Teaching 'dry' subjects without tears

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Every discipline has some subjects which are not readily accessible to students, or which seem at first glance to have limited relevance to their lives. Unfortunately, these subjects are often essential to a true understanding of the discipline, so must be tackled. How can we make dry, technical subjects interesting? Can anyone teach dry subjects without tears?

The author, with her colleague Sarah Greer, has been teaching land law, a notoriously difficult and technical subject, to second year law students for a number of years. Over that time, we have adopted a number of techniques that have made the subject more approachable and that have improved student success on the course. We believe that these techniques may be applicable to other subjects.

What do we mean by 'dry' subjects?

We have in mind a number of features which make a subject appear uninteresting or unapproachable to the average student. Primarily, they have a detailed and technical subject matter, making it easy to overload students before they have seen the bigger picture. In addition, unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary make such subjects inaccessible in the early stages. A lack of obvious relevance to the students' experiences makes them seem irrelevant and obscure.

Land law notoriously suffers from excessive detail and unfamiliar vocabulary, and right from the start students must grapple with the 1925 property legislation, containing concepts and language dating back to 1066. What approaches can be used to guide students through these difficult landscapes without them losing heart?

Teaching strategies

One temptation might be to side-step technical definitions and simply tell the students in modern terms what they need to know. We have deliberately avoided this approach. In every discipline, students must be guided to understand technical and specialized vocabulary and to grapple with primary materials rather than receive everything 'pre-digested' by the lecturer. It is impossible to achieve mastery of a subject without going through this process. Instead, we approach the difficulties head-on, using a wide variety of techniques (see Table 1).

All of these are techniques familiar to any teacher. The trick is to combine them effectively to create an interesting, stimulating course which will engage students almost without them realising it. For example, send them off in groups after the fi rst lecture to take photographs of particular features of land and then e-mail them to the lecturer for inclusion in the next lecture. There is an element of risk in allowing the students to have input early in the course, but we fi nd that the advantages outweigh that. It is essential to be constantly innovative; always looking for ways in which dry, dusty subjects can be irrigated. Use

Table 1 Teaching Techniques

Technique	Fee
Explain technical vocabulary and concepts clearly	Set out definitions early in the course and repeat them frequently. Use diagrams to show the relationships between different concepts.
Engage students early in the course	Set early activities which allow the students to take an active part in learning. For example, taking photographs which will be used in lectures. Set an assessment early in the course which engages students and encourages peer collaboration and interaction with the teaching team. Reward and share good work with students.
Relate the subject to students' real life experiences	Use photographs, find examples of documentation relevant to the course, encourage students to look for examples in real life and share them in class and online.
Using varied methods of teaching and interacting with students	Use visual methods such as pictures and diagrams; auditory methods such as verbal explanations and podcasts; make use of virtual learning environments with self-tests, links to glossaries, up-to-date news stories and cases. Interact on Facebook or Twitter if students wish (not all do). Encourage collaboration and peer-to-peer teaching through group work and discussion boards.

a news story - there is nothing like a story about pirates taking over a pub to bring adverse possession to life. Explain a complicated concept with a physical demonstration - a chocolate bar and its wrapper memorably explain how a trust works!

Assessment strategies

It is vital to have a clear assessment strategy that is designed to support learning as well as to assess it in manageable steps, building skills throughout the course. We have created a 'scaffolded approach' to assessment, in which students receive more lecturer help with early assessments and less with later ones. All tasks are designed to test understanding rather than rote learning, and thus deep rather than surface learning.

We set an early first assignment of an unfamiliar kind – in our case a web page – which encourages interaction with both peers and teaching staff. Students are encouraged to help each other with technical difficulties and to use their creative talents, which is rare in law assessments. The unfamiliarity is initially unsettling but ultimately liberating.

This is followed by more substantial assignments based on real life problems and documentation. The earlier one has considerable peer and lecturer support through discussion boards on the virtual learning environment (VLE); the second is less lecturer-supported and has a higher independent research element, including an online research log. Both of these develop skills which prepare students for the final unseen examination.

Students also keep a log of their attendance and learning in seminars. This is submitted at the end of the year, and is designed to ensure active reflection on learning as well as participation in the course.

Conclusion

Our experience shows that it is possible to teach difficult and technical subjects in an interesting and engaging way without loss of rigour. Students not only engage with the course, they do well in it. It gains the highest average mark of all courses at level 5 on the LLB programme, and has the highest numbers of first and upper second class grades. Just as importantly, students report that they enjoy it.

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