

Deaths in Prison Custody  
Capstone Course: engaging final  
year law students in service  
learning and public value

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# Introduction

- The University of Limerick Deaths in Custody
- This project has been commissioned by the Inspector of Prisons, Judge Michael Reilly.
- This research will be presented to the Minister for Justice and Equality by the Inspector and funding has been secured to publish this data in a report and place the information in the public domain, recognising the contribution of UL students.

# LA4048 - ADVANCED LAWYERING 2

- Undertake a significant piece of independent activity in legal practice, research or writing.
- Presentations to Inspector
- Funding for publication
- Prison Visit

# Specifics of the Project

- 1. Looking at what data is collected on deaths in custody in other jurisdictions
- 2. Looking at the data on deaths in custody that is available in Ireland.
- 3. Evaluating what is best International Practice having regard to international comparisons.
- 4. Making recommendations as to what data should be collected in Ireland in order to meet best practice and to form a data bank of information.
- They will also give reasons as to why the particular data should be collected and the reasons as to why it is required.
- 5. Report Structure

# Methodology

- **Online Survey 1- administered in January 2015**
- 1. What do you expect to learn from this project?
- 2. What do you expect to achieve from this project?
- 3. How do you think previous modules which you have undertaken have prepared you to be involved in this module?
- 4. What are you most looking forward to as part of this project?
- 5. What are you most apprehensive about in advance of this module?

## **Semi-structured Interviews**

# Pedagogy

- **Capstone Service Learning Course**
- ‘fractioned knowledge’
- ‘culminating experience’
- As Durel notes, the ‘capstone course is defined as a crowning course or experience coming at the end of a sequence of specific courses with the specific objective of integrating a body of relatively fragmented knowledge into a unified whole’ (Durel 1993: p. 223).
- They are in this regard a ‘**liminal threshold** at which students change their status’ (Durel 1993: p. 223)
- Service-learning is a **course-based experiential learning strategy** that engages students in meaningful and relevant **service with a community partner** while employing on-going reflection to draw connections between the service and curriculum course content, thus promoting a scholarship of engagement and civic responsiveness, and strengthening communities )

# Advantages of this approach

1. Promotes **deep learning** by demanding that students continuously navigate between general curriculum content and specific issues/problems

*'Ownership of research'* (Michelle)

*'Depth of reading'* (Michelle)

*If this was just an essay I would throw down anything...Every sentence was important* (Rachel)

*'Lot more tangible, purpose'* (Niall)

Visit to the prison, more attached, more engaged, felt real (Maura)

*Ordinary assignments are robotic...Make sure it was right....taking greater care in what you are saying...Actually important* (Maura)

*'Motivated, vested in it'* (Stephen)

# Advantages

- Given the experiential and active design approach to learning, many commentators assessing the pedagogical benefits of capstone courses have found that they are particularly useful for **embedding generic skills** such as leadership ability, teamwork, public speaking, tolerance of others with different beliefs, and time management.
- *Research skills...Communication skills...teamwork* (Michelle)
- *Report writing* (Kealan)
- *'Other people depending on you, trying a bit harder* (Luke)
- By operating in academic environments that create uncertainty and ambiguity, capstone courses **direct the learner away from familiar and settled patterns of learning**, thereby promoting student independence and creativity.
- *Recommendations by group work is difficult* (Roisin)
- *Identifying what's relevant...[You must] be ok with no right/wrong answers* (Blathnaid)
- *Autonomy, jump at his project rather than normal module...take more from it* (Cillian)
- *So broad...demanded focus, sifting, too much information* (kealan)
- *Is there something massive that we are after missing?* (Kealan)



# Advantages continued

- **Integrative impulse**
- *More real life* (Blathnaid)
- **Synthesising impulse**
- *Helped show skills that were learned over the past four years* (Rachel)
- an excellent conduit for wider professional and civic engagement and provide benefits to the wider community, particularly in **relation to labour input and cost savings**.
- Capstone courses also facilitate transformation. In particular, they **help to change how students identify and perceive themselves** ...thinking and acting like lawyers
- *'abilities feel more valued* (Roisin)
- *Because my opinion was valued, I was more motivated...The publication of the work as recognition* (Cillian)
- They can act as a bridge at important **transitional points in the educational process** – between academia and the world of work, between disciplines, between undergraduate and postgraduate education, and between 'student communities of practice' and 'professional communities of practices'

# Difficulties

- Some academic staff are uncomfortable with **the loss of educational control** – the faculty member in a capstone has to become ‘a guide on the side’ rather than the ‘sage on the stage’ (Todd and Magleby 2005: p. 208).
- Also a concern for students
- *‘not exam focused...different learning method’* (Kealan)
- *‘The challenged posed by the group dynamic’* (Stephen)
- Some students are not **motivated to become self-directed**, more engaged learners (Kerka 2001: p. 4), or may not, for example, develop the ‘soft skills’ as envisaged.
- Capstones by their very nature require **continued input from stakeholders**, the maintenance of networks, the development of feedback loops, the sourcing of useful projects, the establishment of links, and the creation of diverse assessments that will align with the learning outcomes required not just for the capstone but also for the entire program.

# Difficulties continued

- A further criticism of the design of capstone courses is that they are **insufficiently structured and rigorous**, often not providing in-depth coverage of the relevant curriculum (Grigg et al 2004: p.164), or unduly restrictive and limiting (Healey et al 2012: p. 20)
- *Would have preferred more deadlines* (Kealan)
- *Unclear at the start* (Niall)
- *Worried initially* (Michelle)

# Conclusion

- The Advanced Lawyering Project as a **portal**.
- On the one hand it constitutes **an end point** in a particular learning process, providing strong evidence of the extent to which learning outcomes have been achieved for the programme of study.
- On the other hand it acts as a **zone of transition**, enabling students to move into new environments such as work, professional practice or postgraduate study.
- It provides an excellent pedagogical space in which to develop and **hone the soft skills** and creativity of students.
- The same space also offers exciting opportunities for '**town to meet gown**', for universities to build pathways for engagement with civic and professional stakeholders.
- To work effectively, they require a significant **input of logistical time** which will largely be dedicated to preparation, planning and reviewing. They will also require the development and maintenance of strong relationships with stakeholders. Logistical preparation work of this kind may be a new experience for many academics more accustomed to the traditional '**talk and chalk**' familiarity of the lecture hall and seminar room.