

## Learning Across Boundaries

**Tom Cornford (Lecturer, Law) and Timo Jütten (Lecturer, Philosophy) talk to In Practice about co-teaching a joint module on Law and Philosophy.**

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IP: Could you start by telling us a little about the module. How did the idea for it come about?

Tom: We have two joint programmes in philosophy and law. One is a four-year LLB in Law and Philosophy where students study philosophy as well as all the essential things they need for a qualifying law degree. The second is a three-year BA in Philosophy and Law. Students study a bit of philosophy and a bit of law but not enough to go on and qualify. There is a very fruitful overlap between law and philosophy. Many questions in philosophical ethics and in political philosophy can be seen playing out in practical terms if you look at the law.

Timo: We wanted a module that worked at this intersection. This would give students the idea that they were not just studying two things side by side, but two things that were connected to each other.

Tom: We wanted that synergy. We both agreed that the best way to do this was to run a single module co-taught by people from both departments.

IP: How does that work, in practice? Are you both teaching in each session?

Tom: Someone takes the lead and does the donkey work for each session but, yes, we are both there. So, if Timo is teaching, I sort of disrupt the class and disagree with what's being taught! (Laughs)

IP: What kinds of things come out of that interaction between the two of you?

Timo: Just recently we had a situation where I was lecturing and I tried to confirm a particular conceptual distinction that I thought was useful. At the end Tom said "I think that's not useful at all!" (Laughs). It was good for the students to see how even their lecturers disagree about such issues and whether they're worth discussing. As a matter of fact, a lot of the students were disturbed by this. One of them actually said, "well, you have to tell us which one is right!" So we were able to discuss with them that this isn't the purpose of university education; we're not here to tell them what is right and wrong, they have to figure it out for themselves.

Tom: Yes, I think this is one of the things that will come out of this module which is very productive.

IP: Given the distinctive academic cultures that often surround subjects, what particular opportunities and challenges does teaching across disciplines present?

Timo: Well for one thing, it demonstrates that there is overlap. As Tom said at the beginning, there is a close connection and I think we are making that very clear.

Tom: I don't feel intellectually or ideologically committed to either law or philosophy. I dislike the kinds of attitudes that characterise discipline boundaries and peoples allegiances to their subjects. The way we chose the topic was slightly accidental. When we first talked together, Timo had observed that some of his own interests were linked to what I had been teaching. We wanted to extract from that a single theme which would run the whole length of the year, and the theme we came up with was markets. Once you have a theme, it takes on a life of its own. It doesn't matter that it belongs to law or philosophy. In fact, some of the things we're looking at are really sociology or history, and that suits me fine. More of a challenge is the fact that there aren't many students on the module studying law and philosophy jointly. Most are from the philosophy department so they're a bit bamboozled by the parts that involve a lot of law.

Timo: It is true that a lot of those topics that we discussed do have a philosophical substructure even when they are taught from a legal perspective. The challenge for Tom is to provide an overview of that area of law in general, and then we add our particular interest.

IP: When you bring two subjects together in this way, does the focus become broader, or does it go in the other direction and converge on a niche area where the two things overlap?

Timo: I think it makes it broader rather than narrower.

Tom: I agree with that. It goes back to what we were saying about how we study sociology and history, too.

IP: In English universities students specialise early, compared to, say, in the US or Scotland where they can study a range of subjects at undergraduate level. Does that work against this broader, trans-disciplinary way of looking at themes?

Tom: I admire the American system, the way they have a general social science or arts or science degree. My first degree was in philosophy and it was the most arid, narrow thing you can imagine because it was a little sliver within philosophy. That's

not such a problem if you're an undergraduate in a system where you can choose from different departments.

Timo: That's why it's attractive to study law and philosophy together. The study of law can be quite dry and prescriptive in parts, so it's good to have the opportunity to study it with another subject which serves to elucidate the intellectual foundations of the discipline. Once you see the possibility of studying these things together the challenge is to make that work for the students. Our joint seminar is an attempt to do that.

IP: If the students could only take one thing from this experience, what would you want that to be?

Tom: The idea is to open people's eyes to a different way of looking at things which is not much heard in the mainstream media or in most of what one encounters.

Timo: We want students to start to question the way in which we have come to see the experience of privatisation as normal and progressive. We invite our students to look at controversial cases but also cases that are closer to home, for example, the fundamental limitations to thinking about education in that way.

IP: Would it be true to say that this module, by its very existence, challenges the market metaphor in Higher Education.

Timo: I'm not sure that it does so by its very existence but it does so by its design. We're trying to say to students, "look, you could just go for a law degree and do what's required to become a lawyer, or you could spend some extra time and do some philosophy in addition to it." This module shows that, at its very best, education is more than just a qualification, it's more than just employability, it's more than just a product.

IP: Is this reflected in the way that you assess the module?

Timo: We assess it in the standard way, but maybe that's another way to go for the future, to think about how we can use the peculiarity of the subject matter in order to extract some new way of thinking about how to assess the students.

IP: What have you learned from each other by co-authoring and delivering this module together?

Timo: I learned about the law, but I have also learned from Tom how to give a lecture very calmly and not to overload things.

Tom: It's always interesting to watch someone else teaching. Timo is enthusiastic and that's important. I've been to lectures in subjects in which I wasn't especially interested and enjoyed them because the person's love for the subject was communicated.

IP: Should we work collaboratively as educators more often, do you think?

Tom: I can understand that it is not always possible to make those resources available but it really profits both students and staff. I think that the university should investigate co-teaching with the view to making it more common, especially in interdisciplinary subjects.

Timo: It can certainly make a contribution to research-led teaching. Last week, for example, instead of giving a lecture on prostitution I read a paper on the subject that I am still working on. For both of us, this is an opportunity to try out our ideas. The students profit when they see that what they are being taught is a live issue.

Tom: It can also inspire in students a questioning attitude towards the subject matter that feeds into the way they think about research in the context of their own work.

IP: If a colleague asked you whether collaborative teaching was worth the effort, what would you say?

Tom: I would say yes, it stimulates ideas both on the part of the students and the teachers. It encourages the kind of fruitful endeavour that you want in a university. It resists the focus on metrics and quotas that discourages collaboration.

Timo: It's worth pointing out that collaboration of this sort takes time. You have to try to understand material that might be alien to you. You also have to put yourself out there and admit that you're not an expert on it. So when I was in the lectures that Tom gave about tort law, I was learning new things. I felt as though I was also a student. That's what's good about this form of co-teaching. It helps us become better academics, as researchers and as teachers. The students profit from it because they see that the boundaries between subjects are not necessarily strict. They also learn to problematize the assumptions of their own discipline in the light of the other so I think it is a win-win situation. I would like to see the resources made available to make it more common at Essex.