

“Networking: A (Un)Necessary Evil in an Unsettled Market?”

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Introduction

Clinical Legal Education (CLE) involves training the solicitors of tomorrow to be the best they can be whilst acting ethically and with integrity. As educators, one of the ways we do this is by simulating the professional environment for our students as much as possible, for example by using real-life scenarios in our teaching and by encouraging participation in pro bono legal clinics.

However, when our students leave higher education and join the workforce, a key skill they will be expected to have attained by employers is that of networking. This is because, in the current marketplace, it is no longer enough for lawyers to be able to understand and apply the law to complex situations. They also need to be able to get along with clients, colleagues and other lawyers – and help their employers win and retain business.

Networking can be an unpopular concept, and an anxious prospect for many of our students. Yet the very act of working with peers under the guidance of legal

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practitioners as part of CLE is, technically, networking. Student engagement with our various workshops, competitions, pro bono offerings and social events fall into the same category.

Since so much of CLE therefore involves networking, and since it is highly valued by employers, is networking any different from the other vital skills taught in CLE, such as drafting or advocacy? Seen in this light, are we doing our students a disservice if we *don't* teach them how to network properly?

And if networking is something that *ought* to be taught, what teaching methodology/ies should we employ in doing so?

To explore this theme, we will consider the role that networking plays in the Diploma in Professional Legal Practice (DPLP) at the University of Glasgow. The DPLP is a one year, vocational postgraduate course regulated by the Law Society of Scotland and designed to prepare Scots Law students for legal practice, and our student numbers at the University of Glasgow range from 150 to 200 each academic year. Our students go on to complete a two year traineeship either in-house or in a private law firm.

We will examine networking in the context of the Scottish legal community. This community is relatively small and so, given many of our practitioners are actively involved in CLE in one way or another, how students network can have a huge impact on their career in a short timeframe. We will also examine networking in the context of an unsettled market and political climate.

What is “networking”?

Networking is an amorphous concept. Some studies suggest that it originated in Britain during the industrial revolution in the late 18th and 19th centuries, as businesses could expand more rapidly and it was “not enough to develop a few partners and customers then work with them for the rest of your life, as often happened with simple artisans and craftspeople”². Its original focus was on capitalising on existing business relationships and building new ones, but in the 21st century the meaning has expanded to include research peers meeting each other to exchange ideas, parents meeting to share child-rearing tips... there are endless permutations. Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary defines a “network” as “a group of people who exchange information and contacts for professional or social purposes”. A colleague, however, once described it as “the worst part about being a lawyer...”!

Our interpretation of “networking” in the context of CLE simply means students meeting with each other, their tutors and other legal professionals, and beginning to grow relationships that will (hopefully) assist and advance their career.

Why does networking matter?

As well as networking being an opportunity for students to build professional links that should stand them in good stead in their personal careers, it is also one of the tools students need to enable them to maintain and even help grow their firm’s

² http://changingminds.org/disciplines/networking/networking_history.htm

business when they join the legal profession. The ability to speak to people, be interested in them (and come across as such), ask questions, hold conversations, is (or should be) at the heart of what lawyers do because law is, essentially, a “people business”. People do business with people, and clients want lawyers who are not only excellent at the legal element of their job but who are decent and personable. Particularly in an uncertain market in which law firms are increasingly competitive on price, it is strong lawyer-client relationships that can make or break a pitch or fee negotiation, and can encourage a client to stay or to take their business to a different firm. The ability to forming solid relationships with clients as early and as effortlessly as possible therefore sets trainees apart from their peers and pegs them as “ones to watch”.

In addition, there’s never a guarantee that a trainee will be kept on by their training firm or organisation, a particular issue in Scotland where there are more qualified solicitors than there are jobs. Skill in networking directly leads to client popularity, and by honing this skill early on, students are making themselves that bit more indispensable to their employers through helping them maintain and grow their client base.

The aforementioned uncertain Scottish legal market, driven by our current political and financial climate, provides additional context for student networking:

Brexit v globalisation

At the time of writing, it is anybody's guess how Brexit is going to impact on the legal market long-term – but what is certain is that the short-term uncertainty is unsettling, for law firms and their clients.

In contrast to the UK's exit from the EU, we are seeing increasing globalisation, as one by one Scotland's oldest law firms are absorbed by larger international firms. In 2014, only 5 years after celebrating 250 years in business, renowned Scottish law firm Dundas & Wilson merged with international firm CMS Cameron McKenna. Similarly, McGrigor Donald became part of Pinsent Masons in 2012, and most recently, Maclay Murray & Spens merged with Dentons in 2017. Further, the recent recession has resulted in fewer job opportunities in-house, whether in government departments, large businesses or financial institutions.

Whilst the future of what is left of Scotland's independent law firms will be interesting to watch in light of this trend, what is certain is that tomorrow's lawyers will need to be adaptable, flexible and resilient – and will need to be able to build strong relationships quickly with people (peers, clients, potential employers) the world over. What is that, if not networking?

Scottish independence

Scotland voted to remain in the UK in its 2014 referendum. Despite this, and largely due to how Scotland voted in the Brexit referendum when the results are considered from a geographical perspective, a second independence referendum cannot be ruled out at some point in the (near) future. Whatever the views of Scottish lawyers on Scottish independence, there can be little doubt that a further referendum would result in further uncertainty. Again, though, it is the lawyers who can build and maintain strong client relationships that will be better able to withstand whatever the result may be.

Changes to qualification route in England

A major CLE issue south of the border is the forthcoming change to the route to legal qualification in England and Wales. The Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) is introducing a new, centralised assessment for all prospective solicitors. This new approach involves an overhaul of the current system, which more closely mirrors the Scottish system (law degree, Diploma, two year traineeship). Prospective solicitors in England and Wales will no longer be obliged to study particular courses or subjects and, instead, will simply have to pass what the SRA suggests will be a rigorous assessment. The Law Society of Scotland, our SRA equivalent, has said that it has no current plans to follow the SRA's approach, but is nevertheless watching with interest – as are Scottish legal educators and practitioners. And where our English counterparts go, we sometimes follow.

Networking: our approach on the DPLP

Networking has always played a large part in the DPLP at the University of Glasgow. Since we joined as Directors relatively recently (2016/17), we have retained a focus on networking, but approached it from a more informal perspective in an attempt to make it slightly less intimidating for students and to encourage participation. Below are examples of this change of approach, as well as statistics on its success, gleaned directly from student feedback.

Introductory Week

At the beginning of the academic year, our students join us for an intensive week of workshops aimed at helping them transition from the academic undergraduate law degree to the vocational, practical DPLP – a transition that can, understandably, be slightly intimidating for some. In addition, our students come from Universities across Scotland, therefore many of them have not only moved to a new city but have left their existing friendship groups behind. To help our students not only feel at home at the University of Glasgow (and in Glasgow more widely) but to begin to make new friendships – and therefore to begin to build their network – from day one, we have incorporated the following changes into Introductory Week:

- in 2017/18, we introduced a drinks event at the end of Introductory Week, giving students a chance to get to know each other and the DPLP team;
- also in 2017/18, we created a “treasure hunt”, putting students into teams of 12, with each team containing students from all home institutions. Teams had

until the end of Introductory Week to follow clues and complete challenges around the University and local area, with a mock “awards ceremony” held at the closing drinks event; and

- in 2018/19, we adopted a conference-style approach and held the morning of Introductory Week, when all our students are together for the first time, in a local hotel. This allowed us to seat students in their treasure hunt teams, facilitating introductions and encouraging networking at the earliest stage possible – which we had found was more difficult to achieve in the usual classroom / lecture theatre setting in 2017/18.

We surveyed our students at the end of the academic year in 2017/18, and found that 65% felt the networking during Introductory Week was useful. We still have some way to go, but hope that the additional changes made in September 2018 for the 2018/19 cohort will lead to even more positive feedback.

Glasgow Legal Network

The Glasgow Legal Network (GLN) is a network of Scottish legal professionals from all areas of practice and at all levels of qualification, from trainee to partner, in-house lawyer to judge. The practitioners involved not only have an interest in CLE, but are passionate about student development and fully support students being given the opportunity to practise their networking skills with them. As such, we invite all members of the GLN to come and meet our students over drinks and canapés once per semester. Although always an excellent initiative, we have recently relaxed the

DPLP's approach to the GLN as follows, with the aim of making it more appealing to students:

- attendance is no longer compulsory;
- we no longer enforce a dress code or require our students to wear name badges; and
- we schedule GLN events on days when the majority of the cohort are on campus for classes, making attendance more convenient.

These changes have had a positive effect. In the past, when attendance, business dress and name badges were compulsory, some students would simply turn up for two minutes to sign in, look uncomfortable and leave! Having relaxed the approach, feedback suggests that more students are willing to attend, given the more laid-back environment. Indeed, numbers increased (which is surprising, given it was supposed to be "compulsory" in previous years!). One student said that they "attended the first event and thought it was fantastic - was able to mingle and meet great contacts", while another suggested it was "good fun and a useful way to meet legal professionals".

Mentoring

We have introduced a mentoring scheme, whereby we connect students with legal professionals in their chosen field of interest. Once we have facilitated these connections, it is over to the student and their mentor to arrange whatever suits them, ranging from phone conversations or meetings over coffee, to CV advice, to work shadowing. This works best when students (and the mentors) put in effort. One

student said that the scheme was “insightful” and that they “gained a good contact for the future”.

Competitions

We participate in the International Client Consultation Competition (ICCC) and the International Negotiation Competition, running heats for DPLP students and coaching our own finalists for the Scottish and, when successful, international finals. In April 2018, the University of Glasgow’s DPLP team came second in the international final of the ICCC – a phenomenal opportunity for our finalists to meet and network with peers from all over the world, as well as the judges and organisers of the competition.

Building on this success and to further enhance student opportunities for skills development, including in relation to networking, we entered the UK Mediation Competition in 2018/19. We were delighted to take joint first place and will be hosting the 2019/20 event, another excellent chance for our students to put their networking skills to good use.

Pro bono

Pro bono work, such as legal clinics, obviously has innumerable benefits for students and for the community they serve. Specifically considering the networking perspective, it is clear that working for “clients” under the supervision of qualified

legal practitioners is an invaluable opportunity for students to practice their networking skills.

At the University of Glasgow, we do not run a “traditional” law clinic. However, we have a number of initiatives under the umbrella of Glasgow Open Justice or “GO Justice”. Opportunities include placements and work experience opportunities with charitable partners, e.g. Shelter Scotland or the Citizens Advice Bureau. DPLP students also have the option to take part in our Corporate Law Advisory Support Project (“CLASP”). CLASP allows DPLP students to provide advice to student start-up businesses. The University of Glasgow has a flourishing Business School, where numerous students are entrepreneurs and keen to set up new businesses. Our students, under the supervision of qualified solicitors, meet with these clients and offer support and advice, making them “lawyer-ready”. General queries involve which business vehicle to use and clarification on the business’s intellectual property rights. We have plans to expand CLASP to include advice on employment law, as many of the clients require support in that area.

Feedback from students who have taken part in CLASP is positive. From a networking perspective, our students gain huge benefits from their involvement.

Tutors and peers

All DPLP teaching is carried out by qualified, practising Scottish solicitors. Class sizes are limited to 12 students per tutor, and the practical nature of DPLP teaching means that each of our students has the chance to not only learn from, but to get to know,

experts in a variety of legal fields. Each year, at least one student is offered work experience by a tutor, and often this converts into a two year traineeship – opportunities that would not have arisen for these students if it weren't for the strong relationships they had built with their tutors.

Similarly, students network from day one on the DPLP, working with their peers on a daily basis and building strong relationships from the outset. There are also a number of committees with which our students can get involved. Some are student-only (e.g. our Social Committee and Social Media Committee) and some involve staff (e.g. our DPLP Committee and Staff Student Liaison Committee), but all provide an opportunity for students to extend their networks.

Given the changes implemented, we are keen to obtain feedback from students on a regular basis. We were delighted to note that 86% found Diploma networking events useful in general in 2017/18 – an increase of 45% on 2016/17.

Given the positive feedback our networking-focused initiatives are receiving from students, and the impact they are therefore having on the student experience, we will be continuing to develop these initiatives as well as new ones, and continuing our informal approach, for future cohorts.

Pedagogical perspective

As demonstrated above, networking is an integral part of the DPLP and, we would argue, CLE more broadly. But this begs the question: can networking be taught?

Should it be? If it should, then *how* should it be taught? And taking this one step further: can, and should, networking be assessed as part of CLE?

We raised these questions at the 6th ENCLE Conference, *Clinical Legal Education: Innovating Legal Education in Europe*. They inspired many of our peers at that conference to discuss their approaches to student networking with us, and engendered healthy debate on best practice.

The consensus seemed to be that whilst there is certainly a place for networking in CLE, whether it can actually be *taught* is less clear.

Teaching networking?

From our perspective on the DPLP at the University of Glasgow, we *are* teaching networking – but our students don't necessarily realise that this is the case. Networking is embedded on the DPLP. Our students start to build their network from their very first day with us, and develop it throughout the course through group and class work, involvement in competitions and committees, and attendance at our networking events. However, we do not provide any lectures or workshops on "How to Network". Nor is there any coercion to attend networking events, meaning there is little resentment from students. Instead, we foster a safe, non-judgmental environment and, from there, encourage networking skills to develop naturally through the various opportunities we present daily to students for practising them. This is because we believe that best practice on a vocational, professional course such as the DPLP must always be that the best way to learn is by doing – and it is no

different with networking. We further believe that our informal approach, and the environment we create, enables even our more introverted students to begin to embrace networking.

Assessing networking?

The DPLP requires all students to be assessed on their in-class participation, as well as their professionalism in their relationships with peers and tutors. Does this mean that we are assessing networking? In some respects, we are assessing it indirectly. However, we do not necessarily believe that networking should be directly, formally assessed as part of any CLE programme. It is difficult to imagine introducing an assessment whereby we create a mock networking event, hire actors to play “clients” and then grade our students on how well they get on with them. Our view – based on what has been a success for us on the DPLP – is that it is better to wrap any assessment of networking into a broader assessment of student participation in the subject matter and professionalism towards others.

Conclusion

Our experience, and our discussions with our peers at the 6th ENCLE Conference, leads us to the view that networking *is* a necessary evil from a CLE perspective. However, that does not mean it has to be an intimidating chore for students – and we believe we can avoid it being so by adopting the DPLP’s model of encouraging students to practise networking skills in a relaxed, non-judgmental environment.