

# THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND, TEACH

Nottingham Law School's **Rebecca Huxley-Binns** shares her secrets from the classroom



Have you heard the phrase 'you can't enter the same river twice'? That is how I regard teaching; every class, every law student, every teaching experience and every learning experience is different. That is what makes the classroom such a dynamic and exciting place.

Law students tend to be intelligent, hard working and eager to challenge the status quo. Tutorials can be hard to manage when students become passionate about what is seen as a miscarriage of justice, but that is to be encouraged because an animated student has the potential to become an autonomous and independent student. Many students choose to read law because they want to change the world, or at least make a difference in people's lives. But rules have to be mastered in order to be challenged and sometimes learning those rules can be boring. Sorry, but that's the truth. It's hard, hard work. To get the most of your legal studies, here's my advice.

## TURN UP

Even if you have a dreadful hangover or feel under the weather, try to attend all of your classes. Being there is a major part of study and you will get a sense of collegiality the more you attend classes. Make the most of your peer group. They will be your support when you need it most.

## ENGAGE

You have a choice. Tutors would like you to choose to be independent and autonomous learners, but we cannot force you. It is only by choosing to engage with your programme and the study of the law that you can maximise your potential, and make informed decisions about the sort of person, and the sort of professional, you want to be.

## READ

You will discover quickly that getting a law degree takes more reading than you might have imagined. Law doesn't all have to make sense the first time you read it, but if you haven't read it at all, you simply will not understand the discussion. Most tutors do not mind if you turn up with unresolved issues. Indeed, ironing out problems or misunderstandings is one of the purposes of a tutorial. And if you are prepared to talk about what you have found difficult, that might generate a useful debate. Do make use of your tutor; they are there to help. But you will not be told the answer. You have to work that out for yourself (and beware that there may not be one).

## LISTEN

Studying is not just about reciting what the professor tells you, but hearing and acting on the advice. If you listen to what is being asked in tutorials, you are better able to answer the question than simply give a general 'yes' or 'no' response. This is key to success in assessments and in being a good practising lawyer, too.

## STUDY

You have to be prepared to work on your own. Legal study can be lonely and you have to concentrate to understand what the law is, and what it should be (which are sometimes two different things). Shut your door, turn off the mobile phone, log out of Facebook and allow no distractions. We all have to do it, law teachers too!

## THINK

Students often underestimate the importance of the thinking time that is needed to condense learning and to reflect on what it means. Thinking space provides room to process learning and embed it in your mind. It also allows you to address what you think of the law. Even when you are busy at study, work or play, try to find a quiet space to think about what you have learned and what it means to your understanding of the law and legal system.

## SPEAK

Always have a go, whether in tutorials or in more formal assessments. Even if you're not sure about the law, try to state it as you understand it verbally in a way that is as clear as possible. Too often we find ourselves knowing what we want to say but not able to put it into words; the best way to tackle that is to try, try again and keep trying.

On top of working well in the classroom, try to get as much work experience as possible in as many different legal settings as you can, such as courts, solicitors' firms, barristers' chambers, local authorities and legal departments of businesses. Don't forget the availability of voluntary work such as pro bono. To make your CV stand out, show a dedication to your university as well by standing for election in your students' law society, helping at open days and opting for extra-curricular activities such as mooting.

Rebecca Huxley-Binns is a senior lecturer at Nottingham Law School and winner of the 2010 Law Teacher of the Year award.

## REBECCA HUXLEY-BINNS



Rebecca Huxley-Binns started teaching part-time in 1993 in a number of local colleges in her home town of Nottingham. "I taught whatever I was asked to teach (and whatever they would pay me to teach) including A-level law, GCSE law, GNVQS, BTECs; I taught nursery nurses, sports centre managers, purchase and supply agents, trade union officers, the young, the not-so-young and sometimes the quite old," she explains. Most of these teaching roles came about after Huxley-Binns posted her CV to the head of law of each college. By Spring 1996 she was teaching 25-30 hours a week. "In September 1996, I got my first full-time job when I was appointed head of law at Franklin College in Grimsby," she adds. In 2002 she was appointed senior lecturer in law at Nottingham Trent University.