

Inspirational session 17

Session's theme: Supporting student learning

Paper number: 40

Presenters: Anne Haarala-Muhonen and Sakari Melander

Presenters' Organisation: University of Helsinki

Session's chair: To be announced later.

Session title: How to get a good start – developing the first substantive course of legal studies

Abstract:

In this paper we present the way in which the Faculty of Law at the University of Helsinki has sought to address the progression and social interaction of first year students by developing the curriculum of the course, The Foundations of Legal Thinking (11 ECTS).

At the beginning of the studies the students have an orientation period and it is followed by obligatory course The Foundations of Legal Thinking (FLT). The course focuses on generating an overall picture of legal field.

In the academic year 2009–2010 the course was based on independent textbook reading and traditional lectures offered to the whole year cohort. Written examination was the method of assessment. 257 students participated in the course. In the first examination 189 students failed and even after resit 49 students failed in passing the exam. It was clear that the curriculum needed drastic revisions.

In real life legal problems are not connected to only one area of law, but go over the branches of law. This calls for recognising the core of different legal problems, which, in turn, is crucial in solving these problems. Bearing this in mind, the main focus in developing FLT was in combining theoretical knowledge in interactive problem-based learning. The course is divided in three modules. The first module (Dimensions of Law) is based on lectures, which introduce students to various dimensions of law. The second module (Legal Argumentation) seeks to combine the knowledge adopted during the first module in actual court cases, which the students present in working groups. The third module (Lawyer in resolving conflicts) goes even further and forces the students to apply the skills adopted during the course in actual cases that illustrate the role of the lawyer in solving conflicts.

In our presentation we will describe the main developments which were done to the curriculum and teaching methods and we will show how passing rate grew significantly and how students experienced this renewed course.

Inspirational session 17

Session's theme: Supporting student learning

Paper number: 13

Presenters: Ed Foster and Sarah Lawther

Presenters' Organisation: Nottingham Trent University

Session's chair: To be announced later.

Session title: Developing a sense of belonging: what is it that helps students feel that they 'fit in' on their course?

Abstract:

Before learning can take place, it is argued, students need to fulfil a more basic "fundamental need" to belong (Strayhorn, 2012, p123), to connect with their place of learning, to "emotionally attach themselves to their institution", before they engage with their studies (Percy, 2002, p95). This sense of belonging is a "critical dimension" of student success (Strayhorn, 2012, p121). It can make study "a more fulfilling and enjoyable process" (Kember, Lee and Li, 2001, p340) and where it isn't present, can be a primary factor in the decision to withdraw from university (Thomas, 2012). Belonging is, Strayhorn argues, context dependent; the more that students feel that they fit in to the course "the greater the influence on outcomes (such as adjustment, achievement)" within the course (2012, p123). Given the importance of a sense of belonging to learning, how can we facilitate this?

This session shares the findings of research carried out at NTU with over 400 first year students that explored their perceptions of belonging to their course. Many of the students explained what had helped them to 'fit in' on their course in some detail, providing insight into how we might support students with belonging in the first year. The three most common reasons that students gave for why they felt that they fitted in on their course were: an interest in the course (those who rated this highly often used the word 'passion' when describing their course or subject), that they were coping well academically, and that they got along socially with others on their course (such as they had made friends on their course, it was welcoming). Students also told us what they do themselves to help develop a sense of belonging to their course.

The findings reflect much of the current literature on supporting students in their transition to learning and this will be discussed along with any implications the findings may have for practice.

References

KEMBER, D., LEE, K. AND LI, N., 2001. Cultivating a sense of belonging in part-time students. *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 20(4), pp.326-341.

PERCY, A., 2002. Student Induction: the psychology of transition. In: P. FRAME, ed, *Student Induction in Practice SEDA Special 113*. Birmingham: Staff & Educational Development Association, pp.95-104.

STRAYHORN, T., 2012. College Students' Sense of Belonging A key to Educational Success for All Students. London: Routledge.

THOMAS, L., 2012. Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme [online]. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/retention/What_works_final_report.pdf