

Letter To Editor

## Adopting Law School Pedagogy into Teaching and Learning of Dentistry - My Melbourne Experience

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Dear Editor,

In 2014, I was fortunate to be accepted into the fully-funded Specialist Certificate in Teaching and Melbourne Teaching Certificate programs at Melbourne Graduate School of Education, ranked world's second-best institution in the field of educational study (QS Top Universities, 2014). In the midst of completing my PhD study at the University of Melbourne, I was determined at taking advantage of the opportunities and gaining as much experience as possible that the University could offer in an endeavor to improve the quality of dental education and practice back home. Meeting other current and future leaders in education, I was overwhelmed by the unique differences portrayed in relation to our academic, career and cultural backgrounds, as well as the enthusiasm expressed by each of the participants. This further inspired me to be adamant in adopting such diversity into establishing a symbiotic relationship that would lead to the advancement of higher education.

One of the tasks during these programs was to observe teaching and learning activities of a colleague from a different faculty, which in my case was law. Coming in for this activity with misconceptions about the teaching of law, I then became stimulated with the amount of discussion, debate and brainstorming in the class-

room, brought about by the 'blended learning approach' in teaching. In the teaching of law, the blended learning approach, which integrates face-to-face teaching, independent studying and online learning experience, prepares students to be actively engaged in classroom discussion and brain-storming in discussing examples of legal cases and other learning issues (Hess, 2013). Rather than merely learning the theory or concept outlined in the legal documents, Act or constitution, such learning techniques have been proven effective in preparing graduates with employability skills fundamental to the professional practice of law, including oral and written communication skills, teamwork and time management (Lane, 2016).

From this observational experience, I came to a conclusion that the teaching of dentistry should also adopt an approach such as that of the teaching of law, which emphasized on integrating the fundamentals of scientific theory and professional practice. Such a learning approach is essential, as graduates of Malaysian dental school were reported to be incompetent in applying theoretical knowledge into providing holistic patient care (Yusof, et al., 2010). An effective learning strategy that seeks to focus on comprehensive patient management through evidence-based approach is therefore important in order to prepare students for the future challenges of clinical practice. A learning

environment that stimulates students' active participation in teaching and learning is also integral to developing strong interpersonal skills and professional demeanour, which is crucial for one's future career progression.

Similar to the teaching of law, blended learning approach has been introduced and implemented in dental schools around the world, including Malaysia (Bhardwaj, et al., 2015, Maresca, et al., 2014, Reissmann, et al., 2015). The blended learning approach has been found effective in improving students' clinical skills, understanding and interest in the subject matter (Maresca, et al., 2014, Reissmann, et al., 2015). Self-directed learning approach, adopted in blended learning, also encourages students to become self-sufficient individuals in undertaking independent life-long learning (Faraone, et al., 2013). In addition to blended learning, I hereby opine that problem-based-learning (PBL) activities should be implemented in integration with the former, and in a larger scale, in order to provide students with opportunities in engaging and applying the theories they learn into managing patients in a clinical setting (Barman, et al., 2006). The current extent of PBL incorporated into the undergraduate dental curriculum in Malaysia should be enhanced, with more sessions conducted to discuss a variety of clinical cases. Case scenarios that include aspects relating to systemic health, socio-economic status, emotional and psychological wellbeing, environmental factors including cultural and social norms, as well as other issues that may affect treatment planning and maintenance of health need to be incorporated in an attempt to prepare students for providing care in a holistic manner. Implementation of blended-learning activities, which

reduces the content of learning to be carried out face-to-face, allow for more opportunities for PBL to be conducted.

Besides increasing the amount of student' engagement with PBL, the implementation of PBL should also be assessed, to ensure its' quality and effectiveness. Students' diversity, such as that related to language proficiency, cultural values or technology literacy, need to be assessed and addressed, as some Asian students reported facing difficulty in adapting to this learning method (Sanders and Lushington, 2002). Dental educators, including academic advisors and mentors, need to play a proactive role in identifying students who experience issues in adapting to PBL activities, and develop strategies to remedy issues faced by these individuals. A one-stop academic center that caters for guiding students who experience learning difficulty, such as that available at the University of Melbourne, would be beneficial in supporting students' diversity in any area of learning.

Another suggestion for an improved students' learning experience, adopted in other institutions, is to establish a 'think tank' or a focus group, consisting of student representatives from each academic year to address any pedagogical issues. Such initiative is relevant in Asian countries, where the students are culturally unprepared to be critical and outspoken, especially during teaching and learning (Khoo, 2003). Lack of student-faculty engagement may also occur as a result of superiority standard that exists within the dental fraternity, in which specialists are held in high regard and may be perceived as being too intimidating to be approached (Rowland, et al., 2010). Having

a 'think tank' group and faculty student advocate may bridge this gap as representatives from both sides of the party collaborate to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Pritchard, et al., 2009).

Overall, the programs have offered me an interesting experience and opportunity to learn from peers across the University, dedicated to development of teaching and learning. I learnt the different educational challenges encountered by other disciplines and the various teaching strategies adopted. Such an experience provided me with a valuable insight into enhancing my own teaching performance, drawn by integrating the various perspectives of academicians of other fields.

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