

Enhancing Student Engagement and Belonging in Legal Education: The Impact of Personalized Teaching and Continuous Professional Development

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of effective teaching strategies within legal education, specifically in the UK, emphasizing personalized teaching, interactive learning techniques, and continuous professional development (CPD) of the teacher. Drawing on reflective teaching practices, this study investigates how personalized approaches—such as the correct pronunciation of students' names and tailored feedback—foster student engagement and a sense of belonging. Additionally, the implementation of mock courtroom scenarios and technology-enhanced learning tools like VEVOX and Padlet are analysed for their role in promoting higher-order thinking and inclusivity. Continuous professional development informed the decolonization of the curriculum, challenging systemic inequalities in legal education. The findings highlight the importance of integrating personalized attention, interactive methods, and CPD to enhance student engagement, well-being, and the creation of equitable learning environments.

Introduction

Legal education has long been recognized as a demanding field, not only due to the complexity of its content but also because of the unique challenges students face in mastering critical reasoning, analytical skills, and applying legal principles to practical situations. As legal education evolves, there is increasing recognition of the need to foster inclusive, supportive, and engaging learning environments to address both academic challenges and the mental health stressors disproportionately affecting law students (Skead & Rogers, 2015; Flynn et al., 2019). This paper examines how personalized teaching approaches and continuous professional development (CPD) can enhance student engagement, belonging, and overall well-being within the context of legal education, with a focus on first-year undergraduate law students.

Teaching law in a diverse classroom presents unique challenges, especially when students come from varying backgrounds and academic experiences (Pokorny & Warren, 2021). As Brookfield (2002) points out, reflective teaching is a critical tool for educators to adapt their methods in ways that not only meet academic goals but also support students' personal development. In this paper, I explore the importance of reflective teaching by drawing on my experience as a seminar instructor for the "Law State and Individual" module at the University of Warwick. This first-year module, which covers key elements of the UK's constitutional framework, provides a backdrop for broader pedagogical discussions on student engagement and support.

One of the key challenges facing legal educators today is the mental health crisis among law students, who experience higher levels of psychological stress compared to their peers in other academic fields (Fines 1998; Larcombe & Malkin 2011; Skead & Rogers 2015). Research suggests that the competitive, high-stakes environment of law schools contributes significantly to this issue (Flynn et al., 2019). To counteract these stressors, it is critical for educators to cultivate a classroom environment where students feel acknowledged, valued, and supported.

Personalized teaching, which involves understanding students' unique needs and aspirations, can play a vital role in achieving this. Scholars such as Cureton and Gravestock (2018) have emphasized that student engagement is deeply influenced by the personal connection between students and their teachers. Therefore, in my practice, I place particular emphasis on learning and using students' names correctly, as a small but significant step towards creating a sense of belonging.

This paper also examines the role of continuous professional development in improving legal education. In recent years, there has been a growing call to decolonize the curriculum and address systemic inequalities that persist within higher education, including legal studies (Heleta, 2016; Saini & Begum, 2020). Engaging with CPD opportunities has enabled me to reflect critically on my own teaching practices and consider how they contribute to broader efforts to create a more equitable and inclusive legal education. By incorporating insights from CPD sessions on decolonization and inclusive teaching, I aim to develop a teaching approach that not only enhances student learning but also challenges traditional power dynamics within the classroom.

In this paper, I reflect on the outcomes of implementing personalized and interactive teaching methods, such as dividing students into groups for mock courtroom scenarios and utilizing technology-enhanced learning tools. By critically assessing these strategies, I aim to contribute to the growing discourse on how personalized attention, continuous professional development, and reflective teaching practices can enhance the educational experience of law students and promote a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Methodology and Reflection

This study adopts a reflective teaching methodology, rooted in the framework of **critical reflection** as outlined by Brookfield (2017), which posits that educators must critically examine their own assumptions and practices to foster more inclusive and effective learning environments. Reflective teaching involves the continuous evaluation of one's teaching strategies through direct feedback, peer observations,

and self-assessment, allowing for iterative improvement in pedagogical approaches (Brookfield, 2002). In this paper, I engage with my experiences as a seminar instructor for the *Law, State, and Individual* module at the University of Warwick, examining the impact of personalized teaching and continuous professional development (CPD) on student engagement and learning outcomes.

Research Setting and Participants

The context for this study is the *Law, State, and Individual* module, a first-year undergraduate law course that introduces students to the foundational principles of the UK's constitutional framework, including Parliamentary Sovereignty, Judicial Review, and Public Interest Litigation. Over the course of two academic years, I have taught approximately 80 students over the two academic years of 2022 – 23 and 2023 – 24, divided into seminar groups of 19-22 students each. The cohort of students represented a diverse mix of backgrounds, both domestically and internationally, including individuals from various ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection was primarily qualitative and involved three main sources: **self-reflection**, **peer observations**, and **student feedback**. I gathered student feedback through formal anonymous surveys distributed by Warwick Law School, ensuring comprehensive and honest insights into my teaching methods. These surveys were distributed in hard copy form at the end of term 2 seminars, with all 45 students from that academic year participating. Physical copies of the survey were issued, and students were asked to complete them during the class before returning them to me, ensuring a high response rate. The surveys did not collect personal data, and anonymity was maintained throughout, which encouraged students to provide candid feedback on their learning experiences.

The survey questions were designed to evaluate various aspects of teaching, including clarity of explanations, the usefulness of personalized teaching approaches, engagement with the material, and the perceived effectiveness of interactive learning methods such as mock courtroom scenarios. Student feedback

was analysed qualitatively to identify recurring themes related to engagement, inclusivity, and the effectiveness of specific teaching methods.

In addition to student feedback, I engaged in **peer observation**, where colleagues observed my seminars and provided constructive criticism on my teaching approach. The most important comment made in the first year was to try and speak more slowly, allowing students more time to process the information which is quite new for a lot of them. This I believe laid a very strong foundation for me to build my CPD from. In the second year, the comments were more centred around letting the students do more thinking to solve a question that I pose, before providing help. This process of peer evaluation has been instrumental in refining my techniques, particularly in balancing interactive methods with content delivery.

Personalized Teaching Strategies

One of the core strategies I implemented was **personalized teaching**, which focused on recognizing and valuing the individual identities and needs of each student. This approach was inspired by Cureton and Gravestock's (2018) work on student-teacher relationships, which underscores the importance of acknowledging students as individuals to foster deeper learning connections. At the beginning of each term, I made a concerted effort to learn each student's name and the correct pronunciation by having direct conversations with each individual. I introduced this process during the first seminar, setting aside a few minutes for informal one-on-one interactions. In these short discussions, I asked students not only for their names but also for their preferred pronunciation, and I inquired about their personal motivations for studying law. This approach allowed me to build a more personal rapport with each student and helped create an inclusive atmosphere from the outset.

In some cases, I encouraged students to share their motivations with the group, fostering a sense of community where peers could also engage with and learn about each other. However, I was mindful that some students might prefer to keep this information private, so I respected their choice to share only during one-on-one

interactions. By balancing group engagement with individual attention, I was able to make each student feel valued and supported, as evidenced by their positive feedback regarding this personalized approach. Several students explicitly mentioned feeling more engaged and valued when addressed personally, reinforcing the importance of creating an inclusive environment.

I also divided students into **mock courtroom groups**—a dynamic approach to seminar discussions aimed at fostering **higher-order thinking skills** in line with Bloom's Taxonomy (Hmelo & Ferrari, 1997). By assigning students roles as either appellants or defendants, I encouraged them to actively apply legal concepts to real-world scenarios, promoting critical thinking and engagement. However, the initial response to this exercise varied. While some students embraced the challenge and performed well in crafting legal arguments, others appeared hesitant, likely due to their transition to university life or discomfort with group dynamics. Reflecting on this variation, I adapted my approach by offering additional guidance and clarifying expectations in subsequent sessions, incorporating the concept of scaffolding to better support student learning. Scaffolding, as defined by educational theorist Jerome Bruner, involves providing students with structured support when they encounter new or challenging material, and gradually removing that support as they become more confident and independent learners. In this case, I began by offering more detailed explanations, providing step-by-step guidance for activities such as mock courtroom exercises, and setting clear expectations for participation and collaboration.

As students gained familiarity with these tasks, I gradually reduced the level of direct instruction, encouraging them to take more ownership of their learning and engage more independently with the material. This approach ensured that students who were initially hesitant or struggled with group dynamics had the necessary support to participate fully, while those who became more confident could challenge themselves further, thereby fostering an inclusive and progressive learning environment.

Technology-Enhanced Learning

In response to the growing integration of technology in education, I incorporated **technology-enhanced learning (TEL)** tools such as VEVOX and Padlet into my seminars. These tools allowed for real-time polling, quizzes, and anonymous feedback, which aligned with **Turner's (n.d.)** suggestion of using technology to engage large groups and encourage participation from introverted students. Additionally, TEL tools helped me gather immediate insights into student comprehension, allowing me to adjust my teaching methods on the fly. This approach is consistent with Petty's (2002) recommendation of using interactive methods to promote student engagement, particularly in large group settings.

The **anonymity** offered by these platforms was particularly beneficial in addressing sensitive topics. For instance, during the analysis of cases involving LGBTQ+ issues, such as a case involving a homosexual couple facing legal repercussions under the *Rents Act*, some students expressed discomfort with the language used in the case. I reassured students that they could opt out of discussions that caused distress by contacting me privately, fostering a more inclusive classroom environment. This strategy aligns with the recommendations of **Ayres (2019)**, who advocates for **Queer Pedagogy** as a means of ensuring that educational spaces are welcoming and supportive of diverse identities.

Reflection on Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

A critical element of my reflective practice has been my participation in **Continuous Professional Development (CPD)** sessions, which have significantly influenced my teaching philosophy. The largest influence on my personal pedagogy has been of the APP PGR program offered by the Academic Development Council of the University of Warwick. CPD in general and APP PGR has enabled me to engage with contemporary pedagogical theories, including the **decolonization of legal education** (Heleta, 2016; Saini & Begum, 2020). These sessions have highlighted the systemic inequalities embedded within legal curricula, particularly the Eurocentric focus that can alienate students from marginalized backgrounds. These sessions

have highlighted the systemic inequalities embedded within legal curricula, particularly the Eurocentric focus that can alienate students from marginalised backgrounds. For instance, in teaching constitutional law, I supplemented the standard discussions of UK constitutional principles with comparative examples from non-Western legal systems, such as the Indian and Pakistani constitutions. This allowed students, particularly those from South Asian backgrounds, to see their own legal traditions represented in the curriculum. It also prompted all students to critically reflect on the limitations of a purely Eurocentric legal framework and consider how different legal systems approach fundamental principles like human rights and democracy. By integrating these perspectives, I have sought to create a more inclusive and critical approach to legal education, ensuring that my teaching materials reflect diverse perspectives and challenge dominant narratives.

Through CPD, I have also become increasingly aware of the 'hidden curriculum'—the implicit, often unspoken, messages conveyed through educational practices that can perpetuate social hierarchies and disadvantage minority students (Cotton et al., 2013; Kentli, 2009). These messages often include cultural biases that are embedded in seemingly neutral classroom practices, such as the assumption that students' names or pronouns will conform to the dominant culture.

By critically reflecting on these insights, I recognized that mispronouncing students' names or assuming their pronouns can reinforce feelings of exclusion and 'otherness'—a key aspect of the hidden curriculum. To counteract this, I have implemented practices such as inviting students to correct my pronunciation of their names and inquiring about their preferred pronouns. These practices directly challenge the hidden curriculum by disrupting the implicit assumptions about identity, language, and cultural norms that often disadvantage students from minority backgrounds. Although these actions may seem minor, they help dismantle the unspoken hierarchies present in educational settings, creating a classroom atmosphere that values each student's identity and promotes greater inclusion.

Discussion and Results

The findings of this reflective study reveal that **personalized teaching, interactive learning techniques, and continuous professional development (CPD)** have a significant impact on enhancing student engagement, promoting inclusivity, and addressing systemic inequalities in legal education. This section discusses how these strategies influenced the learning environment in my *Law, State, and Individual* seminars at the University of Warwick and reflects on the broader implications for legal education.

1. Enhancing Engagement through Personalized Teaching

A key finding from this study is the positive correlation between personalised teaching and increased student engagement, which can be observed across multiple dimensions: behavioural, affective, and cognitive.

Behavioural engagement was reflected in the increased participation in class activities and discussions. When students felt personally acknowledged, they were more willing to contribute to seminar discussions and engage in collaborative exercises such as group presentations or mock courtroom scenarios.

Affective engagement—the emotional investment in learning—was evidenced by students expressing a greater sense of belonging and motivation. By addressing students by name and acknowledging their personal motivations, I noticed that they exhibited more enthusiasm for the subject matter, which created a more positive classroom atmosphere overall.

Cognitive engagement, which refers to the intellectual investment in learning, was also enhanced. Students demonstrated deeper critical thinking when given personalized feedback tailored to their strengths and weaknesses. This type of

feedback allowed them to focus on areas where they could improve, encouraging a more active and reflective approach to their own learning. This supports the work of **Cureton and Gravestock (2018)**, who argue that students are more likely to engage with learning when they feel acknowledged as individuals. By fostering all three types of engagement—behavioural, affective, and cognitive—personalized teaching contributed to a richer, more dynamic learning environment.

Student feedback also reinforced this observation. Several students noted that being addressed by name made them feel more connected to the learning environment, reducing the psychological distance between student and teacher. This is particularly important in legal education, where the hierarchical structure of law schools often exacerbates student anxiety (Skead & Rogers, 2015). By breaking down these barriers through personalized attention, I was able to create a more supportive and inclusive classroom environment, aligning with **Brookfield's (2017)** concept of critically reflective teaching, which emphasizes the need for educators to adjust their methods to create a humanized learning experience.

The use of personalized quizzes based on topics that interested individual students also proved effective in maintaining engagement. The quizzes allowed students to showcase their knowledge in areas where they felt confident, thereby fostering a sense of competence. This aligns with **Petty's (2002)** findings that using varied assessment methods can enhance student motivation and help them recognize their own progress in learning.

2. Interactive Learning and Critical Thinking

The use of **interactive learning techniques**, particularly the division of students into mock courtroom groups (appellants and defendants), contributed significantly to the development of **higher-order thinking skills**. Students were encouraged to critically apply legal concepts such as Parliamentary Sovereignty and Judicial Review to real-world scenarios. This aligns with **Bloom's Taxonomy**, which highlights the

importance of moving beyond basic knowledge acquisition to encourage analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Hmelo & Ferrari, 1997).

However, the effectiveness of this approach varied. While some students thrived in this interactive environment, others appeared overwhelmed, especially during the early stages of their university experience. This finding resonates with **Flynn et al. (2019)**, who highlight the stress that law students experience during their transition to higher education. To mitigate this, I adapted the structure of the mock courtroom exercises by providing clearer instructions and offering additional support for students who were hesitant to participate. Over time, even students who initially struggled with group dynamics demonstrated improved confidence and engagement.

Moreover, the use of real-world legal scenarios as the basis for discussion fostered **critical thinking** by prompting students to evaluate the applicability of legal principles in varied contexts. This finding supports **Brookfield's (2002)** view that reflective teaching should involve challenging students' assumptions and encouraging them to think critically about the material.

3. Addressing Student Mental Health through Inclusive Practices

A significant challenge in legal education is the high level of stress and mental health issues among law students. According to **Skead and Rogers (2015)**, law students face greater psychological stress than their peers in other disciplines, often due to the competitive nature of legal education. My findings corroborate this, as several students expressed feelings of anxiety, particularly when dealing with sensitive case materials, such as the analysis of LGBTQ+ legal issues.

In response, I implemented strategies to create a **psychologically safe** learning environment. For example, I allowed students to opt out of discussions that they found distressing by sending an email under the subject line "Distressing Content."

This approach aligns with the **Queer Pedagogy** framework proposed by **Ayres (2019)**, which advocates for creating inclusive spaces where students can engage with difficult content at their own pace. By normalizing the process of opting out without fear of judgment, I fostered an environment where students felt safe to engage with the material on their own terms.

Moreover, the **anonymity** provided by technology-enhanced tools like VEVOX and Padlet enabled students to express their concerns without fear of public scrutiny. This proved particularly useful when discussing cases involving sensitive social issues, further supporting the idea that technology can enhance inclusivity in the classroom (Turner, n.d.).

4. Continuous Professional Development and Decolonizing the Curriculum

Participation in **CPD sessions** played a crucial role in shaping my approach to teaching, particularly in the context of **decolonizing legal education**. Engaging with scholarship on **decolonization** and systemic inequalities in higher education (Heleta, 2016; Saini & Begum, 2020) allowed me to critically reflect on the implicit biases embedded in traditional legal curricula. As **McGregor and Sang-Ah Park (2019)** argue, the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives in higher education often marginalizes students from diverse backgrounds.

In response, I made deliberate efforts to **incorporate diverse perspectives** into seminar discussions. For example, when discussing UK constitutional law, I drew parallels with the Indian constitutional structure, which resonated with students from South Asian backgrounds. This approach helped to challenge the hegemony of Western legal thought and encouraged students to critically examine the global implications of legal doctrines. These efforts are in line with **Warren's (2021)** call for a more inclusive and anti-hierarchical approach to teaching that recognizes the diverse experiences and identities of students.

Additionally, CPD sessions on student well-being informed my approach to addressing the **hidden curriculum**, which perpetuates inequalities based on race, gender, and class (Cotton et al., 2013). By fostering open discussions about students' personal experiences and acknowledging their struggles, I was able to create a more inclusive and empathetic learning environment. As a result, student feedback indicated a greater sense of belonging, with one student noting, "I feel like I can bring my whole self to class."

5. Impact of Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL)

The use of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) tools was another key factor in promoting student engagement and inclusivity. Tools such as VEVOX and Padlet allowed students to participate anonymously in polls, quizzes, and discussions, which helped bridge the gap between more vocal students and those who were less comfortable speaking in class. Turner (n.d.) notes that TEL can significantly increase participation by offering students alternative modes of engagement, particularly in large-group settings.

My findings confirm this, as even the most introverted students were able to contribute their ideas via the anonymous platforms. Furthermore, the immediate feedback provided by these tools allowed me to gauge student comprehension in real-time, enabling me to adjust my teaching methods on the spot. This aligns with **Petty's (2002)** argument that interactive learning techniques enhance student engagement and lead to better educational outcomes.

Conclusion

Personalised teaching, interactive learning, and continuous professional development (CPD) are important tools in enhancing student engagement and promoting inclusivity in legal education. Through reflective teaching practices, educators can adapt their methods to create a supportive and engaging learning environment that responds to students' unique needs, particularly in challenging

fields such as law. Critically reflecting on teaching practices is essential for developing inclusive and effective pedagogical strategies.

One of the key observations is that personalised teaching, such as addressing students by name and considering their individual motivations, significantly improves student engagement. As emphasised by Cureton and Gravestock (2018), acknowledging students as individuals strengthens their connection to the learning process, fostering a sense of belonging that can alleviate the stress associated with legal studies (Skead & Rogers, 2015). This paper demonstrates that even small acts can have a profound impact on the classroom atmosphere.

Educators across the legal education field can adopt similar personalised approaches to foster engagement and inclusivity in their own classrooms. Simple practices such as learning students' names, providing tailored feedback, and engaging with their individual learning motivations can make a significant difference in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. By actively considering the unique needs of each student, educators can enhance both student well-being and academic performance.

In addition, the use of interactive learning techniques—such as mock courtroom exercises—was found to enhance higher-order thinking skills in line with Bloom's Taxonomy (Hmelo & Ferrari, 1997). However, this approach requires careful adaptation to ensure that all students feel supported, particularly during their transition to university life. By providing additional guidance and adjusting the structure of group activities, educators can foster critical thinking and engagement even among students who may initially feel overwhelmed. Institutions and educators alike should consider integrating interactive learning tools to help students develop analytical and problem-solving skills in a more engaging and supportive environment.

The integration of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) tools, such as VEVOX and Padlet, was another key factor in promoting inclusivity and engagement. These tools provided an avenue for students to participate anonymously, helping to bridge the gap between more vocal students and those less comfortable contributing in traditional classroom settings. As Turner (n.d.) notes, TEL offers alternative modes of engagement, which can be particularly beneficial in large-group settings, allowing educators to cater to diverse learning styles. Educators should explore the potential of these tools to diversify participation methods and ensure that all students, regardless of their learning preferences, have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

Finally, continuous professional development (CPD) played a crucial role in shaping the decolonising efforts within this study. Engaging with CPD sessions on decolonising legal education (Heleta, 2016; Saini & Begum, 2020) enabled a critical reflection on how traditional curricula can marginalise students from diverse backgrounds. This study demonstrated that by incorporating a broader range of perspectives and challenging dominant narratives, educators can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments, as urged by Warren (2021). Legal educators should consider how CPD can help them challenge systemic inequalities in their curricula and develop more inclusive pedagogical practices that reflect the diversity of student experiences.

As legal education continues to evolve, it is vital for educators to engage in reflective practice and seek out professional development opportunities that allow them to address the systemic inequalities embedded within traditional educational frameworks. By doing so, educators can not only improve student engagement and well-being but also contribute to the broader efforts to decolonise and democratise legal education. Legal educators reading this study can adopt similar strategies in

their own practice, tailoring them to their specific contexts, to foster a more inclusive, reflective, and engaging learning environment that meets the needs of all students.

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