

The 'Law' Critique and Question Reading and Writing Group: a space to connect 'with' rather than 'for' students

This blog post has been co-written by Verona Ní Drisceoil (Senior Lecturer in Law, Sussex Law School) and Year 1 students Ayodele Idowu-Bello, Tyrone Logue, Plum Philips, Judith Ohen and Miles Ratcliffe.

It is a cross post from the Dare to Transform Blog (28 May 2021).

Introduction

In this blog post we share, as students and faculty member, our experience of, and reflections on, the 'Law' Critique and Question Group of 20/21. In this respect, we speak to the power of coming together – students and faculty - to share and connect in a non-hierarchical space to critique and question the law. In doing so, we managed to create something special and powerful – to do and be 'otherwise' ([Jivraj, 2020](#)). We also, in part at least, managed to transgress ([Hooks, 1994](#)) the problematic structures that dominate the student/teacher relationship and continuum in Higher Education (HE) and ultimately to build a virtual community of friendship and connection during the pandemic.

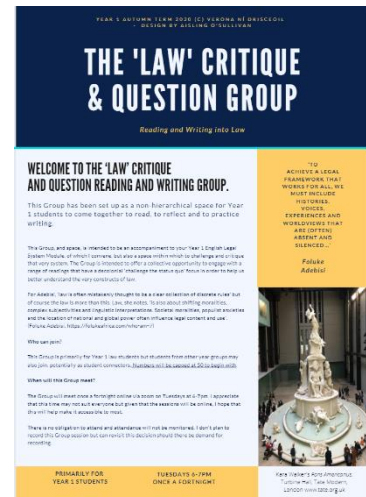
In the spirit and ethos of the Group, we deliberately write this post as a collective, but we will, as appropriate, highlight the unique experiences of faculty member and student/s. We do this too as a means of providing a potential roadmap for others – whether faculty or student/s – who would like to create something similar within HE spaces and across different disciplines. We appreciate that reading/writing groups are not a new concept, but we nonetheless suggest that there was something unique created in this space. It was 'liberatory' and 'transgressing,' not only in content but in its being and approach. It allowed a space to 'reimagine' HE spaces outside the classroom.

In this post, we begin by outlining the vision for the Group before then moving on to provide an overview of what we engaged with and why. It concludes with reflections on the impact of the Group and plans for the future.

The vision for the group



As Verona noted in her invite to us at the start of the Autumn Term 2020, this group was set up as ‘a non-hierarchical space for year 1 students to come together to read, to reflect and to practice writing’. She noted that the group, was intended to be an accompaniment to the year 1 ‘English Legal System’ module (which Verona convenes in the department of Law at the University of Sussex) but also a space within which to challenge and critique that very system and to engage with a range of readings that had a decolonial and challenge-the-status-quo focus. Drawing on the words of [Foluke Adebisi](#) (2020), Verona reminded us that ‘to achieve a legal framework that works for all, we must include histories, voices, experiences and worldviews



that are (often) absent and silenced...’ In this online space then, our aim was to embrace and champion voices, experiences and worldviews that are deliberately silenced as part of ‘law’s violence’ and ‘as violence’ as we read in our first reading - *(B)ordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* by [Nadine El Enany](#) (2020).

Though reiterating that the group was intended to be ‘organic in nature, and not formally structured in an academic sense’ Verona suggested that the following might be potential benefits to joining the Group:

- Allow you to engage in wider reading and expand your horizons and thinking
- Develop critical thinking, explore positionality. How do I/you view law?
- Develop writing skills – particularly how to engage and use secondary source materials to enhance your writing/argument; and
- Build confidence in voice work and developing an argument in writing.

Finally, Verona stressed that she would not be taking any position of ‘knowing’ in the group, rather taking this journey of reading, reflecting – learning and unlearning - *with* us as students. On reflection, Verona said ‘I’m not sure I succeeded on that front’. In her own reflection of self, Verona as ‘the’ faculty member said that she knows she often slipped too easily into the position of tutor/teacher and, at times, took up too much space. As a teacher, she reflected, ‘it’s hard to be silent sometimes – silence can be frightening for teachers and I/we often default to filling space when in fact all we need to do is just be, and sit in silence, especially when there is any discomfort. It is ok to be uncomfortable. As [Lee-Ann Sequeira](#) (2020) reminds us, silence is only a problem if we make it so. Further still [Danielle Hinton](#) (2021) has been quick to remind us that ‘listening, reflecting and all those other potentially silent behaviours are important parts of the learning journey.’ One striking positive of the pandemic

(according to Verona) is that it has forced educators to reflect more deeply on the fact that 'engagement' presents in a multitude of ways.

All that was asked, in signing up, was to do so with the intention of engaging and being part of a collective space and respectful dialogue'. In total, 45 students signed up to the Group with 12-15 regularly joining the sessions in the autumn term. In the spring term, this number dropped down to approximately 8-10 students per session.

Highlights from the autumn term

Beginning in week 3 of the autumn term, the sessions were held fortnightly on a Tuesday at 6pm (UK time) via Zoom for an hour or just over. Canvas, the University's VLE, was used to facilitate announcements regarding readings, updates, and optional tasks. At the end of each session, we used a poll on Zoom to select from a potential choice of readings and podcasts. This element of choice was key to this collective and democratic space and 'doing otherwise.'

As noted above, our first reading was from El-Enany's wonderful book (*B)ordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire*. This book explores how immigration law is a form of violence, and that Britain continues to colonise through spoils of empire. Ayo noted that 'it was interesting to hear many people in the Group say they never realised how bad the immigration system was/is in this country'. For me, being an immigrant 'this was my reality and something I had to go through'. She went on to say that (*B)ordering Britain* shines an illuminating light on 'how this country likes to paint an image or create this facade of being inclusive and being accessible to all when in all honesty that is false.' Britain has redefined the word 'inclusive' to pick and choose who is deserving and who is not. There is, to draw from El Enany's work, an 'ordering' and this ordering is often racialised.

At each session we dealt with new material/s of varying content. Please see the references for a complete list of works discussed. To complement the text and audio material, we also undertook writing exercises, such as free writing exercises, respond and reflect exercises, and a summarise/paraphrase exercise.

Highlights from the spring term

Though intended to be an autumn term initiative, we all agreed that we would like to keep this space going for the spring term. One of the group members noted that 'it provided a welcome reprieve' particularly as we were now in lockdown again. Connection and belonging, we agreed, was needed, for all of us. Tyrone suggested that in the spring term we should begin by selecting a reading or audio that does not align with our views to generate interesting discussion/critical analysis/written responses. In that vein, we started with an interview with [Jordan Peterson](#) on the Me Too movement. As a group,

this was an interesting exercise and one that allowed us to not only explore and consider Peterson's deeply problematic argument/positioning (as we saw it) but the manner and approach he takes to 'deliver'. We reflected on his 'confidence' (arrogance?) and how it can be easy to miss his 'actual' position because of the way he presents. How damaging this is and can be. As Law students, considering the way in which someone delivers and presents, allowed us an important entry point to talk about the role of voice work, advocacy, and the power of persuasion, particularly as legal practitioners, and indeed the biases present in our perception of a particular type of confidence/voice work. Our writing exercise that week was a reflective one on 'what is confidence?' We also explored [what makes a good written argument](#).

As with the autumn term, at each session we dealt with new material/s of varying content. Please see the references for a complete list of works discussed.

Not just a reading group...

The selection of readings and podcasts we engaged with all provided important provocations and points for us to pause, reflect, learn, and unlearn. In this space, we, as per our aim, considered experiences and worldviews that are often absent and silenced in mainstream law curriculums. But beyond that, the group provided a space for true connection and friendship – for relationality, where, as Ayo put it, 'it felt like we were equals' despite our 'different backgrounds and different life experiences'.

Plum echoed this point. She spoke of the importance of this space to 'connect with other members of the law school, but also to pause and coalesce learning generally'. She noted that 'the sessions revealed and examined – who it (the law) doesn't serve, and how 'it' fails, often. For Miles, the space and group helped him 'to absorb and listen' to the thoughts and reflections of others. This, he noted, 'helped me to refine and understand my social and political views better, being able to state them with more confidence and conviction (something that I have struggled with in the past)'. For Judith, pushing beyond the curriculum was welcomed. The great thing about the 'Law' Critique Group, she said 'was the opportunity to discuss multiple topics that were outside our curriculum'. Like Miles, Judith noted that the group 'helped me improve my verbal and written argument through the pre-readings and writing tasks'. Finally, and most importantly there was, as Ayo noted, 'a sense of belonging' in that space.

The importance of community and belonging in HE

Over the past year, there has been much focus, rightly, on the importance of a pedagogy of care approach within HE. ([Maha Bali](#), 2020) The literature tells us that there is an important need to create spaces where students can build a sense of community and belonging even if this is online. The focus of the community and belonging debate is, however, often on 'for' students rather than 'with' students.

This group was about the 'with' and not the 'for' and as noted by all of us there was so much gained in that space – more than can be put into words, in fact.

What's next for the 'Law' Critique Group?

This group, despite never meeting in person, became a space to connect, support and 'do otherwise'. Together and relationally we will continue with this journey in 21/22. Who knows what next term will bring and how the group and space may evolve and grow, whether online or not? We, as a collective, faculty member and students, are certainly excited for the next 'chapter'. Together, we will continue to challenge, critique and question.

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