skills than had been the case in the block model. Good organisational skills were required to meet deadlines

for assignments, to keep up with reading and to prepare for tutorials.

Undertaking four subjects concurrently in the semester model was reported by about one-half of the students as having the following advantages: students learned how to deal with a number of areas of learning at once; there was greater variety in the subject matter, which resulted in study being more interesting; students felt they had time to catch up if they fell behind; the semester model gave them more time to research material; and they found that it was easier in the semester model to reflect on material and retain information.

On the negative side, over one-half of the students reported that they sometimes found it confusing to have to take in information from four relatively unrelated subjects at once, and there was much less opportunity in the semester model for excursions and other forms of extended learning. For some, there was also a loss of continuity and focus: "We are chopping and changing all the time. We have a lecture, followed by a different tutorial, followed by lunch, then something else." The semester model was described as being "segmented" and "disjointed", which meant for some students that they were unable to obtain an overall picture.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS

Eleven students reported having undertaken work experience placements, varying in duration from 6 weeks to 10 months over the two-year period of the block model. This range reflects the fact that some students were able to take full advantage of the time available to them for work experience, while others for various reasons chose to do a work experience placement in first year only, or on a part-time basis. Some students were placed with local solicitors, while others travelled as far afield as Brisbane, Newcastle and Sydney. Four of the students interviewed did not do work experience placements. The reasons for this varied and included family responsibilities and financial commitments which necessitated remaining in the Lismore region.

There was strong support for the value of the work experience placements, which students described as "useful", "a bonus" and "valuable in providing practical knowledge". For some students the

placements compensated for having coped with the pressures of the six-week teaching blocks: “At the time, with everything being cramped in, it’s difficult. But it pays off in the end—being able to work at the end of the year.” Some students reported that the practical experience obtained through the placements had given them a strong advantage over students at other institutions.

The quality of the work experience obtained varied across placements and was affected to a large extent by what was happening in each workplace. Students placed with solicitors were most likely to have been engaged in family law and workers compensation cases. Students working in Sydney were involved with non-English-speaking clients and with community legal centres — these offered the students a rich variety of experiences, including research work for community services, attendance at meetings with representatives from government organisations, and submission writing. Some students found, though, that they were working simply as clerks or doing photocopying. In some firms, the solicitors did not have time to teach the students very much, and if firms were short-staffed, then the students ended up working long hours.

The quality of learning from the work experience placements may possibly have been greater for students in the second year than the first year of the program. One student commented: “In the Australian Securities Commission [in first year] I did not know anything and got stuck on one case. In the Crown Law Office last year [that is, in second year] I had more knowledge and more to contribute.” Other students expressed similar views.

There was an important link for five students between having a work experience placement and obtaining future employment. Indeed, several students were initially attracted to the law program at Southern Cross because of the opportunity to undertake a work experience placement, which was seen as possibly making them more attractive to employers. Several students saw their work experience placements as providing them with direct openings for future employment. One student described, for example, how a legal firm had said: “Do stay in touch. We’ll be interested to talk to you after you finish your degree. And I have stayed in touch.”

Learning by doing and observing was a characteristic of work experience placements for a majority of the students. Several described how they had acquired practical skills in case work,

while others described becoming involved with cases and how this meant taking on responsibilities, going to court and meeting with barristers. One student described how she had learned the art of questioning: “I learnt the art of asking the right questions, how to look for flaws in an argument and how to bolster an argument.” Others described learning a great deal about office procedures, legal letter writing, preparing submissions for government organisations and how to write an advice. Some students described how they learnt indirectly through observing: “I did not learn much about law. I learnt how a law office runs and about the pressure solicitors are under.” Students described becoming familiar with the courts, with various court-related procedures and with court personalities. One student commented: “It was good. You sort of crept your way into the legal system.”

Work experience placements were reported by six students as having contributed to the quality of class discussion: “It raised the standard of discussion in the class more than if students hadn’t gained practical experience.” The placements also gave two students a greater sense of direction in a discipline considered to be “all encompassing” and in which there was seen to be a need to specialise. One student described how the experience had given him more direction regarding which field of law to pursue: “I consciously chose optional subjects and I found out what’s needed out there and what is not.” Some subjects were considered to be of academic interest whereas others were “where the bread and butter will come from.” The placements also helped to bridge the gap between theory and practice for about one-half of the group. One student commented: “I was able to relate theory to practical through experience.” Another said: “I could apply law in reality.” There was strong appreciation for the fact that the course as it was structured was trying to bridge the “credibility gap” between academia and the legal world.

LECTURERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE BLOCK MODEL

The five lecturers interviewed reported that teaching in the block model was very demanding. The situation required time, energy, knowledge, experience, and good preparation. Staff were able to meet these demands to varying degrees according to their personality, level of other commitments, preferred teaching style,

legal background and prior experience in teaching. All of the staff referred to the difficult circumstances in which the block model was introduced—a new Faculty, new staff, new course and general need for more administrative support: “If everything was in place, perhaps the pressure would not have been so great. It doesn’t mean I don’t think it was a good idea. It was hard at the time.”

It was generally agreed that one of the major attractions of the block model was its capacity to allow flexibility and innovation in course delivery. The six-week blocks enabled visits, excursions, and guest lectures to be arranged for all students: “In Evidence and Procedure we had four weeks of teaching and two weeks of court visits and discussion.” Further, the block model allowed significant access to external expertise, which helped greatly with the credibility of the course during its early stages. Within the classroom setting there was more flexibility and greater opportunities for duplicating real life situations in the conduct of moots: “It was a more real-life experience when students were limited in time to forty-eight hours in which to prepare.” The block model encouraged innovation: “The intensity also forced me to think about other strategies. I moved into other sorts of teaching strategies to get students involved but ensure time was quality time for them.” Several lecturers reported that block teaching had forced them to redefine their conceptions of teaching in ways that were more student-centred and that required them to become more concerned with the individual learning needs of their students.

Teaching in the block model was attractive because it was so highly focused: “The block model had the advantage of being able to focus—to the exclusion of anything else. Nothing else was coming into their [the students’] minds.” Another student commented: “I had their full attention and there were no other demands.” In this sense lecturers did not have to compete with other distractions and students were observed chatting excitedly out of class about the subject matter. A related advantage was that teaching over the summer break meant that it was easier to access library resources, guest lecturers, a range of teaching rooms and teaching resources generally.

Some staff felt that they also performed better within the highly-focused block system: “In the block system it was full-on and I would close my mind. All other responsibilities were put on hold. I gave my all to my teaching.” Lecturers found that they did

not have time during block teaching to be distracted.

Teaching in the block model was very intense: “It takes 100 per cent of your time.” Another lecturer reported: “It was a hectic life, teaching all day and reading all night just to cope.” It was particularly difficult for staff who had demanding administrative responsibilities within the Faculty or who had family commitments. The intensity could create anxiety for lecturers if they got sick or had to miss a day’s lectures. There was the worry of “What do I do?” Several lecturers described the block model as having been stressful: “I was in a state of physical exhaustion” and “I needed to take stress leave at the end of the block.”³⁶ Several staff were happy to return to a semester model because it was felt to be much less stressful than the block model.

The block model required staff to be prepared: “You had to be extremely well prepared before the course started.” Lecturers reported that once the six-week block teaching began, there was no time for reconsidering the direction taken or for reconfiguring lecture notes and plans for student learning experiences. Those teaching in the block system for the first time found this to be very demanding, but lecturers teaching in the block system for a second and third time reported that it became easier with experience. Lecturers also found that some subjects fitted better with the block model than others: “Some subjects benefited and some did not.” It was considered that court-based subjects such as Evidence and Procedure, Criminal Law, and Family Law were the most suited to block teaching.

To a certain extent how staff reacted to the block model depended on their personality and reflected individual teaching preferences. For one lecturer the block model was stressful but enjoyable: “You got wound up and could keep going at that pace,” and “Some are good at doing one thing at a time and I find it better to be totally immersed.” For another the model matched the person’s professional background: “I found it very satisfying and enjoyed it. I have a background as a barrister and I fitted happily into block teaching.”

Staff considered that the students were generally very well prepared for examinations as a result of having intensive teaching followed by a short revision period. Several reported, however, that they had been very concerned about the strain placed on students and their families by the block system, and also about the lack of

reflection time available to students. One lecturer reported, for example, that it was not possible to do much more in the six-week block than simply familiarise students with a subject area. Others reported that there seemed to be no time to attend to details.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the block model introduced in 1993 at Southern Cross University for the teaching of an LLB program to graduate students. In general, the block model was successful because it allowed students to engage with individual subjects in a way which was focused, structured, and time-efficient, and its design allowed valuable opportunities for extended learning, both within individual subject blocks (through visits to courts, realistic time frames for moots, availability of guest lecturers for extended periods) and through its highly popular system of work experience placements. At the same time, it was highly stressful and it resulted in learning under pressure, with insufficient time during the six-week blocks for reflection and consolidation (particularly in some subjects such as Property and Equity, and Constitutional Law). However, once the teaching blocks were completed in July, students did have time for reflection and consolidation from then until mid-September, during which time they completed outstanding assignments. Staff reported that students made considerable progress in integrating their knowledge during this period, and students confirmed that they had found this period to be valuable to their deeper understanding of the law subjects studied in the six-week blocks.

The evaluation has been interesting for the light it throws on the argument by Biggs³⁷ that teaching and learning do not take place in a vacuum: how they occur and the conceptions students have of their effectiveness are critically dependent upon the nature of the interactions between the learner and the specific setting. The block and the semester models represented two markedly different settings for learning. The experiences of the same group of learners, and their needs from the lecturing staff, varied substantially across the two settings. In the block model, for example, the students portrayed their learning as having been dependent to a large extent upon the quality of the direction provided by their lecturers—who needed to be “organised,”

“adequately prepared prior to commencing a block,” willing to provide “clear objectives” to accompany lecture outlines, able to reinforce main points and practised in checking for understanding. In contrast, learning in the semester model was generally felt to have been self-directed and largely dependent upon self-motivation and personal organisational skills. In the context of the semester model, students placed less emphasis upon the importance of lecturing ability and teaching styles. The change in context, therefore, brought about a different set of interactions which affected teaching and learning. As Ramsden has asserted: “In everyday studying, the context of learning is an ever-present influence on students’ activities.”³⁸

Critics of the block model may assert that it is reactionary in legal education terms. One argument, for example, is that a block model reduces opportunities for student reflection. The contention is that over the standard teaching semester of 13 weeks students have more time to interact with the subject matter and to acquire a much deeper and more critical understanding of it. This argument might have substance if the students were studying only one subject for 13 weeks, but in practice students usually undertake four subjects concurrently over a traditional semester, which means that they probably have no more time for reflection on an individual subject than was possible in the block model.

Time is, of course, only one of the necessary conditions for student reflection on the subject matter. Another important condition is the student assessment schedule. In the Southern Cross model, each of the six-week teaching blocks was followed by an examination in the subject taught. In addition, however, for all subjects taught in a year, a major assignment had to be submitted by the students after mid-September, some seven months after the conclusion of the first teaching block, and six weeks after the conclusion of the last. Given these time frames, a well-designed assignment could achieve significant student reflection on all issues raised both within and across the subjects studied in a year. While the block model entailed a sequential approach to studying individual subjects, the assessment requirements provided circumstances for ensuring that there was integration of learning across all subjects.³⁹ A similar approach could also answer the criticism that block teaching may not be suitable for courses that include significant amounts of theoretical and/or critical material.⁴⁰

Again, by suitably designing the assessment items and their timing, such problems could be minimised. Nevertheless, we do not underestimate the difficulties of teaching theoretical and/or critical materials in a block system.

Another common claim in favour of the traditional semester model is that knowledge learnt in one subject will assist student learning in another. Interestingly, the students interviewed did not claim this to have been one of the advantages of the semester model. Perhaps the existence of this benefit from studying a number of law subjects at the same time is assumed rather than actual, and that the effect is not explicitly planned for in the structure of most traditional semester programs.

Finally, what are some of the tentative lessons for a law school wishing to replicate in full or in part the block model introduced at Southern Cross University? First, a significant advantage of block teaching is that it permits students in first year to develop prerequisite knowledge of legal processes before proceeding to study particular areas of law. In the Southern Cross course, for example, students were able to complete an Introduction to Law unit before proceeding to undertake the substantive law units of Constitutional and Administrative Law, Torts, and Contracts. Second, a key benefit of the block model is that it enables the timetabling freedom for valuable learning experiences in the form of moots conducted over several days, court visits, and excursions. It also is a more efficient use of guest lecturer's time and allows for scheduling of work experience placements. Third, the block model may well be better suited to some subjects than to others. Full-year subjects such as Property and Equity, Constitutional Law and Administrative Law may be too demanding for students for delivery by means of six-week blocks. Fourth, teaching in a block model is highly demanding of staff, requiring experience, excellent personal organisational skills and detailed prior planning. With practice, however, staff found it much less difficult to do. Nevertheless, block teaching will suit some staff more than others. Finally, students appear to require more support with their learning in the block model than may be the case with a semester model. Stress-management skills are important, as well as the need to be prepared in advance for the intensive nature of studies in a six-week teaching block.

- * Lecturer, Teaching and Learning Unit, Professor, Teaching and Learning Unit, Senior Lecturer, School of Law and Justice, Professor, School of Law and Justice, Southern Cross University, respectively. ©1998. (1998) 9 *Legal Educ Rev* 59.
- ¹ Due to an organisational restructure of Southern Cross University, this Faculty was replaced in 1997 by the School of Law and Justice.
- ² For example, most of the Melbourne University Law School's Masters courses are taught in an intensive manner, often over a one-week period. See The University of Melbourne, Faculty of Law, *Graduate Studies and Continuing Education Program 1998*.
- ³ For example, subjects offered in the University of Queensland's summer semester in 1998 are all taught over a three- or four-week period. See brochure of The University of Queensland, *Summer Semester 1997/98*.
- ⁴ The Southern Cross LLB degree in 1993 was only open to graduates. It was not until 1996 that the first non-graduates were admitted (see below).
- ⁵ The sequencing of units in the first two years of the program reflected pragmatic considerations related primarily to staff availability. The Introduction to Law unit was deliberately placed first, however, to address prerequisite knowledge requirements. Being able to teach this unit first represented a distinct advantage of the block model in comparison with a traditional semester model for LLB programs, where students undertake introductory and substantive law subjects simultaneously.
- ⁶ For each of the subjects taught in six-week teaching blocks, students were also required to submit a major assignment, due after mid- September. In some subjects, an additional requirement was a contribution to a moot court and/or the writing of a court report.
- ⁷ Teaching concluded in July but the academic year, and assessments, did not conclude until after mid-September.
- ⁸ Staff tried to help students to find placements but ultimately it was the responsibility of the students to find their own placements.
- ⁹ The mid-September date was set to accommodate requirements imposed by the federal government's student financial assistance scheme, AUSTUDY.
- ¹⁰ The law program has grown rapidly since 1993 when 57 students enrolled in the program. There were a total of 89 students enrolled in the program in 1994, and a total of 132 students enrolled in 1995. Growth was contained in 1996, when a total of 118 students were enrolled in the program. There were 62 graduates from the program by the end of 1997.
- ¹¹ The Skills 1 and 2 subjects made formal provision for linking these experiences with the study of law.
- ¹² N Entwistle, Motivational Factors in Students' Approaches to Learning, in DR Schmeck ed, *Learning Strategies and Learning Styles* (New York: Plenum Press, 1988).
- ¹³ P Ramsden, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- ¹⁴ F Marton, Describing and Improving Learning, in Schmeck, *supra* note 12.
- ¹⁵ J Biggs, From Theory to Practice: A Cognitive Systems Approach (1993) 12 *Higher Education Research and Development* 73.
- ¹⁶ N Rogers, Improving the Quality of Learning in Law Schools by Improving Student Assessment (1993) *Legal Educ Rev* 133.
- ¹⁷ A Hasche, Teaching Writing in Law: A Model to Improve Student Learning [1992] *Legal Educ Rev* 267.
- ¹⁸ M Le Brun and R Johnstone, *The Quiet (R)evolution: Improving Student Learning in Law* (Sydney: Law Book Company, 1994).
- ¹⁹ G Joughin & D Gardiner, *A Framework for Teaching and Learning Law* (Sydney: Centre for Legal Education, 1996).
- ²⁰ P Ramsden, Context and Strategy: Situational Influences on Learning, in

- Schmeck, *supra* note 12, at 159.
- 21 YS Lincoln & EG Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985).
- 22 B Glaser & AL Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Grounded Research* (Chicago: AVC, 1967).
- 23 Marton, *supra* note 14, at 76.
- 24 The volunteers were representative of the cohort in terms of gender, age and academic achievement.
- 25 There did not appear to be any pronounced difference along gender lines in the views expressed by staff in favour or against the block program. There were, however, some gender differences in the reasons given for favouring or being against the block system. Ideally, all female staff would have been included in the interviews.
- 26 The “constant comparative method” formulated by Glaser & Strauss, is described by Lincoln & Guba, *supra* note 21, at 339, and involves the coding of data into categories by comparing it with previous categories and by developing new categories where necessary.
- 27 This enabled extracts from interview data to be traced back to the original interview notes.
- 28 Students were asked the same questions about their learning in a traditional semester model. They were also asked: can you explain to me how the two methods are different? on balance, which method do you think was better for your learning, and why?
- 29 Extended learning is a term used in this paper to refer to learning that takes place outside the classroom through interactions with legal institutions and personnel and as a result of work experience placements, excursions and other out-of-classroom curricular activities.
- 30 While attendance at class was not compulsory in most units, students were given a class participation mark in recognition of the contribution they made to classroom discussion and debate, and to encourage the development of skills in the verbal articulation of argument.
- 31 These issues are returned to below in the summary and conclusions.
- 32 Students did, however, have time for consolidation of their learning during the period from July to mid-September when they were working on outstanding assignments.
- 33 Subsequent discussions with staff suggest that there had not been a serious and coordinated attempt to use a Socratic teaching approach, but some staff tried to use the approach, with varying success.
- 34 Interestingly, their comments accord with views expressed in the literature about the disadvantages of the Socratic approach. See, for example, J Morgan, *The Socratic Method: Silencing Cooperation* (1989) *Legal Educ Rev* 151.
- 35 Staff reported that they should have organised more social activities to try to achieve better integration of the group.
- 36 The Faculty introduced changes in teaching arrangements for 1994 and for subsequent years in order to reduce the extent of teaching stress. A major change was the introduction of tandem teaching, whereby two staff had responsibility for the delivery of individual subjects.
- 37 Biggs, *supra* note 15.
- 38 Ramsden, *supra* note 13, at 64.
- 39 Unfortunately the full potential for ensuring this kind of integration was only beginning to be realised at the time the block model was largely abandoned.
- 40 Known in legal education literature as the “affective domain”. See Le Brun & Johnstone, *supra* note 18, at 158, 164–169.