

It's Not All Zoom and Gloom: Reflections on University Study During COVID–19

Fraser King

Abstract

The ongoing COVID–19 pandemic has presented varying challenges for students and teaching staff alike. The difficulty of transitioning from traditional in person teaching to an online delivery of teaching that students and teaching staff are now well-acquainted with cannot be understated. This article analyses the challenges that have arisen as a result of the pandemic and offers reflections on these difficulties from the author's two different perspectives within York Law School — first as a Master of Laws student and, second, as a graduate teaching assistant. In particular, this paper will focus on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the delivery of the York Law School's problem-based learning methods and the process of completing an independent dissertation project. Finally, this paper offers thoughtful recommendations for the future of teaching and learning at higher education.

1 Introduction

The COVID–19 global pandemic led, in March 2020, to the United Kingdom being placed into an unprecedented national lockdown. A consequence of the lockdown measures was the dramatic transition from teaching in person to online delivery in higher education. The difficulty of adjusting well-established teaching techniques to an online environment cannot be understated; the fact that universities across the country continued to teach students throughout the differing stages of the pandemic should be applauded.

As a Master of Laws (LLM) student at York Law School (YLS), having graduated from YLS with a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) degree in 2020, and also as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), I have experienced first-hand the implications of the period of disruption caused by COVID–19. My LLM was a one-year programme composed entirely of option modules, most of which were delivered through problem-based learning (PBL): a form of student-centred pedagogy where students learn about areas of law through the experience of solving legal problems identified in an initial scenario. Throughout my time as an LLM student, I experienced the challenges of learning in a new online environment. At the same time, as a GTA, involved in teaching elements of the undergraduate law programme for first- and second-year students, I have had a unique viewpoint on the impact of the pandemic in higher education, having experienced it as a member of the teaching staff.

In this paper, I will, first, reflect upon the impact that the COVID–19 pandemic has had on the delivery of PBL, drawing upon my experiences as a student and a GTA. Second, I will consider the challenges I faced whilst conducting an independent research project under pandemic restrictions and how I overcame these difficulties.

2 Problem-Based Learning

Throughout the pandemic, the most marked change in the context of higher education has been the transition from in-person teaching to online delivery. The ethos of YLS is largely one of collaboration and this is core to its teaching methods, including its unique PBL style, adopted for both undergraduate and postgraduate study. Before reflecting upon the impact of COVID–19 on the delivery of PBL, this paper will first provide an overview of the PBL process.

2.1 Overview

For the duration of each academic year, students at YLS are divided into student law firms (SLFs), where they are expected and encouraged to collaborate with one another for the entirety of the PBL process. As SLFs are largely self-regulated, each group may approach PBL in a slightly different manner. The PBL approach aims to both increase legal knowledge and to teach students to act ethically and solve complex problems.¹ Additionally, there is no emphasis on ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ sources to use, meaning that, in terms of pedagogy, students, through conducting independent research, discover a range of sources they find to be useful.² The PBL process, whilst daunting at first, has been beneficial for my own development. As I look to legal practice in the future, I have gained a valuable skill set in applying abstract legal knowledge and principles to factual situations.

The PBL process works on a cyclical basis, each week being one full cycle. Usually, two sessions are delivered at the beginning or end of each week, with one interim session sandwiched in between. A typical PBL seminar is formed of two halves: the feeding back of the previous

¹ Jenny Gibbons, ‘Reflection, Realignment and Refraction: Bernstein's Evaluative Rules and the Summative Assessment of Reflective Practice in a Problem-Based Learning Programme’ (2019) 24(7) *Teaching in Higher Education* 834, 836.

² Richard Grimes, ‘Delivering Legal Education through an Integrated Problem-Based Learning Model — the Nuts and Bolts’ (2014) 21(2) *IJCLE*, 228, 253.

week's problem scenario and the 'pick-up' of a new problem. In a typical PBL session, a student in the SLF will be appointed as chairperson, who will act in a leadership capacity, and another student will be appointed as a scribe, who will record the whole process for the group.

During the pick-up phase, the tutor will distribute scenarios to the SLF; these scenarios are fictional legal problems that usually relate to content from two areas of law. The objective of this part of the session is to work collaboratively to identify these problems. To do so, students thoroughly process the problem scenario by clarifying any unclear terms, identifying the key parties and their interests, along with the key facts, then summarising and naming the scenario. Finally, students brainstorm any legal issues they believe to be related to the problem, which leads to the development of ideas or questions for further independent research. Following the independent research process, the students will present their findings to the SLF and then apply the law to the factual matrix within the scenario. This both reinforces the substantive legal knowledge gained from research and practises the skill of applying the law in real-life situations.

Each week there are interim sessions that take place in between the main PBL seminars. In these sessions, the students present their initial findings on the problem scenario. The role of the tutor in interim sessions is to facilitate and encourage the students to further develop their own research skills, rather than give correct answers or provide a list of sources to consult. After the interim session, students continue their research and then apply it to the problem scenario in advance of their next PBL seminar, where they feedback their completed and detailed research to the tutor and fellow students.

Additionally, to further support students, lectures, known at YLS as plenaries, are delivered to coincide with the content relevant to a given week's PBL problem. Prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, plenaries were delivered as interactive, in-person lectures, meaning students

could pose questions to lecturers. However, due to the COVID–19 pandemic, plenaries were pre-recorded by teaching staff and uploaded for students to access at their convenience. Despite the lack of interactivity, this new format permitted me, as an LLM student, to make more comprehensive notes as I was able to set aside sufficient time to watch and understand the content. Drawing from my experience on the LLB at YLS, I believe plenaries being delivered in an online format has been more beneficial for my learning. This brings me to question whether, when we look to the future, a hybrid approach that incorporates the benefits of online plenaries, coupled with in-person seminars, could be adopted in higher education.

2.2 PBL from a Student Perspective

PBL, even without the challenges associated with COVID–19, has been a challenging style of learning to adapt to. These sessions are facilitated by PBL tutors at YLS, in line with the important pedagogical objectives that underpin PBL. The sessions primarily focus on conducting productive research, and application of the law to the factual matrix of the week's scenario.

When picking up a new problem scenario as an undergraduate, I often struggled to maintain a balance between capturing the required level of detail to sufficiently complete the learning objectives and moving swiftly through the process. Throughout my experience as an LLM student, where the delivery of teaching has been solely online, I have found that this problem was not necessarily replicated as, initially, we tended to move efficiently through the stages of PBL. Instead, attending the sessions online meant I felt almost disconnected from the other students in the SLF and we appeared to be more concerned with establishing the relevant learning outcomes efficiently than working collaboratively to achieve this. As a result, in the first term, I felt that successfully working through particularly challenging problems was less rewarding than it had been throughout my undergraduate experience, where the delivery of PBL had mostly been in person.

The lack of collaboration could be attributed to the online setting, which felt at times like artificial separation between me and the other members of the SLF, meaning I felt less familiar with who I was working with. Prior to the pandemic, I would often work closely with students in my SLF, especially if I had been having difficulty navigating the research. Owing to the restrictions on social contact as a result of COVID–19, I was unable to meet with my fellow students in person and, unless I arranged to collaborate in an online setting, I mostly worked independently. This meant that I felt less certain of the quality of my research and I was often less forthcoming in the following week's feedback session.

During the second term, after previously experiencing a disconnect with my fellow students, I consciously made attempts to facilitate positive discussions within the PBL setting, particularly when acting as the chairperson. I would often directly ask members of the SLF to participate, which initially led to stilted silences and, occasionally, instances of students accidentally speaking over one another. Eventually, the SLF established a 'hands up' policy, meaning we would take it in turns to contribute our thoughts by first signalling to the chairperson our intention to do so. Consequently, I felt more confident in sharing my contributions with the group, without fear of interrupting another student. I believe this also had a positive effect on other quieter members of the group who previously did not frequently contribute to ongoing discussions. This was not a perfect method, as it did not permit a free-flowing discussion that may be expected in an in-person setting, but it did remedy some of the problems associated with online delivery.

Whilst individual members of the SLF attempted to facilitate discussions, these efforts were greatly assisted by the tutor. Within online sessions, tutors tended to adapt their teaching style to be more proactive in encouraging contributions through leading questions or suggesting potentially fruitful areas of discussion. This adaption of teaching style aided the SLF, encouraging us to work collaboratively whilst still successfully working through the legal problems generated

by the scenario. Furthermore, the leading questions asked by the tutor prompted me to do further independent research around the topic that consequently informed my understanding of the week's scenario. As I have experienced, the role of a tutor is a challenging one – especially during the restrictions in place due to COVID-19. Whilst it is a tutor's role to encourage productive academic conversations, it can be difficult to create an atmosphere of academic community and collaboration in a virtual environment. Despite this, tutors continued to deliver outstanding teaching and support in PBL sessions, in line with the YLS's intentional student-centred pedagogy.

The experience of online learning in a group setting has demonstrated the importance of developing and maintaining positive relationships with colleagues. As the use of online platforms may become part of normality, even after COVID-19 restrictions have ceased, I will ensure that I cultivate meaningful relationships with colleagues in order to encourage collaborative and friendly interaction both within and outside formal meetings.

2.3 PBL from the GTA Perspective

Whilst completing the LLM course, I delivered virtual interim sessions as a GTA. During this time, I observed that the levels of attendance and preparedness of students had not been disproportionately affected by the shift to online delivery; however, having previously attended interim sessions whilst completing my LLB, I did notice a reduction in participation. It appeared as though students were less forthcoming in sharing their initial research findings, which may, as I found during PBL for the LLM, have been a result of the lack of familiarity students had with their peers.

A further challenge I identified in my capacity as a GTA was the technological constraints some students faced. I was often unsure whether students were unable to contribute owing to having poor-quality microphones or webcams, or whether they needed further

support on the content being delivered. This was a challenge I had not anticipated having to face initially, but one I became more accustomed to as the academic year progressed. In the second term, after getting to know the students, I felt more confident in my ability to successfully encourage students to participate. I was able to recognise that some students felt more comfortable or, as a result of their technology, were only able to contribute using the 'chat' function on Zoom. Eventually, I encouraged the use of this function, which ultimately increased the level of participation within the interim sessions.

To understand the challenges that the students were facing, I drew upon my experiences as a YLS undergraduate student. For instance, whilst completing my LLB, I often struggled to identify the most appropriate legal sources, including textbooks and case law. Therefore, when delivering the interim sessions, I ensured students were completing their research using appropriate material and, where necessary, I would encourage students to consider alternative sources to enhance their independent research. Reflecting upon my own experiences also allowed me to grow in confidence in the role, as I could ensure I guided the students to develop their research skills. Additionally, I was able to share my own experiences with the students during the interim sessions to help them understand the purpose of PBL. It felt particularly rewarding when sharing this guidance with students actually encouraged participation and, on occasion, when individual students would thank me for my delivery of the interim session.

Working as a GTA has been an enjoyable experience and one I would recommend to other students considering further education at master's or PhD level. The role was enriching as I was able to work with the same groups of students throughout the academic year and could chart their development and confidence. I could also apply this journey at a personal level, as I learned to adapt my own style of teaching to accommodate the needs of others and work flexibly in a challenging and uncertain time. These skills will benefit me in my own future career in the legal sector.

3 The Dissertation Project

COVID–19 has undoubtedly had a significant impact upon the delivery of learning in higher education, but it has also noticeably affected independent research projects. At YLS, independent research tasks usually take the form of a dissertation, a project that spans the whole academic year, with a word limit of 10,000 words at undergraduate level and 12,000 at master's level. As both my undergraduate and master's dissertations were completed under restrictions caused by the COVID–19 pandemic, I have faced significant challenges in completing these research tasks. A substantial element of any dissertation project is the consultation and analysis of a range of sources, often made possible by access through the library facilities. However, in March 2020 the university library, along with all other study spaces across campus, closed and during that time access to those resources was inherently limited. The library reopened in July 2020 and, ever since, its capacity has been limited, with a requirement to book study spaces in advance.

Throughout my time as an undergraduate student, I used the library as a study space. Inevitably, when the library closed, this disrupted my working pattern and I found that my productivity was negatively impacted. Just as many of us were required to do, I adapted my home environment to accommodate my study needs. This was particularly challenging for me, as I was previously accustomed to having a separation of work and home life. Further, despite the increased provision of online resources and most key texts being available, I also found it difficult to adapt to consulting materials in an online form, rather than in hard copy.

These challenges I faced as a result of the COVID–19 restrictions meant I experienced some difficulties completing my undergraduate dissertation project. The project itself focussed on police negligence and the respective high levels of immunity from liability. In order to answer my research questions, I initially intended to take a sociolegal approach in one chapter, analysing the role of the police in society and its relation

to negligence in the sphere of tort. At the time, a sociolegal approach to research was largely unfamiliar to me and, as access to resources was difficult at this time, I did not feel confident continuing with this approach. Consequently, I felt it would be appropriate to adapt my dissertation project accordingly and I took a wholly doctrinal approach to answering the research question. Despite initially feeling disappointed that I wouldn't be able to pursue a project outside my comfort zone, it also highlighted to me the importance of being flexible and adaptable, particularly in challenging times.

My undergraduate dissertation was the first time I had conducted a larger-scale independent research project and, consequently, I found it challenging to effectively manage my time. For other assessments that I had completed as part of my undergraduate degree, I found that working in a collaborative environment in the library with other students who were experiencing the same process of writing and studying alleviated my anxieties and helped me to focus on my work. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, this was not possible, and I completed most of my dissertation in isolation. As a result, I often struggled to motivate myself to complete the work, which was exacerbated by the lack of interaction with fellow students.

In order to successfully complete the dissertation, I developed skills to help me manage the workload. I initially felt overwhelmed by the scale of the project and found it difficult to envisage the project as a whole. To combat this, I was able to break the project down into smaller, more manageable components and would set myself smaller goals accordingly, such as reading and understanding a journal article. Once I had completed the task, I would feel a sense of achievement, which would motivate me to progress to another task. I carried this approach forward to my master's dissertation, which, despite being a larger project, felt more manageable than my undergraduate dissertation.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered the significant impacts that COVID–19 has had on the delivery of learning at YLS. Drawing upon my experiences as a master's student and a GTA, I have reflected upon the delivery of online teaching and learning in the context of PBL and an independent dissertation project. This paper has established that the value of in-person teaching and access to in-person resources cannot be understated, particularly in the context of YLS, where collaboration is at the core of its pedagogy. This was inevitably harder to replicate in an online setting which posed additional challenges for students and tutors respectively, including, in some cases, a reduction in participation. As we look to return to in-person delivery of teaching and learning in higher education, hopefully these challenges will be remedied.

Nevertheless, it has been important to recognise and reflect upon the valuable skills that have been acquired to successfully collaborate with others in an online environment. The development of these skills could be essential in the future, where we may see a hybrid approach to education, with some aspects of courses being delivered virtually and others in person. Considering this from the perspective of YLS, elements of both the LLB and LLM, including plenaries, could be successfully delivered in an online setting, with PBL, where possible, being delivered in person to achieve the desired collaboration.