

Connecting Through Creativity in the Pandemic Virtual Classroom: A Flat Stanley Project for Law Students

Marie Hadley and Donna McNamara

Conference Presentation

Directions in Legal Education 2022

Chinese University of Hong Kong, 10 – 11 June 2022

Good afternoon, today Donna and I will be talking to you about an intervention that we introduced in the context of our Contract Law and Health Law classes towards the end of last year. This intervention - a Flat Stanley project for law students – was essentially an attempt to support student wellbeing during the pandemic and foster greater engagement and a better morale in our online synchronous classes.

At our university, the University of Newcastle in Australia, semester 2 of 2021 was held wholly online. Around the start of semester, Sydney, our closest major city, went into a long lockdown. About a month later, Newcastle where we live and work, went into a 3 month lockdown. During this time, children were homeschooled, we were confined to our homes and unable to have visitors, and we needed to stay within our Local Government area or a 5km radius for food shopping and exercise. For us as well as our students, this was a time of isolation, monotony, and also burnout.

During the semester, Donna and I were both teaching, and we noticed student engagement dipping significantly in our online classes as the weeks went on. By the mid-semester break, we'd have up to 50 students online at any one time, but only perhaps only 5 or 10 typing in the chat and answering or asking questions. This made classes difficult and tiring for us, but it was also concerning with regards to where the mental health of our students might be at and also how they were tracking with regards to their progression towards learning outcomes and skills development: perhaps their lack of engagement in class was a sign of a disconnection from the course at large.

And then one day my son's kindergarten teacher mailed me a Flat Stanley project for him to complete as part of his weekly homeschooling activities. Flat Stanley projects are inspired by the Children's book *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown. In the book, Stanley is squashed flat one night while he sleeping. He decides to make the most of being flat, and goes on a number of adventures, including visiting friends by mailing himself in an envelope. Now since the 1990s, Flat Stanley Projects have been used in primary schools and high schools as a way for teachers to connect with their students and support a learning exercise. There have also been a few Flat Stanley projects used around the world in a university context too – but typically these involve connecting the university to primary school students rather than being used internally by educators for their tertiary students. In any case, a Flat Stanley project involves taking a laminated or paper version of the teacher (usually their cartoon avatar) on an adventure and undertaking an associated literacy project.

So this is what my son's teacher had done. And as a result, my son and I ended up taking his flat teacher on an adventure all around our garden, looking for things that rhymed with his spelling words, and taking photographs and making videos. And it was actually really fun – I enjoyed it as much as he did.

The next time I touched base with Donna, I mentioned to her how much fun I'd had doing this Flat Stanley Project. And then Donna and I thought, well, could we not do something like this for our law students?

We ultimately decided to create a Flat Stanley Project in the form of a Photography Contest and wellbeing activity.

While perhaps a little bit out of the ordinary, our interest in organising an activity like this was not wholly unexpected. In the past, we have both set creative assessments in our law subjects, Donna had been involved in research that underpinned an art exhibition, and I'd run a photo contest amongst staff as part of our annual Teaching and Learning Day. So even though it seemed a little silly to do a Flat Stanley Project given that our students are a whole lot bigger than my 6 year-old son, we thought it might have possible positive effects for students in terms of letting them know that we and the university cared about them, or at least get a few laughs. And then, the more we looked into it, the more we realised that there is research that supports a close relationship between creativity, productivity, and wellbeing, and we became more hopeful that the contest would support student wellbeing and productivity, and with any luck, have the by-product of more engagement, in our classes.

In terms of practical matters, we sought internal funding for the printing and laminating costs because our building was currently closed, and we also sought funding for a prize pool for the best photographs, and we were lucky enough to receive support from our Head of School for the activity. We called for our students to volunteer to opt-into the activity. And then we posted those volunteer students a laminated cartoon avatars of ourselves and asked them to document student life in the pandemic by taking photographs of their adventures with their #flat lecturers. And the poem we sent them is shown on the slide. We also provided a "download at home" version on our Course pages in case any students decided to join in later on. We set up the photo contest through a lowcost website called Pollunit, it cost \$10USD in total for a month, which could be accessed by students through a QR code or a URL, and they could then upload their submissions directly through the pollunit portal. When the entry period closed, we could also use our Pollunit site to allow for public voting on the photographs.

In terms of participation, uptake was sound, but not overwhelming. We'd budgeted our laminating and postage costs based on about 40 students being involved – out of our combined 200 total students. Ultimately 37 students opted in to receive the materials via post, and we ended up with 53 entries to the competition. One of things that was quite interesting though was that we had a number of students as well as members of the public also join in on the voting – approximately 200 people voted for the "People's Choice Award".

Outside of having a People's Choice Award, we had three random prize draws, two Lecturer's Choice Awards – Donna and I both chose our favourite picture from our cohorts (and young

Frankie dog on the slide here won my category), and there was also an award for the Best Overall photograph – which we will show you right at the end of our presentation. The winners received a gift card of their choice

So having talked to you about what we did and why we did it, Donna will now run through the outcomes of our Flat Lecturer project and also the implications we see as arising from it for the teaching of law more generally.

Our students are drawn from a very diverse cohort, we have a large amount of first in family students, a number of students attend our University from neighbouring regional areas up to four to five hours away, many if not most work part time jobs to support their living expenses in Newcastle, and a number of our students, both post graduate and undergraduate, are juggling family or carer responsibilities. On top of the diversity of our cohort, the Newcastle region is a very geographically diverse area. Our Law School campus in the CBD is located one street from the port, on a really beautiful stretch of coastline that features a number of beaches. About half an hour South is a large lake, half an hour west is the Hunter Valley wine region, and further out is number of rural, farming and coastal towns.

So one of the key outcomes from doing the Flat Lecturer project was simply being able to see the sheer diversity of the imagery that was entered in the competition – that captured something of the range of student experiences during the pandemic, and also the variety in the scenery that there is around Newcastle and the surrounding areas – in circumstances where a lot of students from the country had actually returned back to their family homes for the semester. So the photographs really showcased our local area and made us appreciate more fully where our students were and what they were up to – from skateboarding along the paths at the beach to birthing lambs on a rural property, to studying by their pool with a pet at home.

Now, in terms of student wellbeing outcomes – we did not systematically set this project up as a research project. As Marie mentioned, our idea came from a conversation, and we put the project together quite quickly over the course of a week or so. Ethics approval would have taken minimum 3 months, by which time the semester would have been over.

Without ethics approval, we did not have the opportunity to reliably capture data around the impacts of the project on students – and whether it did indeed improve student wellbeing or productivity. However, our informal data does support that it was a positive experience for students. We received emails thanking us for running the project and those students who participated seemed to have fun. The People's Choice Award data also supports engagement from students outside the direct participants, and I'll return to this shortly.

In terms of engagement in class itself – it's also hard to measure outside of a formal research project whether we achieved our aim in gathering our students back in, and connecting them more closely to our classes and courses. However, what we did notice was that running the competition and receiving the photographs actually improved *our own wellbeing as teachers* – remember, we were in this lockdown too, and teaching to the void was incredibly draining. Featuring the competition entries on our powerpoint slides, and publicising the competition and letting the students know that we were impressed with the quality of entries we'd

received – made us feel good. And we were able to bring that additional energy to our classes which we would argue, then lightened the mood independently of any direct benefits also received by the student who participated in the project.

If we were to re-run this exercise, we would seek ethics approval to undertake qualitative research – and we think it would be worthwhile to seek to capture data on wellbeing and productivity from the perspective of the teachers as research participants *as well as* data from the student participants about their experiences.

Our project had some less anticipated outcomes as well. The first involved the uptake by our undergraduate and postgraduate students who are parents. And this should not really have surprised us, given that we are both aware that there are quite a lot of children amongst the Law School students. But we did not anticipate that our student parents would be such enthusiastic volunteers, given that many of them were homeschooling their children at the same time as studying and working remotely. They were typically the first students to put their name down for the competition, and they were also the students who reached out after the competition and told us how much they enjoyed it, as it took the family outside for their exercise time and essentially gave them a fun activity they could all do together. Some students also mentioned to us that their children were doing a Flat Teacher project as a homeschooling activity at the same time - so their children's flat teachers would come along on the Flat Lecturer activities. And there is something really nice about that as it positioned education as a shared experience between our students and their children.

And I think this form of activity that was conducive to family time, also brings to the fore the idea that certain types of learning activities are potentially more inclusive of a wider range of personal circumstances than others.

The second less anticipated outcome involved social media engagement.

Now as part of the competition, we encouraged the students to share their photographs on Twitter and tag us in the pictures along with the hashtag #flatlecturer. In some ways this was not super successful as a lot of students didn't have Twitter accounts. But as we publicised the competition more in class, and as the deadline for the entries got closer, we had a few students jumping on board and sharing their imagery online or commenting on their friends' imagery. Also, as part of the terms and conditions of the competition, we had received permission from the students to share their photographs from our own social media accounts and we progressively did this more as the public voting for the People's Choice Award was opened up. And sharing some of the photographs online along with a couple of Linked in and Twitter posts, actually generated a decent amount of public interest – from within the broader student body, but also strangers to our university. And facilitating that connection between our Law School and the university and the broader public was quite a positive experience – we felt proud of our students, and of our region - the photographs really show off the Newcastle area quite nicely. And ultimately, while the uptake of students themselves choosing to share their own photographs remained quite limited, there was nevertheless quite a lot of social media interest from the posts that we did. And you can see that on the

table on the slide, where we had something like 830 engagements with our Twitter posts and the imagery we shared.

To us, this shows that a Flat Stanley project like this, is different enough and interesting enough that it can have a public facing side to it that could facilitate supporting connections between a Law School and the university and the broader community.

So what are the implications of our Flat Stanley Project for the teaching of Law more generally?

We see our experience with this project as having potential significance for two key areas.

The First is for Distance Learning. Fostering engagement and a sense of connection in online classes, whether synchronous or asynchronous is a difficult task. Perhaps using a Flat Lecturer project as an icebreaker could help connect students to each other in an online cohort, and help capture their engagement in the course materials early – or alternatively be used halfway through a course where motivation might be starting to wane, to help re-capture or loop students back into a course.

Research also shows that distance learners typically rely on narrow set of written learning strategies, and could benefit from broader strategies or learning experiences – which brings us to the second key area we think our project has significance for – the potential for using learning activities or devising assessments that have a visual component.

Now we did not specifically tie our Flat Lecturer project to a literacy or writing task – as is typical of many primary and high school Flat Stanley projects. Our focus was on getting students to think creatively and engage in a hobby that they might find enjoyable, with the hope that this would have positive flow on effects for our classes.

However, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine how a photography activity or assessment – whether or not it also involved a cartoon avatar – might support learning in law – and particularly how law or its effects manifest in society. A photograph could be used in combination with a reflective or explanatory writing task. And if you are interested in this area, the concept of “Photovoice”, where taking a photograph is used as a way for individuals to reflect, learn, talk, and share, could be something you might want to look into further. Photovoice encourages discussion around experiences, and could include experiences of law, or to highlight other things such as highlight social justice issues. So photography activities or assessments could be pitched as critical thinking tasks. In our opinion, asking students to engage creatively in legal thinking, aids their development of the skills necessary to become reflective practitioners but also good problem solvers.

And finally if you are interested in which photograph won our competition overall – it was this entry here which was titled ‘Point of View. It’s dinner time, eat some bamboo and drink coffee’ by student Tabitha Lethlean.

Thank you.