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Unpublished: 01/07/2016

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

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Recommended citation(APA):

Stevenson, L. (2016). *Reflecting on placement experiences: using clinical legal education to promote student engagement with the complexities of access to justice*. Paper presented at International Journal of Clinical Legal Education and the Association for Canadian Clinical Legal Education joint Conference, Toronto, Canada.

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Reflecting on placement experiences: Using clinical legal education to promote student engagement with the complexities of access to justice.

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Clinical Legal Education provides an opportunity for students to gain a better understanding of barriers to justice in the community. In an era when access to justice is threatened on many fronts (Law Council of Australia, Inquiry Into Access to Justice, 2009), student awareness of the complex factors that define access to justice is of utmost importance. Today's students will be tomorrow's reformers; and effective management of the risks and rewards for students engaged in access to justice programs will help motivate future lawyers to enhance access to justice opportunities for the vulnerable.

This paper will describe the author's experience of using reflective journals as part of a clinical legal placement subject. The subject encourages greater student appreciation of the underlying difficulties of access to justice first through classroom learning and then by placement experiences at community legal centres. Reflection on these experiences enables students to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding access to justice. Many students begin the class with preconceptions that legal issues are the largest barriers for vulnerable clients. However, lack of competency and capacity of such clients, often means that legal assistance plays a small role compared to other interventions, such as psychological or financial help.

Through the reflection component of the subject, students are encouraged to explore access to justice concerns relative to their placement. They demonstrate a deeper understanding of barriers to justice by exploring issues such as the effective management of emotion, which additional services (such as social work) impact the success of a legal action and how the physical environment may impact a client's ability to effectively communicate. The reflections often reveal a deeper comprehension of the multifaceted barriers to justice based on exposure to real clients. Frequently, the students reflect on how these experiences, and this deeper understanding, may affect their career choices and future practice of law. They often express their frustration with the current system and their desire to reduce access to justice barriers in the future. The reflective component of this course highlights how malleable the student perspective on access to justice is when students are exposed to clients who are experiencing inequity based on legal, social and personal barriers.

This paper will explore how the use of reflection methods, including weekly journals and sharing through oral presentations, provides tools for deepening student engagement with access to justice issues and reduces the risks that otherwise talented and motivated

students will prematurely disengage from access to justice issues. As confirmed by feedback from former students feedback, for at least some students the deeper personal exploration achieved through the reflection exercises will help to ensure their continued involvement in access to justice issues after graduation.