

## **Why do I have to go to class and do all the reading?**

### *The argument for complete freedom*

There is a school of thought which says that we should simply let the students do whatever they want: i.e. they can do the work whenever they like and just turn up for the exams and good luck to them. If this sounds appealing, you should note that the academics who propound this approach will also refuse, under any circumstances, to talk to you about your studies out of hours if you have made the decision to work on your own and not to go to timetabled seminars. So complete freedom also carries with it complete responsibility.

*So, why do I need to have read all the stuff before the seminar? Why can't I read it later?*

There are two reasons why you need to have done all the reading before the seminar, and to have thought about it. The principal reason is that learning is about *a moment of commitment*. You have to know the material at some point: you will not progress as an intellect unless you honestly attempt to wrestle with the material, to come to know the material, to test your knowledge and your views in the discussion that is the seminar. If you don't read the stuff before talking it through (arguing it through?) in the seminar because you are constantly putting off the moment at which you are supposed to *know* it. If you don't have this moment of commitment to the material before moving on to a moment of commitment with the next seminar, then you will not be getting the benefits of the progression of learning through the course.

You will also be one of those students about whom academics inwardly roll their eyes and dig their nails into the palms of their hands, who pitch up in office hours with a long list of questions which they should have been able to answer if they had gone to seminars and if they had had the educational benefit of going to each seminar and learning the material bit-by-bit. Instead, you become one of those zombies who drift through the university life never actually knowing anything, panicking about exam revision too close to the date, and under-achieving. No academic minds at all long lists of questions from students who have been doing all the work and keeping up with the course: precisely because their questions are so much more informed and necessarily sensible.

### *Seminars are rubbish if no-one has done the work*

From an legal academic's point of view, at some point she has made the decision to pursue a vocation in education and in research instead of becoming a millionaire in a large law firm. The whole rationale for that decision was that, in part, teaching law to intelligent, motivated students would be far more fulfilling than an advising the sorts of people whom millionaire lawyers advise. So, there is nothing more dispiriting than sitting

in a seminar with a group of students most of whom have not done any work. Here's why.

Seminars require that everyone has done the reading so that everyone can discuss the material. Seminars are not about teaching you the material again: that is the point of lectures. To develop your intellect you need to look behind the law, think about its context, think about the claims made for different models in the academic literature. So, if no-one or insufficient people have done the work, then the seminar cannot fulfil its function.

If you are one of those students who asks "how do I get a first?" but who has not done all of the reading, then you are really missing the point. On the plus side, you are not alone. On the minus side, you will not get a first.

Furthermore, remember there is an ethic bound up in being a law student. There is nothing more offensive than students who do little work and then go to seminars to take notes off other students who have done the work. It doesn't happen in my seminars quite simply because I throw out everyone who has not made a genuine effort to do the work. A "genuine effort" means reading the assigned textbook, case law and journal reading; and if it doesn't make sense then reading it again, and thinking about it. And if it doesn't make sense after a few attempts, then your participation in seminar should be about discussing with the seminar leader what did not make sense: you will not be the only one. The ethic of being a law student is discussed elsewhere.