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The student as lecturer: building confidence, collaboration, and community in first year undergraduate law lectures

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ABSTRACT

Should first year undergraduate students be involved in the delivery of lectures? This paper reports on the development of a project to instil student leadership in large group learning (lectures). The initiative draws from an experimental student-run lecture in the spring of 2018, when the six undergraduate co-authors took the opportunity to stand in as the lecturer in a core first year module. The results of that experiment led us, in 2019, to explore formal opportunities for student leadership in first year lectures. In this model, the teacher–student relationship becomes one of collaboration: the lecturer mentors rather than presents. Our findings contribute to the literature on student-led teaching, corroborating accounts that report greater participation and collaboration as a result of student-led teaching. The novelty of our model is that it reimagines learning roles, positioning students as lecturers at the point where students first encounter material and at an early stage of undergraduate study. Dismantling traditional learning hierarchies in this way has the potential to encourage a collaborative relationship between teachers and learners, nurturing student confidence and fostering a stronger learning community. This paper is an extension of such a collaboration, being written collectively by six undergraduate students and our lecturer.

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Introduction

At 9am on a cold Thursday in March 2018, we – first year undergraduate law students – delivered our first lecture. The previous weeks had been disrupted by industrial action, with many lectures cancelled. This day was different; we were offered the chance to use the empty lecture theatre to deliver the teaching materials for ourselves. Initially, we were sceptical about the effectiveness of a student-led session and several of our peers maintained that effective learning depended on academic staff delivering the material. But we felt it was worth a try. Aside from the novelty, we hoped that the session would be

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an opportunity to hone our public-speaking skills and contribute to teaching in a student-friendly way. The student-led discussion might also help us to develop our own understanding of the topic. There was also a community motivation: we wanted to reciprocate our lecturer's efforts and, since it would be recorded, our "lecture" had the potential to become a revision tool for others.

It was not perfect. The start was slow as we navigated unfamiliar legal jargon. We soon realised that researching the concepts and forming our own views prior to the session would have increased the effectiveness of the exercise (a point that became central to later student-led lectures). Reading our lecturer's notes verbatim was ineffective and one of our group suggested pausing for discussion as we went along. Taking ownership of the material made everyone more comfortable and, more importantly, made room to scrutinise the issues and sources. For example, we paused to reflect on contentious cases and developed our perspectives regarding majority and minority judgments. Unsurprisingly, although not obvious to us at the time, reflecting on our interpretations allowed us to better understand the rationale underpinning those judgments. We also found that we could later recall the material better than we would after a standard lecture and were enthusiastic about developing our understanding through further research. Whether the same advantages were felt by the cohort at large was unclear at that stage, although we did not sense any particular detriment (not least since that particular lecture would have been affected by the industrial action). Finally, our teaching performance gave us a sense of achievement and self-fulfilment. The experience was far removed from the traditional "sage on the stage" lecture¹ and, while the conditions around this particular lecture could not be reproduced, we felt there was a case for trialling a version of it in the core curriculum. Thus in 2019 we formalised the 2018 experiment by working with our lecturer (Tyrrell) to introduce student-led lectures to first year undergraduate students.

Implementation

We introduced student-lecturing to the first year cohort at Newcastle University Law School in February 2019. There were some important differences between these lectures and our 2018 lecture. First, in 2019, the entire cohort (an audience of 250 students) was present. Second, the lecturer gave up a segment of a lecture rather than the entire slot. The latter change aimed to balance the opportunity for the student-lecturers with the confidence of the cohort – giving up full lectures for student delivery might have been seen as an abdication of the lecturer's job. Giving students responsibility for smaller segments was also a way to make the task less daunting, encouraging participation. On a practical level, we had in mind that, if successful, the student-lecture could in future be extended across the module to provide the whole cohort with the opportunity. Offering smaller segments throughout the year would be a way to achieve this in balance with the formal leadership offered by the academic lecturer.² Finally,

¹See eg Alison King, "From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side" (1993) 41 *College Teaching* 30; Rohan Havelock, "Law Studies and Active Learning: Friends Not Foes?" (2013) 47 *The Law Teacher* 382, 383.

²We consider the potential for entirely student-led lectures below from n 6, concluding that such autonomy may work in later stages of study but that it is appropriate to offer academic support for such teaching activities in the first year of study.

while we had presented materials created by our lecturer in 2018, the 2019 students were given ownership of the materials in their segment, thus giving them full creative licence over the content (within the parameters of necessary course coverage).

The first of the student-lectures was scheduled to take place during a semester two section of the core first year Public Law course: the judicial review topic. We (at that point in our second year) spent 15 minutes of the first lecture presenting the concept to the first year undergraduates. Our presentation focused on the challenges of the topic and our own experiences of the learning. The benefits of teaching as a way to learn occupied a small part of the presentation – the purpose was more to introduce, demonstrate and demystify the idea of students delivering material from the front of the lecture hall. The length of our presentation (15 minutes) mirrored the time that any student-lecture segment would take.

The presentation was followed by an email sent by the module lecturer, inviting students to volunteer to deliver parts of upcoming lectures. We considered it important that, aside from issuing the formal invitation to participate and making it clear that involvement was extracurricular, the email addressed likely concerns or causes for hesitation. We included some answers to questions we imagined our first year peers may have:³ “That sounds terrifying, why would I do that?” “How many students present at any one time?” “Any support for this?” “Are we just doing your job for you?”; and “I didn’t pay fees for other students to lecture me, they might be wrong”. The latter was an effort to get buy-in from the wider cohort. Scepticism about the effectiveness of student-led learning sessions was the reason that so few of our cohort had seized the original opportunity in 2018. There was a risk that, here too, students would question the value of learning from their peers or would be less inclined to trust the learning material. Any perception of scepticism amongst peers could also discourage those who might have been inclined to volunteer. Finally, we encouraged students to present in groups of two or three, although this was flexible. The option to present solo was offered but none of the students in the trial year opted to present alone.⁴

Sixteen first year students volunteered and arranged a first meeting. Other than offering our contact details we played no part in this meeting, preferring to leave the students to create a direct collaborative relationship with their lecturer. On the other hand, the module lecturer provided a high level of support in the preparatory stages. In effect, the module lecturer participated in the preparation of the student-lecture by steering students to appropriate resources: students were offered a choice of sub-topics and were given an outline of the core principles and materials, with starting points in textbooks or other sources for their own learning of the topic. The lecturer also stipulated “essential” content that would need to be covered, and offered slides from previous years as an example of how their topic could be divided.⁵ As long as the essential material was present, the students had full creative licence to go “off script”, for example by illustrating the core principles in different ways, referring to different cases or literature, or adopting different styles of delivery. The students were given time to bring their material together and invited to keep an open line of communication with

³“We” (the students) anticipated the concerns around fear and purpose, while our lecturer added the questions about job delegation and accuracy.

⁴A year later (2020), two students did come forward as solo-presenters. Unfortunately the Coronavirus pandemic prevented the lectures from being delivered in person and asking students to present online felt inappropriate given the stresses of the time.

⁵In hindsight, this hindered creativity, discussed further below.

their lecturer, who would be available to answer queries (by email or in office hours) during the compilation stages. The students were also offered the chance to practise their delivery before their lecture and to receive feedback. During the lecture itself, the role of the module lecturer was more muted. Since the aim was to give students ownership over the delivery, the lecturer confined herself to introducing the presenting students and taking a seat in the audience so as to be available to assist should the need arise. Finally, the module lecturer offered the students feedback on their lecture segment after the event.

There are mixed views in the literature about the appropriate level of input from the lecturer or tutor when supporting student-led learning activities. For example, in the context of an assessment task that required students to “teach” seminars, Greig suggests that a high level of “behind the scenes” involvement is important.⁶ Strawson and others also emphasise the importance of supporting students in the preparatory stages of work tasks.⁷ Campbell, on the other hand, has argued that these approaches risk removing student agency and diluting the goal of a student-led session.⁸ Campbell had very limited involvement in her student-led sessions, reporting that she often “would not know what [the group] were doing in the session until [she] turned up and the student told everyone”.⁹ While we agree that there should be space for creativity,¹⁰ there is a distinction to be made between postgraduate students (as Campbell’s students were) and undergraduate students in their first year of study (our student-lecturers). Entirely student-led learning sessions may bring additional benefits for students in the later stages of study but we did not consider it appropriate to demand or expect such autonomy from first year students. The first year of university is an intimidating time, where self-confidence may be at its lowest.¹¹ The involvement of the module lecturer in scaffolding the lecture segment and providing behind the scenes support felt necessary to encourage student participation. In fact, it seems that this support was a factor in encouraging some of the least confident students to participate, as explained further below.

Results and reflections

The 16 students who participated in 2019 reported a range of benefits, from strengthening public-speaking skills to gaining new insights into the topic. *All* of the students reported that the exercise led them to a deeper engagement with the subject. One student fed back that the exercise had given them “a far better understanding of [the topic] than I think I would have necessarily attained from just being present in the lecture”. This student placed emphasis on “having to go away to do the reading and the research surrounding the topic, before then simplifying it into a presentable format”, saying that the nature of this task is what forced them “to understand the topic fully”.

⁶Alison Greig, “Student-Led Classes and Group Work: A Methodology for Developing Generic Skills” (2000) 11(1) *Legal Education Review* 81, 82.

⁷Hannah Strawson and others, *53 Interesting Things to Do in Your Seminars and Tutorials* (Routledge 2012) 19–21.

⁸Elaine Campbell, “Students as Facilitators: An Evaluation of Student-Led Group Work” (2015) 9(1) *Practitioner Research in Higher Education Journal* 52.

⁹*ibid* 57.

¹⁰Greig also left the creative process to her students: Greig (n 6) 82.

¹¹Simon Brooman and Sue Darwent, “‘Yes, as the Articles Suggest, I Have Considered Dropping Out’: Self-Awareness Literature and the First-Year Student” (2012) 37 *Studies in Higher Education* 19; Natalie Skead and Shane L Rogers, “Stress, Anxiety and Depression in Law Students: How Student Behaviours Affect Student Wellbeing” (2014) 40 *Monash University Law Review* 564.

Being nudged into putting in more effort with learning materials seemed to be a common motivator. Another student told us: “being able to present and ‘teach’ a part of a lecture ... *pushed* me to research the topic further in order to reach a point where I would feel comfortable enough to explain it to others” (emphasis added). Other students spoke in similar terms: the task “*required* me to understand the topic [so as to be able] to apply the knowledge” (emphasis added). This ought to be the case for any presentation task, such as in small group seminars, but the participating students suggested that the scale of the task (or rather, the audience) was a significant factor: “If you are to stand in front of a room full of students and talk, even if it is just for a couple of minutes, you have to know your stuff”. And talking to your entire cohort feels quite different from talking to your seminar group.

Some of this benefit seemed to stem from a shift in perspective for the participating students, moving from a portrait view of the module lecturer to a collaborative relationship where they took some personal responsibility for the taught session. Simply, it was always possible that students in the audience could raise a point of confusion with the presenting students directly. Student-lecturers would bear primary responsibility for clarifying the point and only if the student-lecturer was unable to do this would the module lecturer step in. In practice, the 2019 student-lecturers had prepared so thoroughly for their delivery that this scenario did not arise. In fact, given what we were told by the students about feeling compelled to research the topic “further” so as to “feel comfortable enough to explain it to others”, it may have been the very possibility of needing to address uncertainties and, if unable to do this, to be assisted by the module lecturer, that prompted such thorough preparation.

This shift in perspective also helped students to grapple with the fundamentals of a topic. For example, one student reported that it was breaking their topic down that really improved her learning: “put[ting] myself in the perspective of the students ... first learn[ing] the topic” is what drove her to be more confident in her own understanding. One student analogised the learning involved to the process of revision: “we had to understand it in order to explain it to others”. Finally, the activity led a few students to reflect on and make changes to their own learning methods; preparing for and delivering the lecture helped them to “understand that teaching something is one of the best ways of learning something”.

One of our most surprising observations was that not all students had approached the task with confidence. Some students reportedly volunteered despite finding the idea of leading a lecture daunting. The outcomes for these students were some of the most promising. One student told us that it was “hard to explain the feeling of pride and the confidence boost I felt after the presentation was done” and that “[i]t was a really satisfying feeling to stand in front of everyone and to take the role of the professor”. Linguistic confidence did not seem to be a factor either. Around half of those who came forward were students who spoke English as a second language.¹²

¹²We have been asked why this group (students with English as a second language) were over-represented, relative to the Newcastle cohort (mostly native English speakers). This is hard to answer as we did not ask the students who did not volunteer to explain their hesitation. However we can report that of students who volunteered for the next round in 2020 (although cancelled), the proportion of native English speakers and those with English as a second language seemed to be in keeping with the wider cohort. The balance in 2019 may have been a coincidence.

Another surprise (more so to the module lecturer than to us) was the relatively small part that assessment played in promoting the activity. We know that students have a tendency to be strategic with their time, participating mainly in learning activities that are likely to have an impact on their marks.¹³ With this in mind, part of our design was to trial student-lecturing on a topic relating to summative coursework. Our lecturer's hypothesis was that the relationship between the lecture topics and the summative work could encourage participation. Yet the anecdotal feedback from the students involved did not indicate this to be a primary motivating factor. Rather, the feedback showed that most students volunteered to try something different or take on a personal challenge (just as we had done in 2018). We were told that these lectures "felt like an opportunity to step out my comfort zone, something which I have not done in a while, especially while trying to adjust to a new life here".

The lectures also seemed to be well received by the cohort at large. Our worries about other students rejecting the authority of their peers as lecturers turned out to be unfounded. A couple of students that were in the audience commented positively on these lectures in open text comments in the anonymous end of year survey. No students made critical remarks. We recognise that this feedback is limited. The end of year module survey is generic, meaning students could not be asked bespoke questions relating to the student-lectures and some constructive feedback might have been missed. Without having had an opportunity to address this evidence gap to date, the best we can do is to reflect on informal cues. For example, the lectures seemed to feed a sense of community among the cohort: without prompt, students in the audience applauded their peers after the delivery of a student-lecture segment (students do not habitually applaud lectures in general) and the student-lecturers reported receiving further questions or comments from peers after the event.

Notwithstanding the apparent success of our trial, some of the feedback from the student-lecturers flagged areas for improvement. A number of the presenting students would have liked more time to prepare. The timing of the opportunity might also have dissuaded some students; the lectures were timetabled in a busy period, such that students were preparing for and delivering lectures while working towards assessment deadlines. We also observed another shortcoming for ourselves: although we felt that behind the scenes scaffolding was important, providing example materials such as slide templates seemed to hinder creativity. This is likely to reflect something observed from the lecturer perspective: although all students embraced the staff–student collaboration and particularly enjoyed being treated as part of the teaching team, most students were initially nervous about the task itself and their individual contribution. One result was that students who used the example slides seemed reluctant to deviate from their design or structure. In short, while students were entitled to go "off script", few did. It is possible that students in later stages of study would be more confident on this front, or would be able to take inspiration from their experience of a wider range of teaching styles. For first year students, however, the *type* of support offered in the preparatory stages needs revision. This may be as simple as stripping styling from example slides or offering a handout of key points – challenging students to structure the materials as they see fit.

¹³Graham Gibbs, "Why Assessment Is Changing" in Cordelia Bryan and Karen Clegg (eds), *Innovative Assessment in Higher Education* (Routledge 2006) 20; Lisa Claydon, "Engaging and Motivating Students: Assessment to Aid Student Learning on a First Year Core Law Module" (2009) 43 *The Law Teacher* 269, 272.

Another factor to consider is that the student-lecturers were offered and arranged at a point in the year after seminar materials relating to the lectures had been set. Thus it was necessary for the module lecturer to be prescriptive about some mandatory content, even if not the delivery. Allowing greater time for preparation might also create the space for student input into the design of the related learning sessions which may in turn provide for greater creative ownership over the learning materials disseminated in the lecture, as well as offering students a more holistic perspective on the course design and their own learning journey.

Beyond the traditional lecture: what does student-lecturing add?

It is still common for lectures to form the introductory basis in relation to a topic.¹⁴ Students also tend to see lectures as the most important part of their learning experience,¹⁵ even if not their preferred learning method.¹⁶ Nonetheless, student preferences tend to lean towards small group teaching, perhaps because these foster a “community of learners”.¹⁷ Our own experience is that this type of learning community encourages a deeper understanding of the course material, beyond what is achieved in lectures.¹⁸ This could have been the root of the success of our own lecture in 2018, which created a similar community environment and may have been what prompted us to go beyond cue-conscious learning.¹⁹ This was also reflected in the feedback from the 2019 student-lectures (above). Our first claim, then, is that student-lecturing could help students progress beyond passive, “surface” or “superficial” learning experiences.²⁰ This is what makes the exercise particularly valuable during the early stage of the degree.

In advocating this type of exercise, we do not suggest ignoring the variety of teaching styles which already exist to move away from passive learning. There is growing literature on active learning in lectures specifically. The best-known methods are the “flipped classrooms”,²¹ the use of clicker quizzes,²² or other in-lecture learning activities.²³ These methods all promote active learning, but student-lecturing has something to add.

¹⁴Anthony Bradney, “Lectures” in Chris Ashford and Jessica Guth (eds), *The Legal Academic’s Handbook* (Palgrave 2016) 9.

¹⁵Alison Bone, “The Twenty First Century Law Student” (2009) 43 *The Law Teacher* 222, 231.

¹⁶Roseanne Russell and Rachel Cahill-O’Callaghan, “Speaking in the Classroom: The Impact of Gender and Affective Responses on Oral Participation” (2015) 49 *The Law Teacher* 60, 61 fn 5, reporting that 14% of their student sample “identified lectures as their preferred method of teaching”.

¹⁷*ibid* 61.

¹⁸Gerald Hess, “Value of Variety: An Organizing Principle to Enhance Teaching and Learning” (2011) 3 *Elon Law Review* 65, 81.

¹⁹Roger Säljö, “Learning about Learning” (1979) 8 *Higher Education* 443, 447–50.

²⁰Havelock (n 1) 383; John Biggs and Catherine Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (4th edn, McGraw-Hill Education 2011) 5–7; Maureen F Fitzgerald, “Rite of Passage: The Impact of Teaching Methods on First Year Law Students” (2008) 42 *The Law Teacher* 60, 66. Havelock (n 1) 385.

²¹On flipped learning generally, see Higher Education Academy, “Flipped Learning” (18 May 2018) <www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/flipped-learning-0> accessed 1 December 2020; Lutz-Christian Wolff and Jenny Chan, *Flipped Classrooms for Legal Education* (Springer 2016).

²²Colin Murray and Kevin Brown, “Enhancing Interactivity in the Teaching of Criminal Law: Using Response Technology in the Lecture Theatre” in Kris Gledhill and Ben Livings (eds), *The Teaching of Criminal Law: The Pedagogical Imperatives* (Routledge 2016); Karen McCullagh, “Click Happy?: An Analysis of the Use of an Electronic Voting System (EVS) in Large Group Lectures to Improve Interaction and Engagement” (2011) 6 *Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 189; Vicki Simpson and Martin Oliver, “Using Electronic Voting Systems in Lectures” (2007) 23 *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 187.

²³Hélène Tyrrell and Joshua Jowitt, “Let Them Eat Cases! Bridging the Gap between School and Degree Level Learning” (2019) *The Law Teacher* (forthcoming).

In the flipped classroom model, for example, students are introduced to learning materials prior to the lecture. Lecturers tend to provide a synopsis for the topic, leaving students to probe and absorb the content.²⁴ The student-lecturer is likewise provided with a synopsis but the student will *need* to go beyond a rudimentary understanding in order to deliver the material in front of their peers. Aside from the advantages associated with building confidence in the topic (as reported by the 2019 lecturers, above), this imposition of greater responsibility builds key transferable skills even before the lecture itself – independent study, and the confidence to take initiative. This is in addition to the development of organisational skills derived in the preparatory stages and the more obvious oral communication skills derived from delivery of the material. In the flipped classroom, the lecturer passes some responsibility over to students but retains control of the learning environment; in the student-lecture, the learner is actively involved in the teaching design and is given leadership in the learning environment. It is this responsibility that builds confidence in the student-lecturer as an independent and active learner. We admit here that the impact is not equal. Naturally, these particular benefits are likely to be felt mainly by the lecturing student rather than the audience (the cohort at large), making it important that all students are eventually given the opportunity to lecture. There is also a benefit to the non-presenting students (the audience), although this is more closely tied to relatability; the fact that the student-lecturer has only recently engaged with learning the topic for the first time themselves makes them better able (than the module lecturer) to empathise with their audience.

Tools like clicker quizzes (CQs) can have equality of impact. CQs can also contribute to reflective and critical thinking, through increased student engagement and participation.²⁵ This is achieved by concurrent testing of knowledge on a topic by posing multiple questions alongside or immediately after content delivery. Our experience as students is that CQs can be effective checks on learning as well as having an attractive equality of impact but fall short on the development of analytical thinking forced by student-lecturing. While clicker quizzes can encourage self-reflection,²⁶ there is an inherent limitation in the need to distil materials into bite-sized questions.²⁷ And, again, in-class quizzing is (usually) managed by the lecturer. Our feeling is that preparing for and managing the delivery of a lecture is more likely to promote critical (deep) learning skills for the delivering student, without needing to detract from the experience of the cohort at large. Indeed, there is nothing to prevent the student-lecturer from developing their own CQ as part of that preparation.

Other active learning methods in lectures focus on specific activities, such as in-lecture reading. This method involves, for example, the provision of extracts from key cases which are read during a lecture at intervals that coincide with coverage of key principles.²⁸ The aim is to increase students' confidence in tackling specific reading materials, while developing contextual and analytical skills.²⁹ As with the flipped

²⁴Kylie Burns and others, "Active Learning in Law by Flipping the Classroom: An Enquiry into Effectiveness and Engagement" (2017) 27 *Legal Education Review* 163, 165.

²⁵Gabrielle Appleby, Peter Burdon and Alexander Reilly, "Critical Thinking in Legal Education: Our Journey" (2013) 23 *Legal Education Review* 345, 347; Catherine Easton, "An Examination of Clicker Technology Use in Legal Education" (2009) 3 *Journal of Information, Law & Technology* <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/jilt/2009_3/easton>

²⁶McCullagh (n 23) 199.

²⁷Simpson and Oliver (n 23).

²⁸Tyrrell and Jowitt (n 24) 16.

²⁹*ibid* 10.

classroom, however, these activities are still designed and guided by the lecturer. The crucial difference with student-lecturing is that while the module lecturer sets the framework for the learning, it is the students who are given control over the content *and* the delivery. Thus a student-lecturer must not only grapple with these types of materials during their own preparation, but also extract the key principles that need to be taught to their peers. Indeed, in planning their own delivery, the student-lecturers may themselves undertake the analytical exercise of selecting reading extracts to share in an in-lecture reading task. Some of the 2019 student-lecturers chose to do so. The key point is that the student takes ownership of these decisions. This sense of ownership is what creates the stimulating environment which is more likely to promote deep learning and critical thinking.

Some of these skills are developed by presentations in small group learning sessions, such as seminars and tutorials, or as the basis of an assessment.³⁰ However, the nature of a presentation in these types of sessions is quite different from a presentation given as part of a lecture. Seminar, tutorial or assessment presentations tend to build on a basic understanding of a topic that has already been introduced (typically through a lecture), rather than requiring students to self-teach a topic *prior* to any formal instruction.³¹ Even where a presentation is set on a topic that requires research on the part of the student presenter, the perceived purpose of the exercise is still likely to be quite different from that of a presentation in a large group lecture. Because of the importance that most students ascribe to lectures,³² and the fact that lectures tend to be seen and used as a first contact with a topic, a student that teaches part of a lecture has significant responsibility towards the full cohort. This is not to belittle the value of presentations in small group settings. Newcastle Law School first year students are ordinarily required to deliver presentations in the context of small group seminars or assessments in at least one module. Indeed, the participation and confidence building that comes from presentations in smaller group sessions or as part of an assessment may do a lot to prime students for an opportunity like student-lecturing.³³

Finally, positioning students as lecturers is different from traditional peer assisted study sessions,³⁴ in which students act as facilitators in small group learning sessions.³⁵ Aside from the fact that a lecture hall is quite different from a small group seminar environment, a key distinction between student facilitators and the student-lecturers is that facilitators are usually further along in their studies than the students they are facilitating. Our student-lecturers are in the same phase of study, at the same point in the learning journey. This provides an unusual learning experience for the presenters as well as the wider cohort, not least because the student-lecturers can identify with and relate to their audience.

The learning model that we propose is therefore based on students immersing themselves in the literature around the topic, learning it and delivering it to their peers as part of their first contact with the subject. This is not to obscure the potential for other active learning tools which benefit the cohort at large; students have creative

³⁰Jane Korn, "Teaching Talking: Oral Communication Skills in a Law Course" (2004) 54 *Journal of Legal Education* 588, 588–89; Greig (n 6) 82; Stephanie M Wildman, "The Question of Silence: Techniques to Ensure Full Class Participation" (1988) 38 *Journal of Legal Education* 147.

³¹Claydon (n 13) 279.

³²Bone (n 15) 231.

³³Claydon (n 13) 274.

³⁴Amanda Zacharopoulou and Catherine Turner, "Peer Assisted Learning and the Creation of a 'Learning Community' for First Year Law Students" (2013) 47 *The Law Teacher* 192.

³⁵See eg Campbell (n 8).

freedom and may choose to employ other active learning tools such as quizzes or other in-lecture activities. This creative freedom also has the potential to lend more variety to the classroom, catering to many more learning styles.³⁶ For the student-lecturers, creating these lectures can also provide an avenue for the expression of creativity and emotion.³⁷ Finally, students who participate in and monitor their own learning process are also more likely to succeed,³⁸ while students who are required to research a topic and teach others benefit from deeply processing the information.³⁹

Oral communication skills and student presentations in lectures

The multifaceted nature of a law degree is underlined by its ability to provide more than just a knowledge-based education. Attention can be paid to developing transferable skills.⁴⁰ Oral communication skills, in particular, are frequently said to be essential to law graduates.⁴¹ We also know that the development of these types of skills has a part to play in boosting student self-confidence and promoting enthusiasm for higher education.⁴² Despite this, the academy and profession have regularly reported an oral communication skills deficit and these skills can be overlooked in undergraduate degrees.⁴³ Communication skills were a focus of the Legal Education and Training Review (LETR) where it was reported that gaps in oral and written communication skills were “a recurrent concern”,⁴⁴ and that “providers and employers were largely in favour of the development of oral communication skills at the undergraduate level”.⁴⁵ The importance of oral communication skills is obvious for those pursuing a career at the Bar,⁴⁶ and is also mirrored in the recent changes to the qualification route for solicitors.⁴⁷

³⁶Eric A DeGross and Kathleen A McKee, “Learning Like Lawyers: Addressing the Differences in Law Student Learning Styles” [2006] Brigham Young University Education and Law Journal 499, 535; Robin Boyle and Rita Dunn, “Teaching Law Students through Individual Learning Styles” (1998) 62 Albany Law Review 213, 231–32.

³⁷Senthoran Raj, “Teaching Feeling: Bringing Emotion into the Law School” (2021) 55 The Law Teacher 128.

³⁸Wendy Davis, “Collaborating with Students as Co-Authors” (2013) 47 The Law Teacher 32, 35.

³⁹Elizabeth F Barkley and Claire H Major, *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (2nd edn, Jossey-Bass 2020); Davis (n 39); Boyle and Dunn (n 37); Mark Israel, Elizabeth Handsley and Gary Davis, “It’s the Vibe’: Fostering Student Collaborative Learning in Constitutional Law in Australia” (2004) 38 The Law Teacher 1.

⁴⁰Catriona Paisey and Nicholas J Paisey, “Professional Education and Skills: Liberalising Higher Education for the Professions in the United Kingdom” (2004) 9 Research in Post-Compulsory Education 161.

⁴¹Randall Kiser, *Soft Skills for the Effective Lawyer* (Cambridge University Press 2017) 4–5; John Bell, “Key Skills in the Law Curriculum and Self-Assessment” (2000) 34 The Law Teacher 175, 180.

⁴²Bell (n 42) 179.

⁴³Korn (n 31) 589.

⁴⁴Legal Education and Training Review (LETR), “Setting Standards: The Future of Legal Services Education and Training Regulation in England and Wales” (June 2013) 133 <<http://letr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/LETR-Report.pdf>> accessed 1 December 2014.

⁴⁵ibid 135.

⁴⁶Charles Barker, “‘To Convince, to Delight, to Persuade’: Rethinking Teaching Oral Communication Skills to Undergraduate Law Students Using Cicero and Active Theory” (2019) 13(1) Journal of Commonwealth Law and Legal Education 27.

⁴⁷SQE2 will assess skills including Client interviewing and Advocacy which it is explained “correspond to competences specified in the Statement of Solicitor Competence”: Solicitors Regulation Authority, “Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) Briefing” (August 2020) para 51 <www.sra.org.uk/globalassets/documents/sra/news/sqe-briefing.pdf?version=4a0342> accessed 12 January 2021.

Many teaching styles do develop interaction skills,⁴⁸ and some law schools scaffold the development of oral communication skills into assessments or through performance-based learning (including presentations). The usual platform for presentations and the development of oral communication is the small group seminar or tutorial, where a core objective is often facilitating and encouraging student discussion.⁴⁹ Yet our experience (and, we suspect, the experience of our teachers) is that peer-to-peer discussion is not always forthcoming in these sessions. That is not to say that low participation levels in small group seminars reflect a desire for a more passive learning environment.⁵⁰ In fact, our experience is in tune with Russell and Cahill-O'Callaghan's findings: students do recognise the value of participation even where they do not engage with or enjoy the experience.⁵¹

The biggest barrier to oral participation seems to be a lack of confidence. As many teachers already recognise, students often lack the confidence to speak in front of peers or may be reluctant to "get it wrong". There is a gender imbalance to this too – female students are reportedly more susceptible to "the negative influences of the affective responses to legal education".⁵² One particularly interesting finding from Russell and Cahill-O'Callaghan's study of small group oral participation suggests female students seemed more likely to be "dissuaded from speaking out in class based on previous difficult experiences" (ibid 68). Russell and Cahill-O'Callaghan suggest that this might provide an insight into reports that the minimal participation of female law students increases over time (ibid 68).⁵³ If true, the flip side is that nurturing confidence in these types of learning activities at an early stage in the undergraduate journey may reverse the trajectory. We believe that large group learning environments can be operationalised to this end. By encouraging students to collaborate with their teachers to develop their oral communication and presentation skills in large group settings, law schools have the opportunity to promote oral communication in ways that can have a positive and enduring impact on student self-confidence.

Further, if there is a gender disparity in confidence levels around oral participation, the nature of the staff–student collaboration may help to rebalance it. The opportunity to check the accuracy of material prior to the presentation could help to ease anxieties associated with "losing face amongst their cohort and teaching staff".⁵⁴ Although we do not consider it possible to draw conclusions from a single year group, there was no discernible gender imbalance amongst the first year students that volunteered to deliver the 2019 student-lectures. It is of course possible that our sample was self-selecting; those students who came forward may simply have been confident about oral presentation at the outset. However, our impression from the feedback was the reverse. As already reported, one of our biggest surprises was that some students seemed to view the activity primarily as a way to work on their confidence around oral presentation.

⁴⁸Soile Pohjonen and Sari Lindblom-Ylänne, "Challenges for Teaching Interaction Skills for Law Students" (2002) 36 *The Law Teacher* 294, 295.

⁴⁹Paul L Caron and Rafael Gely, "Taking Back the Law School Classroom: Using Technology to Foster Active Student Learning" (2004) 54 *Journal of Legal Education* 551, 553.

⁵⁰Russell and Cahill-O'Callaghan (n 16) 68.

⁵¹ibid 65–66.

⁵²ibid 62. "Affective learning processes extend beyond traditional 'learning' and encourage students to learn to cope with feelings that arise during learning with the aim of affecting positively the progression of the learning process. This includes learning to control emotions which may negatively affect the learning experience, including stress, fear of failure and poor self-esteem": 67.

⁵³Citing Taunya Lovell Banks, "Gender Bias in the Classroom" (1988) 38 *Journal of Legal Education* 137.

⁵⁴ibid 68.

It might be claimed that public speaking or practising oral communication before large audiences is more relevant to those intending to join the legal profession (particularly those with ambitions to go to the Bar) and that focusing on such skills would alienate students with non-legal professions in mind. We have two responses to this: first, the skills involved in public speaking (research, organisation, time management, oral communication) are general transferable skills which enable a wide range of work roles to be operationalised.⁵⁵ This is in addition to the personal attributes that contribute to the students' experience of higher education – confidence, participation and ownership of the learning process. Secondly, few students electing to study law have a specific non-legal career in mind.⁵⁶ Indeed, law students are still likely to consider themselves to have the potential to join the legal profession, even if not immediately after graduation.⁵⁷

Conclusions

Our paper has reported on the development of a project to instil student leadership in large group learning (lectures). While other pedagogical innovations offer students an engaging and active learning experience (such as flipped classrooms, in-lecture activities and clicker quizzes), the unique contribution of the student-led lecture is that it gives a large amount of control to students regarding content and delivery. In particular, the student-lecture empowers students to own the materials and contribute to their own learning experience. Students who participate in their own learning process are more likely to succeed, while students who are required to research a topic and teach others are more likely to process the information deeply. We know from our own experience and from the 2019 feedback that the students are also more likely to retain their new knowledge as well as being likely to reflect on their own learning methods in general.

It is no small ask. Many students find the transition from secondary school to post-secondary education difficult.⁵⁸ We also know that students have competing pressures on their time. For this reason, it is important that the students feel *collaborative* responsibility. The lecturer is not absent; they provide students with guidance in their preparation process and ensure that the final product is accurate. The lecture delivery is thus student-led but, behind the scenes, the outcome is really the product of staff–student teamwork. Sharing a lecture with students can also be stimulating and rewarding for the lecturer, although collaboration with first year students does require more of the lecturer's time than would be spent preparing a traditional lecture. This is not to say that this teaching style would be better suited to students in more advanced stages of study. To the contrary, our experience has been that the opportunity for student leadership at an early stage of study is worth the additional scaffolding since it offers a chance to build the confidence (in the presenting students) and community (throughout the cohort) that may have an impact on the remainder of their degree. Indeed, improved self-confidence was one of the main motivators for the students who

⁵⁵Bell (n 42) 184–85; John Bell and Jenny Johnstone, *General Transferable Skills in the Law Curriculum* (Department for Education and Employment 1998).

⁵⁶Bone (n 15) 227–28.

⁵⁷Bell and Johnstone (n 56) 11–12.

⁵⁸Brooman and Darwent (n 11) 29.

volunteered in 2019. Given what we know about the relationship between self-confidence and participation on the degree, reported growth in confidence is the result that we are most proud of.

The student-lectures could easily be extended across a module and/or year, to provide the whole cohort with the opportunity to present to their peers in this forum but we do not suggest that all legal learning must be done through presentations. Students do not want to repeat the same exercises in all their classes, nor would that be useful. Good curriculum planning will balance skills development across modules and modes of study.⁵⁹ Neither do we suggest that integrating student-lectures within the curriculum should eradicate the vital role that lecturers play in supporting students throughout their degree. Instead, we are making the case for a shift towards a more student-centred approach, dismantling traditional learning hierarchies and challenging perceptions of teachers as knowledge holders and students as knowledge receivers. We are advocating a curriculum which focuses on teaching courses in a way that empowers us as students to *own* the materials and contribute to our own learning experience. This style of learning might also help to tackle issues of inclusivity and representation since,⁶⁰ by empowering students to contribute to our course teaching, we are given the opportunity to influence it.

Postscript

At the time of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented shift away from in-person teaching and towards online delivery. The implementation of something like student-lectures at such a time may seem difficult or daunting but we think there remains scope. We have witnessed, first-hand, the ability of higher education providers to adapt to this challenging environment. Our institution, in common with most others, opted for a hybrid form of teaching which integrates online delivery of lectures with some, albeit limited, face-to-face teaching (in accordance with public health guidelines). It is inevitable that teaching methods will change in these circumstances and that students will necessarily experience a different learning journey. Nevertheless, our concern is that the quickest and easiest response has been for a number of institutions to replace some of the learning opportunities that were key to developing confidence in skills like presentation and oral communication with more passive online alternatives. We hope this will be temporary. There are a number of ways that oral communication skills could be developed in an online environment. The student-lecturing model is itself malleable (students could pre-record or deliver part of a live online lecture). Thus, while we have focused on the benefit to be gained from in-person student-lecture delivery, we consider that the model could be viable in online learning environments, if lecturers have the scope and willingness to think creatively. In fact, delivering an equivalent session online has the potential to develop a number of modern professional skills. Even in more “normal” times, these platforms could be utilised during the preparatory stages, where a significant amount of the collaborative benefit is felt.

⁵⁹Bell (n 42) 183.

⁶⁰Space precludes discussion of these issues but see eg Ahmed Raza Memon and Suhraiya Jivraj, “Trust, Courage and Silence: Carving Out Decolonial Spaces in Higher Education through Student–Staff Partnerships” (2020) 54 *The Law Teacher* 475.

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