

What a Time to be a Teacher

New-to-UQ contract law lecturer, [Ryan Catterwell](#), moved cross-country to teach at UQ. What inspired him to make the move, and how did the [Teaching@UQ](#) program help him settle in? Read on to find out.



Hailing from Adelaide, Ryan Catterwell is a self-proclaimed die-hard AFL fanatic (Adelaide Crows) who enjoys writing, running and a good pun.

A move into legal practice after university saw Ryan undertake an Associateship with [Federal Court Judge, The Honourable Justice Besanko](#), and then a position at [King & Wood Mallesons \(Sydney\)](#). It wasn't too long though before a love for legal research and writing proved too strong and ended in a PhD through the

University of Sydney (*A Structured Approach to the Construction of Contracts*) and a teaching role at the University of Adelaide. Ryan says working as a tutor during his undergraduate studies provided him with the insight needed to discern academia as his passion. Naturally, he jumped at the opportunity to teach contract law at the [TC Beirne School of Law](#).

We sat down to ask him a little more about his time at UQ so far.

You're completely new to UQ (and Queensland), what inspired you to make the move?

It wasn't an easy decision moving cross-country. But I couldn't pass on the opportunity to be a part of one of Australia's leading Universities and Law Schools. I wanted to work with a highly respected team of academics (many of whom are experts in their fields of research). And I knew the student cohort would be extremely motivated and intelligent.

Highlights of working at UQ so far?

I honestly really enjoy coming to work each day! The campus is fantastic (including in particular the newly refurbished law school) and I enjoy interacting with everyone – academic and professional staff and, of course, the students. I also appreciate the freedom I've been given in terms of teaching approach and methods. I teach first year contracts in three-hour seminars – this format allows me to try different things to keep students engaged.

You participated in Teaching@UQ, how did this contribute to the way you set up your classroom structure and process?

The Teaching@UQ program was an informative and useful introduction to the institution. Meeting other teachers in a similar position was helpful. A lot of them were new to teaching, and creating networks (and friends!) is important when you're new in town.

Teaching@UQ also encouraged me to reflect on my teaching methods, tools and tactics. I had intuitively adopted my approach based on previous teaching experience (and my experience as a student). However, I needed to rethink my methods because a three-hour seminar is quite different from a lecture (or tutorial). It involves both the delivery of substantive content and the practical application of such content (e.g, through the analysis of problem questions). The Principles of Learning and Blooms Taxonomy were two models presented as part of the program. They got me thinking about the best way to present my course and what students need to learn effectively.

The Principles of Learning

Motivation

1.

Practice

2.

Feedback

3.

Reflection

4.

1. Motivation: We learn when we pay attention, feel interested, and can see the relevance. We use engagement strategies to motivate our students to engage in the learning process.

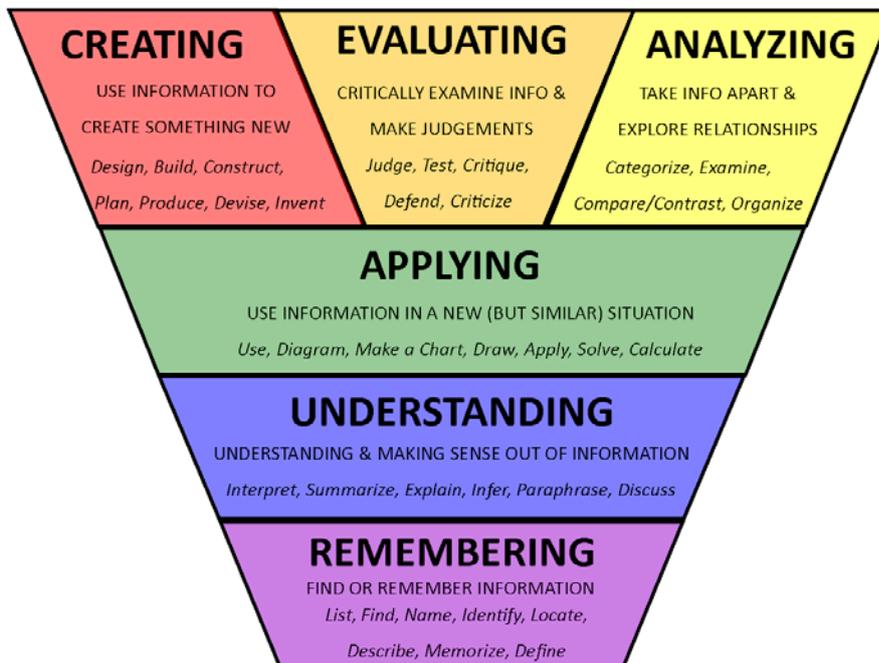
2. Practice: We learn by doing it ourselves. People will have different preferences for how they like to practise and some disciplinary differences exist—for example, how you learn and practise for mathematics will differ to how you learn and practise for music. Even within the same discipline, people will practise differently.

3. Feedback: We respond to other people's reactions to guide our learning. Other people's reactions can also impact on our motivation to persist or disengage. Feedback is critical in the learning process.

4. Reflection: We need time to reflect and make sense of what we are learning.

Adapted from Race, P. (2010) *Making Learning Happen* 2nd Edn. London: Sage Publications and phil-race.co.uk

Blooms Taxonomy



Tell us about your teaching approach?



Well, one of my favourite pieces of “negative” student feedback is: “Be less crazy” – so perhaps that gives you an indication of my teaching personality! I bring lots of energy and enthusiasm to the classroom. When I do that, I find the students do too. I must admit I have an obsession with the concept of ‘interpretation’ (contracts or otherwise), so I’m naturally energetic when I’m talking about it. (I mean, who isn’t excited by the notion that we can agree words – inherently imprecise as they are – to crystallise our respective rights and obligations!)

I think that’s an incredibly important element to being a teacher – having passion for the subject matter.

When I think about it, there are three key elements to my teaching approach. First is motivating the students through my own enthusiasm and encouragement. In each three-hour seminar, I ensure I move around the room to ask questions and keep students attentive (or at least awake!). I also try to avoid lecturing students (even when we are dealing with substantive content). I try to make it more of a group discussion. The three-hour seminar model (with classes of roughly 35) makes this possible. My slides include many questions in bold blue font and the students know they need to interact and contribute on these points – as I say, “When it’s blue, I throw to you”! I find this approach encourages students to pay attention and participate.

I also use Padlet in class (an interactive digital whiteboard) to encourage group work and contributions. However, I’m careful about how much I use it as I don’t want students stuck behind their computers. I’d prefer to have them talking and actively engaged in conversations around them (Padlet can achieve this, mind you, when used appropriately). I’m also looking to use UQ polls in coming weeks.

No doubt, one of the highlights for students is my life tip for the week. I usually make them wait until the very end of each seminar for this important message (covering topics such as “drink more water”, “watch AFL” or “Go the Mighty Crows!”). I’ll admit, these tips are probably not as useful as I think... But it provides some humour and keeps them engaged, as does the occasional meme (a necessity nowadays really). I’m also told I have a catchphrase – “What a time to be alive” (WATTBA) – certainly a common slogan of mine. It seems the students picked up on it early (admittedly I was using it a lot) and now it has stuck. I may change it up a little, but we’ll see... Keeping the classes lively and dynamic does help keep students engaged.



The second element of my teaching approach is about process. I give students a simple method or “template” for studying law. First, you need to know the law and understand the concepts. Second, you need to be able to analyse a problem by applying the law. And third, you need to be able to write an answer. I find that when students follow these simple steps they are more confident in approaching assessments and interactions in class.

The third feature of my teaching approach is directed to feedback and reflection. I encourage students to reflect on their own answers and those of the group. This was largely inspired by Teaching@UQ – as a group, we were consistently asked to reflect on each answer or topic. Through the program, it became clear to me that I needed to incorporate more feedback and reflection in my classes.

Teaching@UQ also prompted me to think about how students want to learn (as opposed to how I want to teach) and how students are going to react to different teaching techniques. In short, the program made me think about my teaching from the student perspective. And this gave me confidence in choosing my teaching methods – e.g, a combination of whiteboard, interactive slides and digital tools (e.g, Padlet). I'd certainly recommend the program to not only new teachers, but also teachers who are looking to revisit or revitalise their teaching methods.

That being said, I think it's important to acknowledge that each teacher has their own methods. Not everyone will adopt the same approach. During our first class, I let students know what I brought to the table – recent experience in practice, a theoretical understanding of the law through my PhD and a not-too-distant memory of what it was like to study undergraduate law. This inspired confidence in me (I believe) and helped students understand where I was coming from as a teacher.

What are your thoughts on the culture at UQ?

UQ and the Law School have a collegial and friendly culture. I've had support and assistance from fellow academics (acting in mentor positions) stepping me through the course requirements, yet allowing me the flexibility to adopt my own teaching techniques and methods. The professional staff have been incredibly helpful in setting up administrative processes – they even changed some lights in the seminar room to ensure the whiteboards were appropriately lit! I couldn't ask for much more. The culture at UQ is exceptional and a good fit for me!

Teaching plans for the future?

I'm looking forward to developing my teaching approach, particularly in regards to the "flipped classroom" and testing new technologies. As the world changes, we as teachers need to be flexible, adaptable and innovative to stay current and relevant – to ensure we are able to provide the best learning experience possible for our students.