

For outstanding leadership in developing a flexible learning environment in teaching Law, based on critical reflection and in response to evidence of student needs.

Overview and Context of Contribution

Over 5 years of tertiary teaching I have observed students grapple with the challenges of contemporary tertiary study. My observations of the competing imperatives in our students' lives are borne out by national studies (eg Universities Australia, 2007), and my own research (Galloway, 2008). As a critically reflective teacher I recognise teaching as a process of 'learning and change' (Brookfield, 1995) and accordingly, I observe and assess students' learning needs and their responses to my teaching to develop and adapt my teaching practice and to lead my colleagues in evolving a sustainably flexible learning environment in our Law School. This represents a systematic approach to developing and promoting a learning environment in which students can control their learning (Kift, 2005). I strive therefore to create a student-centred learning environment that frees students from constraints on their learning imposed by the curricular dimensions of *time*, *place* and *organisation* in the traditional Law curriculum. This is my interpretation of a *flexible learning* pedagogy so that I 'make informed decisions in relation to students' development' (Galloway, 2008) but outside the limitations of formal timetabling.

What sets my approach apart from other approaches to flexible learning is the context within which the Law curriculum traditionally operates; my critically reflective approach based on extensive use of evidence to justify flexible learning as a means to address contemporary student needs; and my drive to influence systemic changes to the way my Law School teaches Law to our students, to create a better fit for our own students' learning needs.

Criterion 1: Approaches to the support of learning and teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn

My philosophy of teaching centres on empowerment of the student as a learner. Initially based on anecdotal evidence and then Australia-wide studies (eg Universities Australia, 2007) since first teaching in 2004, I have considered that I would best empower students to learn based on evidence of what our students identify that they need and how they learn (Ramsden, 2003). I find resonance in the comment that: '[t]he way students perceive and understand their learning environment and the way they approach their learning in relationship to these perceptions have been found to be major intervening factors between teachers' teaching and students' learning outcomes' (Boud & Prosser, 2002). My approach is therefore evidence based, a 'hallmark of a professional approach to teaching' (Ramsden, 2003).

I have used student feedback since 2004 to assess aspects of student learning. I encourage an open dialogue with students in class time to understand the impact of my teaching and what students need to inspire learning. Based on this evidence, I reflect critically on the curriculum in all its dimensions in light of its responsiveness to these needs, and adjust or innovate in the curriculum or aspects of it, to achieve this goal. Three examples of this approach lie in my use of *time* and *place* outside formal university-scheduled teaching settings – that is, flexibly.

First, in response to my students' competing priorities in life, I support students to learn skills and to engage in their learning outside timetabled face-to-face sessions. In O-week each year since 2006, I have provided law students with an introduction to legal writing skills. This initial session allows students to move outside scheduled class time and outside regular content, in a 'low-stakes' environment while engaging in authentic skill development. Feedback confirms that students find it provides 'highly relevant information' and 'increases confidence'. In an unsolicited email, one student wrote '...your workshop last Friday was excellent! I went away feeling excited about starting my course for the first time during o week!'. Furthermore, my surveys reveal that attendees are more likely to attend writing workshops run by learning advisers during semester, indicating that my workshops motivate students to learn.

In response to positive student feedback, I build on the workshop's foundations from the first week of semester in the LLB first year program, using a range of complementary resources I have developed such as checklists for student self-assessment of writing, and podcasts, both of which are available in all first year subject sites and also through the Learning Centre website. My use of a podcast in this way was a first at JCU, and has resulted in development of a number of podcast resources from other schools. The scheduling of the initial workshop and location of supporting

resources online represents my flexible or student-centred approach to teaching – facilitating student learning at a time and place that fits the student's own needs.

Secondly, through observation of the low numbers of students who approach me during my scheduled consultation times, I have reflected on the nature of the power relationship between teacher and student. In response, and in accordance with my philosophy of student empowerment and fl

online; FAQ sites within subjects; face-to-face tutor support for video-linked classes; and more widespread use of online communication tools such as discussion boards. This has occurred in an environment with traditionally limited use of educational technologies and a relatively traditional, fixed approach to teaching and learning. In each case, I have supported staff to articulate the pedagogies underpinning their introduction of this resource or approach, focussing on