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## TEACHING NOTE

# Using Interactive Teaching Strategies in Large Lectures: Some Personal Reflections

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*Diana Henriss-Anderssen\**

### Introduction and Premises

The purpose of this article is to describe, evaluate and reflect upon certain interactive teaching strategies used in the large lecture theatre environment. The article will describe the teaching context in which interactive strategies have been introduced, and will outline and discuss the teaching strategies and aids used. Finally, the effectiveness of the strategies in improving student learning will be evaluated, and some personal reflections on the teaching experience recorded.

The major premise underpinning the article and the exercise, the subject of this article, is that the object of good teaching is to promote high quality learning on the part of the student.<sup>1</sup> I adopt a framework for teaching which embraces the idea of teaching as the fostering and promoting of student learning. This approach is based largely on the work done by Paul Ramsden,<sup>2</sup> amongst others, which has been enhanced in the context of legal education in Australia by writers such as Richard Johnstone and Marlene Le Brun.<sup>3</sup> According to this

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1 P Ramsden, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 87; R Johnstone, "Rethinking the Teaching of Law" (1992) 3(1) LER 17 at 28.

2 Ramsden, *supra* note 1; P Ramsden, "Improving the Quality of Higher Education: Lessons from Research on Student Learning and Educational Leadership" (1995) 6(1) LER 3.

3 See, eg, Johnstone, *supra* note 1; M Le Brun and R Johnstone, *The Quiet (R)evolution: Improving Student Learning in Law* (Sydney: LBC, 1994).

approach, good teaching involves three things: understanding student learning; appreciating both the primary importance, and the best means, of fostering and promoting learning, and having the necessary skills to do so; and the practice of constant reflection.

This approach to teaching and learning proceeds from the epistemological position that knowledge does not exist independently from the knower, but “must be reconstructed by learners”.<sup>4</sup> Skills, concepts and facts are mutually dependent.<sup>5</sup> The academic and social environment is critical, and student learning is learner-focused rather than teacher-focused.<sup>6</sup>

A further and related premise of this article, and the exercise it describes, is that the goal of teaching must be to advance the student’s capacity for “critical literacy”. Critical literacy has been explained as “involv[ing] a form [of] self-awareness based on being sufficiently conceptually literate to read and critique key aspects of the social order and to understand one’s status and role in it”.<sup>7</sup> Thus, critical literacy, like ethical judgment, is an ultimate skill or set of skills – ultimate in the sense that it incorporates and is mutually dependent upon the development of cognitive and affective (attitudinal) learning.

This article is written in the spirit of sharing a reflective teaching experience. As Ramsden points out, “[good] teaching is open to change: it involves constantly trying to find out what the effects of instruction are on learning, and modifying that instruction in the light of the evidence collected”.<sup>8</sup> Further (and somewhat reassuringly), “good responsive teaching cannot avoid making mistakes”.<sup>9</sup> This article is not about prescribing a model for teaching contextual or theoretical materials, nor is it intended as a comprehensive guide for converting lectures into active student learning experiences. It is merely the sharing of one teacher’s experience of trying new ways to promote student learning, and the reflection and evaluation of whether the methods employed achieved the desired outcome – improved student understanding.

Promoting student learning obviously requires an understanding of student learning. Contrasting approaches to learning on the part of students have been described

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4 Ramsden, *supra* note 2 at 18.

5 *Id.*

6 *Id.* at 19.

7 P Havemann, “Law in Context – Taking Context Seriously” (1995) 3 *Waikato Law Review* 137 at 138-139.

8 Ramsden, *supra* note 1 at 102.

9 *Id.* at 179.

by Ramsden and others.<sup>10</sup> A “deep” approach to learning is described as involving a desire to really understand.<sup>11</sup> Students who employ a deep approach to learning focus on the significance of new information. Deep learning involves relating new information to existing knowledge and personal experience,<sup>12</sup> and “relat[ing] theoretical ideas to everyday experience”.<sup>13</sup>

The deep approach to learning may be contrasted with a “surface” approach, which demonstrates a desire to simply complete task requirements.<sup>14</sup> Students who adopt a surface approach seek to reproduce, rather than to understand, new information, and focus unreflectively on signs rather than significance.<sup>15</sup> Good teaching will encourage a deep approach to learning, and discourage surface learning approaches.<sup>16</sup>

A deep approach to learning is encouraged by teaching and assessment methods that foster active engagement with the subject matter.<sup>17</sup> The idea that traditional lectures are an inadequate teaching method for those concerned with promoting active student learning is not new.<sup>18</sup> No matter how entertaining or inspiring the lecturer nor how fascinating the material covered, traditional lectures involve students being passive rather than active. As Johnstone points out, the lecture “encourages student passivity and involves the teacher taking responsibility for student learning”.<sup>19</sup>

The motivation for introducing interactive teaching strategies into the large lecture environment arose from a desire to promote “deep” approaches to learning, and dissatisfaction with the traditional lecture format as an effective teaching strategy. This article is not about making lectures more *interesting* – it is about shifting the focus of the lecture from a performance by the lecturer (before a largely passive, albeit interested, audience of students) to an active learning experience on the part of the students.

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10 Ramsden, supra note 1, Ch 4; L Blaxter, C Hughes and M Tight, *The Academic Career Handbook* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998) Ch 5; and Le Brun and Johnstone, supra note 3, Ch 2.

11 Ramsden, supra note 1 at 46; Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, supra note 10 at 87.

12 Id; Le Brun and Johnstone, supra note 3 at 59.

13 Ramsden, supra note 1 at 46.

14 Id.

15 Id; Le Brun and Johnstone, supra note 3 at 59.

16 Ramsden, supra note 1.

17 Id at 81.

18 Ramsden, supra note 1 at 152-156; Johnstone, supra note 1 at 43, Le Brun and Johnstone, supra note 3 at 258-260.

19 Johnstone, supra note 1 at 43.

## Background

The primary instigating factor behind a trial of more innovative lecturing techniques was reflection upon a previous teaching experience. The teaching strategies discussed here were prompted by an experience in teaching legal theory to first year law students, and have been developed in that context. There is no reason, however, for the discussion to be confined to the teaching of legal theory. This article is primarily concerned with teaching methods that promote student understanding and promote deep approaches to learning, and it is not suggested that anything discussed here might not be relevant in teaching other law subjects.

The teaching experience which prompted implementation of the strategies described here involved the teaching of a first-year Law in Context subject at James Cook University in the year 2000.<sup>20</sup> Law in Context, as the name suggests, seeks to facilitate student understanding of the Australian legal system and law through an understanding of the context in which it operates. Students are introduced to historical, sociological, socio-legal and philosophical literature as they study legal structures and institutions, dispute resolution and access to justice. Skills objectives include critical analysis and ethical awareness, as well as communication, teamwork and problem solving skills.

Although this article is not primarily concerned with discussing the virtues of contextual law teaching, a brief justification may be in order. A contextual approach to law teaching enhances broader objectives of knowledge and understanding,<sup>21</sup> critical skills<sup>22</sup> and ethical awareness.<sup>23</sup> In other words, it facilitates critical literacy. This is so even in the first year of law studies.<sup>24</sup> Legal theory is integral<sup>25</sup> to a critical and contextual approach to the teaching of introductory law

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20 The subject (hereinafter referred to as Law in Context) was then called "Legal Studies", but has since been renamed more aptly "Law in Context". This subject is currently being reviewed as part of a wide-ranging curriculum review of the LLB program at JCU.

21 M Keyes and G Orr, "Giving Theory 'A Life': First Year Student Conceptions of Legal Theory" (1996) 7(1) LER 31.

22 Havemann, *supra* note 7; P Havemann and J Mackinnon, "Synergistic Literacies: Fostering Critical and Technological Literacies in Teaching a Legal Research Methods Course" (2002) 13(1) LER 65.

23 D Henriss-Anderssen, "Teaching Legal Ethics to First Year Law Students" (2002) 13(1) LER 45.

24 M Keyes and G Orr, *supra* note 21; C Sampford and D Wood, "'Theoretical Dimensions' of Legal Education – A Response to the Pearce Report: (1988) 62 ALJ 32 at 43-44.

25 But not, on its own, sufficient: see Havemann, *supra* note 7.

subjects.<sup>26</sup> A recent “stocktake” of law teaching in Australia<sup>27</sup> found an increase in emphasis on teaching theoretical perspectives.<sup>28</sup> According to this report, at least eight out of the 27 law schools have a compulsory legal theory subject in first year and more incorporate legal theory into other introductory subjects.<sup>29</sup>

The commitment to fostering a deep approach to learning in Law in Context resulted in certain design features. These included, first, the subject matter being split into three concrete modules, each building upon the cognitive, affective and skills achievements of the previous module. This encourages students to relate new information to their existing knowledge – an indicator of the deep approach to learning.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, it saw a shift to using assessment as a teaching strategy and a shift away from the all-encompassing end-of-semester examination. This was done because a deep approach to learning is encouraged by assessment methods that “foster active ... engagement with learning tasks”,<sup>31</sup> whereas assessment methods that emphasise recall, or that create anxiety, are associated with the encouragement of surface learning.<sup>32</sup> Each module was assessed independently, and the end-of-semester examination did not revisit the earlier modules. As each module built on the last, however, the knowledge and skills from each previous module were incorporated into the next one.

The first module, legal structures and institutions, introduced the study of the courts, the judiciary, the legal profession and other legal structures and institutions within the framework of the rule of law. Limited jurisprudential material was introduced to enable understanding of the rule of law. Students were introduced to critical analysis through using historical, sociological and socio-legal material to critically analyse the role of these institutions in Australian society. Assessment was by way of an analysis of the Queensland courts, and involved fieldwork, group work, oral presentation and written assignment.

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26 Sampford and Wood, *supra* note 24 at 43-44; Havemann, *supra* note 7.

27 R Johnstone and S Vignaendra, *Learning Outcomes and Curriculum Development in Law: A Report Commissioned by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee*, Australian Universities Teaching Committee (2003): <[http://www.autc.gov.au/pr/law/split\\_law.htm](http://www.autc.gov.au/pr/law/split_law.htm)> (accessed 16 April 2003).

28 *Id* at 123.

29 *Id* at 124.

30 Ramsden, *supra* note 1 at 46.

31 *Id* at 81.

32 *Id*.

The second module, access to justice, built on the first in terms of skills and subject matter. It contained a focus on access to justice for indigenous Australians, and again used historical, sociological, socio-lingual and anthropological materials. The assessment for the second module was a written assignment.

The subject matter of the third module was legal theory. One of the reasons for introducing legal theory in the third and final module was that, by the time that students commenced the final module, the students were becoming comfortable with context and critical analysis at an introductory level. Concepts had been introduced which could now be explored. The third module was designed to expose and explore philosophical concepts underpinning the law and theoretical perspectives on the law. Initially the idea was to give students a “taste”, and thereby an appreciation, of the range of philosophical perspectives. Students were introduced, over four short weeks, to liberalism, economic analysis of law, critical legal studies, and feminist legal theories. The legal theory module of the subject covered the last four weeks of semester, and was worth 30% of the overall assessment for the subject. The assessment for the module was an examination.

In the year 2000, students had performed very poorly in their assessment in the legal theory module of Law in Context. The subject was taught to approximately 180 students on the Townsville campus and approximately 80 students on the Cairns campus. The teaching strategies employed were traditional lectures and tutorials (two hours of lectures and a one-hour tutorial per week). Numbers in the tutorials were deliberately kept small (15-20 students). Feedback from students indicated that students were happy with the lectures on each theory. They found the lectures interesting and inspiring, and the lecturer passionate. Once the interest inspired by the lecture subsided, however, students started to feel intimidated by the subject matter. They found the theories conceptually very difficult, and the readings extremely challenging.<sup>33</sup>

This feeling of intimidation was exacerbated by the lecture/tutorial (theory/application) dichotomy. In the tutorials, students were asked to apply the theory studied that week to a factual scenario, in a similar way to the traditional problem method used in teaching substantive law. By discouraging

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33 This was despite the use of texts specifically directed at first year law students – R Hunter, R Ingleby and R Johnstone (eds), *Thinking About Law: Perspectives on the History, Philosophy and Sociology of Law* (2nd ed, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995); S Bottomley and S Parker, *Law in Context* (Sydney: Federation Press, 1997).

reproduction of the information presented in the lectures and readings, the intention was to discourage a surface learning approach. The application of the theory to a practical scenario was designed to encourage students to attempt to understand the significance of the material in order to understand how it might apply to a practical situation. It also facilitated the assessment, an examination in which students were asked to apply the theories to problems using the method practised in tutorials. It was felt that this type of assessment would be more effective in assessing the students' understanding of the theories than an assessment that merely required regurgitation of information. If the tutorials had simply consisted of discussions of the theories, without application to practical situations, the students may have felt more comfortable. As it was, the students were unsure of what was expected of them in the tutorials. Despite the small numbers of students in the tutorials, they felt overwhelmed and intimidated. This feeling did not improve over the four weeks that this component of the course covered.

As stated above, the examination assessed only the legal theory module of the subject and was worth 30% of the overall assessment for the subject. In Townsville in 2000, the failure rate for the examination was a shocking 72%. (Students performed much better in the other pieces of assessment, however, and the failure rate for the exam was not an indication of the failure rate for the subject as a whole.) For any teacher concerned with enhancing student learning, this sort of experience raises the question "what went wrong?"

Upon reflection, a number of factors may have contributed to the poor exam performance. One external factor may have been stress from large exams in other subjects, combined with the relatively low weighting allocated to the examination. (The examination in this subject was worth just 30% of the semester's assessment, compared with approximately 70% in other law subjects.) This latter possibility has since been addressed by mandating a minimum performance in the end-of-semester examination in order to obtain a pass in the subject.

The poor performance in the legal theory module, especially compared with much better performance in the other two modules of the subject, may also be attributable to the desirability and difficulties of including legal theory in the first year. It was apparent from the student feedback that significant contributors included student uncertainty about what was expected of them, poor understanding of the theories themselves, and inability to apply the theories. The



pedagogical rationale for teaching legal theory in introductory law subjects was discussed above.

Before any rapid conclusions could be drawn about whether first year students have the capacity to comprehend the content (questions about “what” was taught), it was first necessary to evaluate whether the teaching methods employed to teach that content (the “how”) were adequate. This would involve not only evaluating the effectiveness of the existing teaching strategies, but also trialing new, and hopefully more effective, teaching strategies.

The task of evaluating the effectiveness of the existing teaching strategies revealed that, although the students were happy with the lectures, and found them interesting and engaging, this was not reflected in student understanding of the subject matter. Part of the problem seemed to lie in the distinction between the theory (taught in the lectures) and the application (taught in tutorials). In hindsight it was clear that there was too great a divergence between the two. It was thought that a more gradual consolidation of theory, building in stages to greater application, may address the student uncertainty, understanding of the theories, and ability to apply them.

One way to achieve this might be to spend less time lecturing and more time in tutorial classes. Because of large student numbers and limited university resources, however, it was not possible to move away from the traditional two-hour lecture and one-hour tutorial. To overcome the theory/application problem, then, it was thought that the lectures would need to become more interactive, so that students were actively applying the theory themselves in a non-threatening environment.

A week-long intensive on “Legal Education” with Fiona Martin at Queensland University of Technology<sup>34</sup> provided some insight into concrete teaching strategies. I developed a teaching plan to address the problems, and improve the learning experience of the students in the subject. The aim was for the lecture itself to become an active, rather than passive, learning experience. I wanted to change the focus of the two-hour lecture from mere presentation of information, in which the role of the student was simply to record the information for learning later. The information, after all, was available in written form in texts, primary and secondary materials. Some

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<sup>34</sup> Legal Education was a subject offered by Queensland University of Technology as part of the coursework LLM program, and undertaken by the writer in 2001.

lecturing, however, would be necessary to clearly explain and elucidate the concepts and material.<sup>35</sup> As most students lose concentration after approximately 20 minutes,<sup>36</sup> short periods of lecturing could be interspersed with other learning activities to provide a more valuable and effective learning experience.<sup>37</sup>

In order to promote learning within the lecture, then, students would be presented with information in short spurts, and then asked to apply that information immediately. The idea was that immediately using or applying the information would improve understanding and retention. Interactive teaching aids and strategies would be employed during the course of the lecture.

There were time implications in implementing this strategy. In order to incorporate the interactive components into the lectures, the time actually spent lecturing would need to be reduced. As a result, some depth of analysis would be sacrificed. To avoid this, I chose to increase the amount of time spent on each topic covered, and dropped some topics from the course altogether. Liberalism and Feminist Legal Theories were retained with greater emphasis on understanding the concepts, and Critical Legal Studies and Economic Analysis of Law were dropped. I felt that it was more likely that the learning objectives of the subject would be achieved by focusing on fewer areas, than by attempting to “cover the field”. This is supported by Ramsden, who argues:

The ground is covered for the lecturer, perhaps, but not by the students. Few, if any, modern philosophical, educational, and psychological theories accept that there is any direct relation between what is taught and what is learned.<sup>38</sup>

The teaching plan as devised then was implemented in second semester 2001 in both Townsville and Cairns and was refined in second semester 2002. These strategies were also used in lectures in the fourth year subject, Jurisprudence, in 2002. A final year elective, this subject has a smaller cohort of students. Approximately 40 students were enrolled in Jurisprudence in 2002. Feedback from students, comments from peer review, and reflections upon the teaching process have formed the basis of improvement and refinement of the strategies.

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35 Clear explanation is one of Ramsden’s six principles of good teaching: Ramsden, *supra* note 1 at 96.

36 Johnstone, *supra* note 1 at 43.

37 *Id.*; Le Brun and Johnstone, *supra* note 3 at 260.

38 Ramsden, *supra* note 1 at 154.

## Teaching Strategies Employed

The major teaching strategy is to break up the two-hour lecture into a number of smaller presentations, interspersed with interactive learning components. Each presentation takes no longer than 20 minutes. Following each presentation, students individually apply the information from the presentation segment to a handout containing a problem scenario. They subsequently form buzz groups<sup>39</sup> to discuss the application, and finally the groups are then asked to contribute some of the main points from their discussion to the entire lecture group. The process is then repeated.

This strategy is employed to involve students actively in the learning process in order to promote understanding and retention, and to achieve the cognitive objectives of the lesson. The group discussion should also promote critical analysis of the material. This major teaching strategy and some supporting teaching strategies and aids are discussed in detail below.

### *Structure of the Lecture*

The table below presents an overview of the generic lecture structure.<sup>40</sup> The number of topics covered, and the length of time spent on each, may vary from week to week. The primary teaching aids are a handout containing a legal scenario and the use of Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. The size and style of the lecture theatre varied according to the subject being taught. For the larger Townsville cohort enrolled in Law in Context, comprising approximately 180 students, a large lecture theatre with ascending fixed seating and a seating capacity of 250 was used. Smaller lecture theatres, still with ascending rows of fixed seating, were used for the smaller lecture groups (approximately 85 students in Law in Context in Cairns, and 40 in Jurisprudence in Townsville<sup>41</sup>).

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39 Buzz groups are small groups of three to five students.

40 Times given are approximate. The degree of flexibility allowed is discussed below.

41 Only six students were enrolled in Jurisprudence in Cairns in 2002 – one of the first years that final year subjects were offered on that campus subsequent to the commencing of law in Cairns in 1998.

Table 1: Lecture Plan

Content	Teaching Method	Teaching Strategy/Aids	Time (minutes)
Introduction –objectives of the lecture	Lecture	PowerPoint	5-10
Introduction	Quiz/questionnaire	Handout	5
Topic one	Lecture	PowerPoint	15-20
	Individual application, followed by buzz group discussion	Handout	5
	Large lecture group discussion	Handout	5
[Break]			5-10
Topic two	Lecture	PowerPoint	15-20
	Individual application, followed by buzz group discussion	Handout	5
	Large lecture group discussion	Handout	5
Conclusion	Lecture	PowerPoint	10
	Individual application and engagement		5

At the beginning of the lecture, students are given a short introduction, which gives an outline of the lecture and clearly sets out the objectives of the lecture. A handout is then distributed. Depending on the nature of the topic, the handout may contain a number of discrete exercises in increasing order of complexity, but generally it contains an actual or hypothetical legal scenario.

In the latter case, the handout is designed to be familiar to the students. In style it resembles a tutorial or exam question, and the subject matter is a legal scenario. Both these features are employed to catch the students' attention or empathy. Generally, the scenarios used in the first-year Law in Context are hypothetical, to ensure that the legal issues are kept fairly simple. In Jurisprudence, however, generally handouts contain actual legal scenarios, as the students are in their final or penultimate year and this consolidates and builds upon existing knowledge and skills. Students are asked to read the handout and write down their intuitive responses to the scenario. This strategy is employed to engage the students' interest and attention by actively engaging the students in a

non-threatening way. It is also designed to facilitate learning by building upon the students' existing knowledge.

The students are then asked to compare their answers with those of their neighbour. Again, the students are actively engaged in thinking about the issues in a relatively non-threatening way. To maintain the safe environment, students are not asked to reveal their answers to the whole class or the teacher. They are, however, told that we will come back to those answers at the end of the lesson. The strategy is to build upon students' existing knowledge base and consolidate learning from the lesson. The aid of PowerPoint is also used here with instructions for the activity prominently displayed.

Throughout the lecture, the students will be applying the information from the short presentations to the handout. The same handout is returned to throughout the lecture. The benefit of this is that students become familiar with the contents of the handout, and the lecture is not interrupted more than is necessary by the handing out of further material.

### *Use of PowerPoint Presentation*

PowerPoint Presentation is used as a visual aid. The PowerPoint slides are animated so that each dot point appears as it is discussed. The visual and auditory senses are then engaged on the same material at the same time. Care is taken when utilising some of the "fancy features" of PowerPoint so as to not detract from the content of the lecture. The PowerPoint is an aid, not the focus of the presentation.

The PowerPoint slides are made available to students via the subject website prior to the lectures, so that students can print them out and bring them to the lecture. The purpose of this is that, during the lectures, students will not need to write as furiously, taking notes, as research has indicated that excessive note-taking can inhibit effective learning.<sup>42</sup> The focus for the student shifts from furious note-taking to listening and understanding, taking sufficient notes to supplement the slides. One concern with the distribution of lecture slides prior to the lecture is that it may discourage students from attending classes. To avoid this, lecture slides are deliberately constructed so as to not provide the students with a set of "notes". The slides tend to contain sets of headings and subheadings so that students can follow the lecture. Care is taken in preparing the PowerPoint slides so that they cannot stand on their own without attendance at class – the sense of the slides becomes apparent during the lecture.

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42 Le Brun and Johnstone, *supra* note 3 at 265.

## Buzz Groups

In applying the lecture material to the handout, students are asked to form groups of three to five<sup>43</sup> (buzz groups). As Johnstone has pointed out, “[t]he greatest strength of buzz groups is that they encourage active learning”.<sup>44</sup> Le Brun and Johnstone list a number of objectives for the use of buzz groups,<sup>45</sup> including:

enabl[ing] students to discuss a question which we set, provid[ing] students with an opportunity to apply their learning to a problem, giv[ing] students a chance to check on their understanding of the topic ... [and] provid[ing] an opportunity for quiet students to contribute to discussions.<sup>46</sup>

In the buzz groups, the students discuss the application of the information to the problem contained in the handout. While the groups are engaged in discussion, I walk around the lecture theatre, ensuring that all students are involved in a group, answering questions and stimulating discussion where necessary. The timeframe allowed for the buzz groups is fairly critical to the success of the strategy. It is necessary to allow enough time for discussion of the issues, but not so much time that students’ attention starts to wander.

At the end of the buzz group session, feedback is relayed from the buzz groups to the large lecture group. Because of time constraints, not all groups will be able to contribute to the class discussion on each question, but all will be able to see how their answers compared to those of other groups. The role of the lecturer is to ensure that all aspects of the application are covered. The nature of the feedback from the buzz groups also allows the teacher to assess the students’ understanding of each topic for the purpose of better teaching. The lesson need not proceed onto the following topic until the teacher is satisfied that the cognitive objectives have been achieved for the previous topic.

## *Conclusion of Lecture*

At the conclusion of the lecture, students are asked to reflect upon their initial intuitive responses to the scenario (recorded

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43 Usually two or three in front and two behind: the students in front swivel to talk to those behind. Students are discouraged from forming groups along a single row of seats, as it is difficult to achieve the same sense of intimate discussion.

44 Johnstone, *supra* note 1 at 44.

45 Le Brun and R Johnstone, *supra* note 3 at 296.

at the beginning of the lecture), and the application of the material covered in the lecture. They are then asked to locate their own personal response to the scenario within (or without) the range of theoretical perspectives canvassed.

This exercise is designed to promote the affective (value) objectives of the lesson, and to consolidate the learning from the lesson. The task requires students to reflect, summarise and prioritise what they have learned in the lesson and engages the students in building upon their knowledge from prior to the lesson. It is also an important exercise in facilitating critical literacy, which involves self-awareness.

## Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Strategies

The effectiveness of the strategies may be gauged from a number of sources. One is feedback from the students themselves. Peer review by other university teachers can also provide insight into the effectiveness of the strategies. Subject assessment can provide a measure of whether student performance has improved. The link between improved student understanding and improved student performance may provide further insight into the effectiveness of the strategies. Finally, these processes are consolidated by teacher reflection.

### *Student Feedback*

Student feedback has been obtained in a variety of ways: first, from questionnaires designed specifically for the purpose; secondly from the university student feedback process; and thirdly from informal discussions with students throughout the teaching and learning process.

### Questionnaires

Feedback was obtained through the use of questionnaires in each semester over three semesters. The questionnaires were completed during lecture time at the end of semester.<sup>47</sup> The specific purpose of the questionnaires, which was the evaluation of the effectiveness of the teaching aids and strategies outlined above, was clearly explained to students, as were the concepts of deep and surface approaches to learning. Students were asked to indicate, using a scale of one to five,<sup>48</sup>

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46 Id.

47 Only those students attending on the day were surveyed; the approximate percentages of students surveyed varied between 43% and 70% of the enrolled population.

48 1: ineffective; 5: very effective.

the effectiveness of each of the strategies in assisting “deep approaches to learning” in the subject. Students were also asked to comment on the effectiveness of the strategies. The results of the questionnaires for each of the teaching aids and strategies evaluated are tabulated below.<sup>49</sup>

### *The Use of PowerPoint Presentation*

Table 2: The Use of PowerPoint Presentation

Semester	Subject	Campus	Ratings (percentage of class surveyed)				
			1	2	3	4	5
Sem 2, 2001	Law in Context	Townsville	0	0	14	41	45
	Law in Context	Cairns	0	0	10	45	45
Sem 1, 2002	Jurisprudence	Townsville	0	0	11	43	46
	Jurisprudence	Cairns	0	0	0	29	71
Sem 2, 2002	Law in Context	Townsville	1.5	1.5	10	35	52

The questionnaire responses indicated that students found the use of PowerPoint an effective teaching aid. Most comments on the questionnaire responses suggested that the PowerPoint presentation was an effective visual aid to enhance understanding, and that it helped students follow the structure of the lecture. Students commented that the PowerPoint helped them maintain attention in lectures. Some students commented on the content of the PowerPoint slides, in that they did not contain a set of “notes”. Of those that commented on this, most felt that this was good because it directed their attention to the lecture content and to their texts. Some of these students however would have preferred more detail. I have mixed feelings about this. I do feel that including more detail might increase the effectiveness of the slides. The students themselves, however, did not indicate *why* they wanted more detail. It may, in fact, reflect a desire for the easier mode of surface strategies. The general response to the slides was that they were effective. On balance, because of the distribution of slides prior to the lecture, my conclusion is that it is better not to include too much more detail, as that may discourage attendance at the lectures.

<sup>49</sup> The figures in the tables are rounded.



### *Distribution of PowerPoint Slides Prior to Lectures*

Table 3: Distribution of PowerPoint Slides  
Prior to Lectures

Semester	Subject	Campus	Ratings (percentage of class surveyed)				
			1	2	3	4	5
Sem 2, 2001	Law in Context	Townsville	0	3	5	29	63
	Law in Context	Cairns	0	0	13	19	68
Sem 1, 2002	Jurisprudence	Townsville	0	4	14	25	57
	Jurisprudence	Cairns	0	0	0	29	71
Sem 2, 2002	Law in Context	Townsville	1.5	1.5	6	28	64.5

The distribution of slides prior to the lectures was also very popular. It may not be immediately apparent that this strategy would promote a deep approach to learning as opposed to a surface learning approach. Because the distribution of slides would make life easier for students, it would probably appeal to the student adopting a surface approach as well as the student adopting a deep approach. However, the comments on the questionnaire responses indicated that this strategy had encouraged a deep learning approach.

The purpose of distributing the slides, via the website prior to lectures, was to allow students to print them out and bring them to the lecture. The anticipated effect of this was to reduce the amount of note-taking and allow the students to concentrate more on listening and understanding.

Many of the comments from the students confirmed that this purpose had been achieved. These students stated that they had been able to spend more time in the lecture listening and actively trying to understand the information. Interestingly, an even greater response was that the prior distribution of slides enabled the student to anticipate the content of the lecture, thereby enhancing understanding in the lecture itself. A number of comments also indicated that the slides were useful for later study, as a guide for combining notes from lectures and readings. A related comment by some students was that they used the slides later to check that they had covered all the key points. Students indicated that another advantage of having the hard copy of the slides in addition to that on the projector was that it enabled them to better follow the lecture structure, thus enhancing understanding.

The fact that the vast majority of comments were related to improved understanding indicates that this strategy

was effective in promoting student learning and may have encouraged a deep learning approach.

Because the first two teaching aids/strategies<sup>50</sup> reduce the minimum threshold amount of work on the part of the student, one would expect them to appeal to the student adopting a surface approach as well as the student adopting a deep approach. The interactive components of the course are less likely to appeal to students adopting a surface approach component of the class.<sup>51</sup> The following strategies comprise the interactive component of the class.

### *Application to Scenario on Handouts*

Table 4: Application to Scenario on Handouts

Semester	Subject	Campus	Ratings (percentage of class surveyed)				
			1	2	3	4	5
Sem 2, 2001	Law in Context	Townsville	1.5	1.5	17	53	27
	Law in Context	Cairns	0	0	23.3	33.3	43.3
Sem 1, 2002	Jurisprudence	Townsville	0	0	25	36	32
	Jurisprudence	Cairns	0	0	14	43	43
Sem 2, 2002	Law in Context	Townsville	3	1.5	3	44	47

Response to the question on handouts was, in some semesters, almost as high as the response to the use of PowerPoint. In Townsville in semester 2 2002, 47% of students questioned rated the effectiveness of the handouts at 5, and 44% rated them at 4.

The majority of comments about the interactive problems were to the effect that this strategy enhanced understanding and retention. Related comments were that the problems made the students think about and analyse the information, and that the problems tested their understanding of the information by showing up areas that they may have missed, or not fully grasped.

Many students commented that this strategy raised their awareness and understanding of how the topic applied to real life situations, and allowed them to put the theories they were studying into perspective. These are all indicators of a deep approach to learning.

50 The use of PowerPoint during lectures and the distribution of slides prior to lectures.

51 Although it is hoped that these strategies decreased the *incidence* of surface approach to learning – comments certainly indicated that this might have been the case.

A few students commented that the handout scenarios helped them prepare for the exam. One student commented that they needed more time and information to fully comprehend the material before applying it.

### Buzz Groups

Table 5: Buzz Groups

Semester	Subject	Campus	Ratings (percentage of class surveyed)				
			1	2	3	4	5
Sem 2, 2001	Law in Context	Townsville	6	24	31	24	15
	Law in Context	Cairns	10	3	53	17	17
Sem 1, 2002	Jurisprudence	Townsville	3.5	25	28.5	25	18
	Jurisprudence	Cairns	0	0	14	43	43
Sem 2, 2002	Law in Context	Townsville	5	6	25	40	24

Responses to the buzz groups varied from cohort to cohort, with responses generally becoming more positive with each semester. In the most recent semester, 40% of students surveyed rated the buzz groups at 4, with 23.5% rating at 5, and 25% at 3.

The majority of comments were positive. The greatest number of comments were to the effect that students found it beneficial to hear other people’s views or perspectives. Many students commented that the use of buzz groups enhanced their understanding and retention of the information, and that the buzz groups were a useful vehicle for testing the students’ understanding. These results support the objectives of buzz groups suggested by Le Brun and Johnstone,<sup>52</sup> referred to above.

Other comments were more mixed. These responses reflect concerns suggested by Le Brun and Johnstone:

Students who are preoccupied with the lower cognitive learning objectives often believe they are not learning anything in buzz groups because we are not “giving them content”. Able students can feel that they are not developing what they know if the rest of the group is not as well prepared or as skilled as they are in working with the material.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Le Brun and Johnstone, *supra* note 3 at 296.

<sup>53</sup> *Id* at 297.

Some students commented that, although on the whole they felt that the buzz groups were effective, this did depend upon the composition of the group. Some students commented that their groups were ill-directed or tended to become sidetracked. Other students commented that they felt that they benefited more from the whole-class discussion of the problem than they did from the buzz groups. One student commented that although he or she did not feel the buzz group discussion was beneficial, the breaks from lecture presentation did help maintain attention throughout the two-hour lecture period.

The nature and tenor of the student comments generally indicate that these teaching strategies encouraged a deep learning approach. The majority of the comments talked about *understanding* rather than passing the exam; applying knowledge to the real world; seeing other people's perspectives; that the strategies "made [them]" think critically; and that they engaged their own views. These are all indicators of a deep learning approach.<sup>54</sup>

#### University evaluation feedback

Feedback on the teaching of the subjects concerned was also contained in evaluations conducted as part of the routine James Cook University teaching evaluation system. Comments and feedback on teaching in the subject generally were very positive, which supports the general impression that the teaching was effective. Very few, if any, however, of the comments in the university feedback system, related specifically to any of the particular strategies outlined in this paper. The large majority of comments related instead to passion and interest in the subject and in teaching, willingness to help, clarity of explanations, and organisation.

#### Informal student feedback

Informal feedback, in the form of conversations and other verbal and written communications, generally indicates that the learning experience in these subjects is very valuable. In particular, student comments indicate that the students have affectively engaged with the material, in that it helped them to think critically and reflect upon and examine their own previously held views, not only of the subject matter, but also of other areas of knowledge about which the learning experience has inspired critical thought. This is a sign that the affective self is engaged, and is an indicator of both a deep learning approach and the development of critical literacy.

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54 Ramsden, *supra* note 1 at 46.

Significantly, across all forms of student feedback one feature was striking. The confidence with which students engaged with the subject matter of the course improved dramatically after the strategies were introduced.

### *Peer Review*

When a colleague mentioned to me that she needed to do an observation of teaching as part of her Graduate Certificate of Tertiary Teaching, I welcomed the chance to obtain some peer feedback on the teaching strategies I had been developing. I invited her to sit in on one of my lectures on feminist legal theory in Law in Context in 2001. She was thus able to observe the students' response and participation. She wrote:

The fact that a large portion of the class sat in the first three rows indicated to me that the students already knew Diana's material was interesting and useful. Students also spontaneously asked questions during the lecture segments, which for me indicated the students felt Diana was very approachable. The students also appeared to be listening actively – it was clear to me that the material presented was thought provoking for the students. During the buzz groups, Diana moved around the lecture theatre ensuring the students were executing the task properly ...

Probably the most important feature of Diana's lecture was the way she managed to engage the students in the topic with the handout requiring student reflection. This task then put the topic into perspective for individual students as they considered where their own views fit [sic] into the topic (Feminist Legal Theories).<sup>55</sup>

### *Student Performance in Assessment*

One significant indication of the success of the teaching strategies is that student performance in assessment has improved dramatically over the two years that the teaching strategies have been implemented. In Townsville, the failure rate for the examination<sup>56</sup> in Law in Context dropped from

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55 J Shields, "Observation of Teaching" (unpublished paper completed as part of assessment for Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, James Cook University, 2001).

56 The examination was worth only 30% of the overall assessment for the subject. As indicated earlier, students performed much better in the other pieces of assessment and the failure rate for the exam was not an indication of the failure rate for the subject as a whole.

a staggering 72% in 2000 (the year prior to instituting the changes) to just 28.5% in 2002. The corresponding increase in pass rates was spread across all passing grades, from Pass to High Distinction.

Improved understanding is not the sole reason for this change, however. There are other contributing factors. As mentioned above, in order to allow time for the interactive strategies in the lectures, some topics were dropped from the subject. Therefore there was not as much material covered. The students had the same amount of time to cover less material. Understanding and skills were so much improved that it is felt that this is a better result than covering more material with reduced understanding and skills.

## Conclusion

It is clear from the above evaluation that, since the introduction of interactive teaching strategies into the lectures in Law in Context and Jurisprudence, student learning in those subjects has improved. The main problems that I had identified prior to the introduction of the strategies were: student uncertainty about what was expected of them; poor understanding of the theories themselves; and inability to apply the theories. The teaching strategies implemented to address these problems have been effective. Students' confidence has improved dramatically since the strategies were introduced. Understanding and ability to apply the theories have also dramatically improved. Students are engaging confidently and skillfully with the theories that comprise the subject matter of the course. This experience has reinforced for me the need to channel our enthusiasm for the subject by being open to changes in our teaching.