

On public legal education, pro-bono and spas

What is the best test of your understanding of the law, if not the ability to explain its practical application to a roomful of teenagers? Not just a roomful but an assembly kind of roomful - all of them perhaps more excited at the prospect of being able to skip Maths than a meeting with some wannabe lawyers.

For final year students at the Open University, most of whom carry the burden of other careers, work, families, children and dealing with all the challenges which come with the territory of studying (often later in life, sometimes the second time round), having to 'go out in the field' can sometimes be not only an onerous, but also a daunting proposition. But one, which once reflected upon, brings with it not only increased learning and an array of new-found legal skills, the satisfaction of having met those challenges head-on and having overcome them, but also the potential to step into a renewed position of increased confidence and authority.

And so it was that we somehow shakily committed to participation in the Open Justice's public legal education exercise in what turned out to be a series of four sessions of presentations running at schools in Scotland and the north of England, over the course of one week. The hours spent trying to connect with one another over the internet, the phone and various communication applications, as well as planning carried out in tutorials and a number of meetings, will remain countless. It will suffice to say that there were many of those hours and that frustration characterised a large percentage of it. We joked that at the end of this crazy exercise they imposed on us that the Open Justice team *must* send us to a spa, having committed themselves (rather foolishly for a department teaching practical law) to giving us 'any support we needed' and failing to attach any limitations to their liability.

As "The Week" drew nearer, we decided that meeting in person, for those of use who could manage it, was highly necessary in order to get to know one another and identify our strengths and weaknesses. That meeting was invaluable and set the

tone for a fantastically successful week of presentations, where we somehow succeeded in giving the impression that we were a coherent team with all the confidence and professionalism necessary to authoritatively speak to young people on legal matters.

In those moments before the first presentation we were somehow propelled into functioning as a team, encouraging and supporting each other and quickly stepping in for one another when necessary. Each session was different and we were able to go from strength to strength by discussing what was going well or less well and, adjusting and improving, which all culminated in an excellent final session at the end of that week. We managed to deliver a smooth and engaging experience for the students, the staff, and for one another, and in the breathing spaces we found real enjoyment of the task at hand. We learned a huge amount about the topics we presented on, the focus allowing us to look into areas which we might not have otherwise had the opportunity to explore. Nervousness turned to confidence in a matter of minutes. We were lucky to work with people who turned every challenge (like being presented with a hall full of fidgety teens, or a room of 8 unresponsive ones) into an opportunity to take control, to engage and to inspire, or even rule the roost where necessary!

Reflecting on it now we can safely say that a few specific things that we did, made our week of presentations into a success story. If we were to list them here, it would go something like this:

1. *Plan* for everything. You wouldn't think it, but even 'plan D' often comes in really handy. Have variations on every interactive sessions for different levels of interest and engagement. Remember that proper planning and preparation prevents pathetically poor performance.
2. *Communicate* with your team members and your tutor who is there to help and support (we were lucky there too, here's to great tutors who become more like friends - yes, we mean you, GM!). From as simple as exchanging contact details, to keeping people posted about your progress and areas you need help with or which

you are unable to manage. Communicate with your students, engage them and let them engage you. Be open!

3. *Participate* in the group work as much as you can. Life goes on for us all, pulling us in all sorts of directions, but what you get out of anything, is directly proportional to what you put in. Take part!
4. *Listen* actively to what others have to say to you. Your quietest teammate may have the most brilliant idea, or your own seemingly genius scheme could fall flat on its face in the classroom. Listen to the student's questions as they are learning too; from them stems your own deepest learning. Be all ears!
5. *Collaborate*. Take on board the experiences which others bring to the table. Put everything together to create a combined, more valuable piece of work. Own it, but don't monopolise it. You are all in this together.

There would be much more advice to give from a place of new-found expertise but it would suffice to say that making any delivery fun, engaging and inspirational will win over pretty much any audience. Oh, and litter any presentation with the occasional (educational, of course) YouTube video for those rare moments of respite and restorative pin-drop silence!

At the end of it all, we emerged rather different people from the experience than the way we entered it: more confident, proudly sporting the badges of public speaking, team work, the capacity to think on our feet and to respond to the ground shifting in real-time under our feet. We gained the ability to impart our legal knowledge and to demystify the law - in essence, to be a small part of the movement which attempts to improve social justice outcomes for the public. We also got to test and adjust our professional identity and to put into play our own legal values and ethics in a real life situation by sharing what we gained from our legal education and life experiences with the community at large.

Some of us discovered a love of mentoring, some confronted and overcame our fears and some found our voices... standing on stages and shouting at the young and restless, does that to you.

But beyond our new way with the law and our satisfaction of a job done well, we found at the end of that week that in the frustrating process of trying to come together from different parts of the country, from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, different ages and interests, we had somehow become a real team almost despite ourselves. Pro-bono did not just bring us together for the benefit of the greater good of the community, but also for our own. New-found respect replaced hesitancy and wariness and we are now finally and determinedly planning that day out at a spa.

The only thing which remains to be tested, is our advocacy skills: will we be able to successfully argue for obtaining an all-expense paid day from a law department abundant in provision of pro-bono activities, but clearly lacking in its ability to qualify, limit and restrict their offers of support to students, or will they hit back with tomes of small print which will have cleverly hidden legal provisos to such ambitious claims that we all signed without reading? It remains to be seen. Open Justice team, the ball is in your court!

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