

## **Doing by Learning**

**The introduction of activity based learning aids into undergraduate legal professional practice courses.**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to explore the value of activity-based learning in Higher Education classrooms for students of law. The authors were keen to introduce activities and learning aids that would not only enhance the learner's experience, but also cultivate better learner retention levels, while keeping adult evening learners alert and engaged.

The authors initially outline the learning aids that were developed and implemented in their efforts to enhance the modules taught on a legal practice course. The success or otherwise of these activities is then considered through the analysis of data collected from the students who took part in various activities, across a range of modules. The method of data collected was by way of both questionnaire to provide quantitative feedback and also one to one interviews/questionnaires for more qualitative feedback.

The literature review looks at the development of research in the area of activity-based learning in higher education generally, and the paper seeks to draw contrasts and comparisons with the efforts of other authors, while acknowledging the findings which the authors could incorporate in future modules. For example, the authors hope to identify how best to utilise activities in light of the 'students attention clock'.

The paper concludes with a discussion on the findings of the submission in view of the data analysed and the review of literature and best practice in the field. The authors will also consider future work which would be appropriate to the area.

The paper is to be accompanied by a "poster" exhibiting examples of some of the activities that are the subject matter of this paper and that were created and used by the authors in the course of their teaching. Readers are invited to sample the activities for themselves at the International Conference on Engaging Pedagogy in Dublin on December 14<sup>th</sup> 2012. For those who cannot make the conference, a smaller selection of the activities are included in the appendix to this document.

## **KEYWORDS**

Activity, activities, law, interactive, learning aids, learner retention, active learning, role play, jigsaws, crosswords, mock files, legal classroom, undergraduate, higher education, interaction, retaining information, applied learning, alert, engaged students, activity-based learning.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The authors herein initially collaborated on the delivery of a number of modules on a legal training course for the academic year 2011/2012. This collaboration is continuing in the 2012/2013 academic year. The findings in this paper are based on an analysis of the 2011/2012 year. The course on which this occurs is accredited by the Higher Education Training and Awards Council (HETAC) at level seven on their scale. The course is aimed at students wishing to complete a qualification which will give them the academic experience and knowledge necessary to pursue a role as a Legal Executive. Delivery and assessment are rolled out in separate campuses in Dublin and Cork simultaneously. It is also open to students to take the course online as the lectures are recorded and uploaded to an intranet with all of the course notes and copies of activities. Classes are on weeknights from 6pm to 10pm, and the course can be taken over one or two years. The authors were keen to introduce learning activities that would engage the students in the somewhat heavy legal material being taught. Activities were also introduced with the aim of enhancing learner retention levels, as will be seen from the literature review and findings below.

## **LEARNING ACTIVITIES APPROPRIATE TO LEGAL EXECUTIVES**

Peterson (2001) citing Wright, Bitner and Zeitham believed that “lecturing viewed the mind as a empty slate rather than a muscle that needed exercising through constant challenge” and it is evident from research literature that a learner centred approach in the form of active learning techniques engages students and is considered a more effective form of teaching than the more traditional lecturing style. Indeed one of the objectives of the Bologna Process (Bologna Declaration 1999) is to ensure that all teaching methods (tutorials and lectures) are student centred.

In support of this belief a comparison can be made between tutorials which are traditionally learner focused and lectures which are traditionally lecturer centred. The traditional lecturing paradigm is not learner centred. However by incorporating activities into lectures, it is possible to adopt a more student focused (and almost tutorial like approach) to lectures. So while standard lecture format does have its place in the scheme of learning, research strongly indicates that it can “*make students too passive and listless, and perhaps the greatest disservice of all, it can render them voiceless and unable to think critically for themselves*” (McCarthy, 2002, p. 31).

Many lecturers (and the educational theorists cited in the literature review below) believe that students are able to learn better and more thoroughly by varying the ways in which information is delivered. Decades ago, any learning that involved more than simple lectures and regurgitation was considered

interactive. However, students typically need a combination of passive and active learning in order to master concepts. If everything is interactive students run the risk of being over stimulated or losing track of the main objectives of the lecture. However, if teaching is entirely passive students may find their interest and focus declining. Therefore lecturers must strike a balance between passive and learning techniques such as lecturing and independent reading with more interactive activities which incorporate learner collaboration or technology, the two approaches work best when used in conjunction with each other.

In devising the activities appropriate to student needs the authors considered the key roles of the Legal Executive within the legal office in an effort to ensure that the activities introduced would assist in the practical application of each element of the modules on the course.

During the course a variety of activities were introduced by the authors. These activities included jigsaws; crosswords; letter writing; negotiations; mock legal scenarios; mock legal files; presentations and group work. For ease of review and demonstration the activities introduced can be grouped under three headings, namely, writing activities, legal research activities and role play activities.

### Writing Activities

Legal Executives must often write or edit a variety of documents as part of their daily duties. These include memos, briefs, legal documents and letters. Classroom activities may focus on legal writing of actual documents and letters or students may be given a case or instructions to base a brief or letter on.

As part of the Conveyancing Law module students were presented with a mock file containing a variety of legal documents and letters which were used on a day to day basis as part of a standard residential conveyance. These documents were arranged in date order and assembled together in such a way as to resemble a legal practitioner's conveyancing file. There were gaps left in a selection of these documents on purpose. These documents were then given to students requiring them to complete the document by inserting missing words, paragraphs or details.

### Legal Research Activities

Conducting legal research is a key part of a Legal Executive's role within a firm. This typically includes researching information pertinent to a case such as past cases and precedent, new topics, changes in legislation and other related legal matters. Legal research classes may include activities that help students learn about the different types of research required of a Legal Executive and how to actually

carry out the research as well as allowing students to familiarise themselves with the use of online legal databases and search engines.

To ease students into the concept of legal research as part of the Employment Law module students were asked initially to find newspaper articles relating to employment matters by using common search engines (such as Google). Students were then asked to post their findings to the relevant Discussion Forum in order for fellow students to read and prepare for class. The informed student then shared both the research methods and findings with the class by way of presentation. Once students were comfortable with the idea of finding information and using it in a group setting they were then asked to take the next step and use legal databases (such as Bailii or Westlaw) to find relevant cases in the area and follow the same process.

### Role play Activities

Legal Executives as part of their role within a legal office must liaise with a variety of people including clients, colleagues, solicitors and other professionals. Whether the Legal Executive is discussing documents, speaking to clients or confirming details with other professionals, effective communication skills are key to their role. One way to develop appropriate legal communication techniques is the use of role play. Lecturers can set up mock situations for the students to act out. It is also worth using other students as judges as they are often very astute about what constitutes a good effort and will almost always be harsher than the lecturer who can always disagree, overrule, explain or amplify learner comments and decisions.

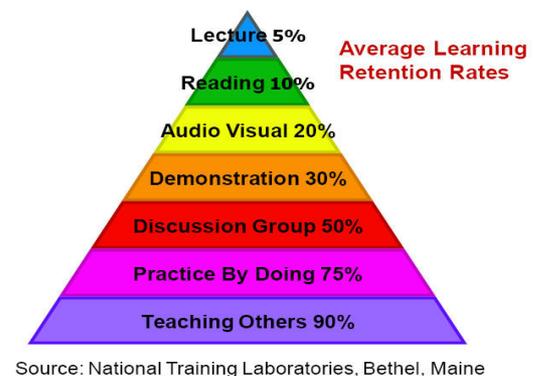
An excellent opportunity to use role play arose during the Employment Law module when lecturers had an opportunity to provide students with scenarios adapted from practice experience. The role plays served to facilitate students' research, preparation, group work, communication and presentation skills on both the substantial and procedural aspects of employment law. For instance the Rights Commissioner scenario that was used not only dealt with the substantive law on a client's right to written terms and conditions of employment, but also would also have served to enlighten students as to the procedure which is followed in bringing such a claim and the etiquette expected at that particular redress forum.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The relevant areas of literature when discussing the introduction of activities relates to subjects such as learner retention levels and the value or otherwise of different teaching initiatives in this regard and further the analysis of the effect of different types of activities and learning aids on the learning experience. During the literature review our primary focus will be on the Learning Pyramid, active learning and the development of learning aids.

### The Learning Pyramid

The learning pyramid is a much-documented (a search for “Learning Pyramid” on Google reveals over thirty million web pages) guide for lecturers to use to keep in mind when designing effective teaching resources. The learning pyramid has become popular despite (or possibly because of) the fact that the original data used in its compilation has been lost. Nonetheless, the pyramid gives the lecturer food for thought when planning a module or lesson.



Sousa (2001), Danielson (2002) and Drewes and Milligan (2003) all provided commentary on the Learning Pyramid and referenced studies based on the learning pyramid which showed that students retained knowledge best by “teaching others”. In an effort to find ways to enhance delivery of the programme, knowledge garnered from studies of the Learning Pyramid provided a platform for introducing “teaching others” into the students’ learning environment.

As the better retention rates are at the bottom of the pyramid, it becomes apparent that lecturers need to come up with ways to incorporate models of teaching that involved the “lower”, more productive end of the Learning Pyramid. Lally et al. (2007) argue that the Learning Pyramid should be relied upon with caution. They point out that the original research has been lost and the same publication (Lally et al., 2007, p. 70) goes on to hypothesise that “*isolating the various methods is nearly impossible in the process of good teaching: a balanced combination based on content, teacher background knowledge, resources, and student characteristics, is likely to be the most effective.*” The authors agree with this

sentiment. All of the teaching methods have their place in affording students the oxymoron of a varied yet structured routine.

The “teaching others” approach was introduced into modules by the authors in asking students to take time to prepare a presentation on a topic, legal case or past exam question and present this to the class.

### Active Learning and the Development of Learning Aids

Active learning incorporates activities that are second most likely to promote learning retention according to the learning pyramid. “*Active performance reduces the most significant impediments to learning in Higher Education: passivity, invisibility, anonymity, and lack of accountability*” (Schulman, 2005, p. 57).

Student feedback, reflection on leading pedagogical theory, and classroom experience have all informed the development of teaching materials and the delivery of same during the relevant course. In order to “move down” the Learning Pyramid it is necessary to incorporate learning aids that increase learner retention. Accordingly, the authors developed appropriate learning aids for the Employment Law and Conveyancing Law modules. An example is the role plays used during the Employment Law course.

Franklin (2010) believes that the benefits of incorporating what he refers to as “games” into teaching law are manifold. Some of Franklin’s key points include the fact that it makes learning more experiential and creative. In addition, activities can draw learner’s attention to parts of legal thinking that they might otherwise gloss over.

When incorporating active learning techniques, reliance on the lecturer as the conveyer of all knowledge is reduced and the traditional ‘chalk and talk’ style of lecturing is transformed from a passive to an active learning environment. Examples of active learning activities in a lecture setting range from quick surveys, short exercises, quizzes, pair and group discussion, role playing, brainstorming or watching ‘YouTube’ clips. Active learning can take advantage of the advancements in visual pedagogy with various forms of media offering unique teaching possibilities. Huxham (2005) describes such techniques in a lecture setting as ‘interactive windows’ where the lecture is interspersed with activities.

Biggs (1996) described interactive windows in lectures as a means of engaging the learner in the sense that they are seeking to develop knowledge, applying that knowledge to different contexts, relating the information presented to their own experiences so in effect they are “*deep learning*”. Jenkins, 1997

states that valuable classroom time should not be spent on the low level goal of conveying chunks of material but rather spent on deep learning goals namely analyses, synthesis and application.

Machemer and Crawford, (2007, citing Mill, C) found that active learning techniques, such as problem solving techniques within the lecture framework creates a positive learner attitude towards the subject and is perceived by students to improve exam performance. However, often the success of introducing activities is dependent on the students appreciating the role active learning will play in their understanding of the topic.

Further, Johnstone and Percival (1976) found that lecturers who adopted a varied approach and interspersed their lectures with some form of deliberate break usually commanded a better attention span from the class. This is supported by Burns (1985) who identified a lapse of attention fifteen to twenty minutes into a lecture at which point an activity can be used in a lecture setting to restarts the student's attention clock. Bennett (2010) makes reference to his success in "*lecturing in chunks interspersed with other learning activities*" and so counteracting the effect of the attention clock on students' attention spans.

However, it must be pointed out and acknowledged that the introduction of active learning involves more demands on the lecturer's preparation time for designing and testing new techniques. As such, this form of teaching by its very nature necessitates more creativity and initiative from lecturers.

## **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

In order to assess the success of the introduction of activities, students from the 2011/2012 course were surveyed. Surveys which contained a selection of both quantitative and qualitative questions were sent to a focus group of participants and further qualitative interviews were also carried out. The focus group to which the surveys were sent totalled eleven students of whom six completed and returned their survey.

In respect of the quantitative element of the surveys, students' replies were as follows: 100% of students indicated that the use of activities provided a better understanding of the topics, increased retention levels with regard to the topic and improved engagement with the topic.

When asked to indicate whether working in groups or working on their own when completing activities was more successful with regard understanding and retention, 83% stated that working in groups was more successful while all believed that the use of activities increased engagement in the topic.

The final elements of the quantitative portion of the survey asked students to list the activities in order of personal preference ranging from most beneficial to least beneficial and also to list the activities in order ranging from most enjoyable to least enjoyable.

With regard to the benefit of activities and on correlation of responses the students ranked the activities in the following order: the review and creation of a mock file; participating in role plays; making jigsaws; reviewing past exam papers; completing crosswords; researching and preparing articles and cases and finally presenting articles and cases to the class.

Upon correlation of responses with regard the enjoyment factor gained from activities, it is observed that students ranked the activities as follows: participating in role plays; making jigsaws; completing crosswords; presenting articles and cases to the class; reviewing past exam papers and finally researching and preparing articles and cases.

With regard to the qualitative portion of the survey, students were asked a selection of questions to which they could respond in an open format. The first question enquired as to whether the participants had enjoyed the activities which were introduced. All students replied in the positive. Some of the specific answers included;

*“Yes I did. I though the role plays for Employment Law were very beneficial and gave an insight how the rights commissioner and the employment appeals tribunal work. I found this very applicable as if I was faced with the same situation I would have the knowledge on how to take a case against my employer and the necessary steps that are involved to bring a case.” (sic)*

*“Yes very much so it also allows you to get involved and I firmly believe that they did the class a world of good. Excellent idea!” (sic)*

Students were next asked to explain to what extent they believed the introduction of activities assisted in their learning. While it was agreed that the activities assisted them in learning, there were differing opinions as to why. This appeared to be based on the individual student’s particular approaches to learning.

*“By introducing activities they assisted us in the learning experience and gave me a better understanding of the topic at hand. They also gave the opportunity to ask more questions.” (sic)*

*“I am more practical when it comes to learning new things, so when the activities were brought in, it helped me a lot.” (sic)*

Having previously been asked to rank the activities, students were then asked to explain why they had ranked them in a particular order. Again there was a variety of responses, indicating personal preferences.

*“Role plays: Excellent idea, perfect example of being in a situation like you would in reality.*

*Mock File: Fantastic to have even my parents were keeping it because of how accurate it was.” (sic)*  
(Parents of this student are practising solicitors.)

*“1. Mock File – Can be and is used on a regular basis at work.*

*2. Jigsaw – made you think about answers.” (sic)*

Having ranked the activities and explained the reasoning behind these rankings, students were asked if they would like to see activities introduced more frequently into modules and why. All students confirmed that they would like to see more activities incorporated, albeit they did have a preference with regard to the type of activity to be used.

*“Yes- It can be very hard to keep concentration levels going after working a full day and feel that when a subject is taught not just by reading you retain more”. (sic)*

*“I feel that using activities ensures better concentration, therefore I feel the student would gain more benefit from the lecture.” (sic)*

As previously discussed, academics refer to the “students’ attention clock” which identifies an attention lapse 15 to 20 minutes into a lecture. In the next question, students were asked whether they believed this is true and were further invited to outline which activities they thought would best counter the learner’s attention clock.

*“Yes, I believe this is true. Activities such as some of the ones mentioned above would help counter this problem, for example: crosswords and jigsaws or role plays so that the student can put it into their own perspective. Usually I have found that in the modules that I have completed there is a lot of information overload and it is important to take a break and get an understanding of the pieces which has been covered already.” (sic)*

*“I think this true with any student but more so with night time students as normally the person works their usual 8-5 job and then comes into a 3 or 4 hour lecture with no real time to unwind. I think to make the mind function especially after a stressful day is to either introduce a crossword or jigsaw just to refresh the brain for the lecture ahead.” (sic)*

Having discussed the students’ attention clock, students were asked at what time of the evening they generally found their attention is most/least engaged with the lecture and in light of same, when they would deem to be the most appropriate for activities that “break up the lecture” to be introduced.

*“My attention was most engaged up until 9pm after this time it can be difficult to continue the engagement especially when there is so much information being received. I think activities should be introduced every 40/50 minutes as this is the recommended time that your brain can absorb information at any one time.” (sic)*

*“Lecture 6pm to 10pm (Break at 7.30 for 15 mins) 6.40pm crosswords, maybe get students to come up to the board and answer a question together.” (sic)*

Having considered the activities introduced by the authors, students were asked to list any other activities which they thought should be introduced into the course. Albeit that there was general acceptance of the existing activities, some suggestions included:

*“More legal document preparation and more practical classes.” (sic)*

*“Proper presentations. I think it would help the students gain public speaking skills and presentational skills.” (sic)*

Finally students were asked if they could suggest any improvements to any of the activities used during the course. Answers to this question included:

*“Use the activities which have been mentioned above more often and keep using past exam papers to assist in getting a better knowledge of the topic and what is the best way of answering the question at hand.” (sic)*

*“Not really bar the one mentioned above. Remember classes have to be fun as well not just study, study, study. Has to be balance.” (sic)*

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

A number of findings are apparent in light of the responses received by students on the 2011/2012 course. Primarily, it is obvious that the inclusion of activities into the modules on which the authors collaborated was seen as beneficial and welcomed by students who were willing to take the related elements on board, such as presenting to the class, participating in role plays and carrying out research outside of class time.

In recognising the benefit of incorporating these activities, students were aware that the inclusion of activities served a number of functions including the use of alternate learning methods in order to suit a range of learner techniques (examples being, giving presentations and working in groups), the interruption of the class in order to avoid the students attention lapsing (examples being, the incorporation of short activities such as making jigsaws or filling in crosswords), the incorporation of

elements which would prove beneficial when in the legal working environment (examples being, legal letter writing and presentations)

One of the key findings which came out of the survey was that once students were introduced to activities as part of a module, they in fact were keen to see the incorporation of more activities, either similar to those already used or in some cases students had suggestions which they felt would benefit other students completing the module in the future.

## **CONCLUSION**

The authors conclude upon an analysis of the above that the inclusion of activities provides students with a myriad of benefits from all levels of the Learning Pyramid. The success or otherwise of these activities is placed initially on the shoulders of the lecturer in preparing, explaining and overseeing their use. The success is secondly, and perhaps more importantly, based on the students willingness to use and engage with the activities.

As previously stated the authors collaborate on the preparation of a number of modules on a HETAC level seven course run primarily for Legal Executives. The information gathered relates to students on the 2011/2012 course, however, as collaboration is continuing on the 2012/2013 course the outcome of the findings have been assimilated and utilised by the authors. A number of the comments taken on board include the introduction of a letter writing activity in the first module, more presentations by students in front of the group, as well as providing students with Self Test Questions rather than relying solely on past exam papers.

A beneficial future study may be to further survey participants on the 2012/2013 course in light of changes made following the survey of last year's students and the reworking of existing activities and incorporation of new activities.

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## APPENDIX 1 – Negotiation Case Study

### Group 1 - Welcome Group

You work for Welcome Group a pharmaceutical company that makes a range of products including ethical drugs. You have a turnover of €3 billion per annum and employ 200,000 worldwide.

Welcome Group are researching a new product which is an important breakthrough drug for the treatment of multiple sclerosis. The drug is now ready to be tested on humans and is expected to permanently stop the disease.

A vital ingredient in the drug is the pulp of Seville Blood Red oranges. The annual crop is 25,000 cases, never more than 28,000 cases.

An auction is organised for the start of September and the crop is sold off in lots of 2,000.

Welcome need 15,000 cases and will buy up to 22,000 cases if they can. Without 15,000 cases the company will not be able to make a sufficient quantity of the drug.

Last year Welcome purchased 8,000 cases at an average price of €220 per case.

The other main purchaser of Seville Blood Red oranges is Refresh Inc. You are going to meet Refresh on the morning of the auction to see if an arrangement can be made.

You have been asked to purchase no less than 15,000 cases at the best price possible.

### Group 2 - Refresh Inc.

You work for Refresh Inc a small consumer products company that makes a range of body creams. You have a turnover of €2 million per annum and employ 50 people in Waterford.

Refresh Inc. are researching a new anti aging product which is an important breakthrough cosmetic cream. The cream is now ready to be tested on humans and is expected to dramatically reduce the signs of aging. Once the product is launched the company can be sold and all existing employees will receive an extremely lucrative commission.

A vital ingredient in the drug is the rinds of Seville Blood Red oranges. The annual crop is 25,000 cases, never more than 28,000 cases.

An auction is organised for the start of September and the crop is sold off in lots of 2,000.

Refresh need 18,000 cases and will buy as many cases as they can. Without 18,000 cases the sale of the company will not go ahead and commissions will not be made to employees.

Last year Refresh purchased 10,000 cases at an average price of €200 per case.

The other main purchaser of Seville Blood Red oranges is Welcome Group. You are going to meet Welcome on the morning of the auction to see if an arrangement can be made.

You have been asked to purchase no less than 18,000 cases at the best price possible.

## **APPENDIX 2 - Role Play Scenario**

### **Rights Commissioner Hearing**

Sarah O'Dowd has worked for Leonara Enterprises (owned and run by Liam Murphy) for the past 4 years and 6 months, over the course of her employment the terms and conditions changed on a regular basis, usually to Sarah's detriment. In the past 18 months due to the recession Sarah's salary has been reduced three times and is now 65% of her original salary.

As Sarah's working conditions deteriorated so too did her work ethic with Sarah arriving approx 30 minutes late at least 3 days a week, extended lunches became the norm and regular complaints were received from clients. Eventually when Sarah phoned in sick on the fifth consecutive Monday her employer having already complied with the company grievance and disciplinary policy in issuing 3 written warnings followed by a verbal warning notified Sarah that her employment was being terminated.

Sarah accepts her dismissal from the company, however, informs you that she was not given a written statement of her conditions of employment.

### **Participant One**

Sarah now wishes to progress an action in respect of same with the Rights Commissioner and seeks your attendance on her behalf.

### **Participant Two**

Having received notification that a case is to be progressed against Leonara Enterprises the sole proprietor Liam Murphy has requested your attendance on his behalf.

### **Participant Three**

You will act as the Rights Commissioner. Sarah is seeking redress as she did not receive a written statement of terms and conditions of employment. What are Sarah's entitlements / what remedy can she receive?

**Please prepare your statement in advance citing relevant legislation and case law where appropriate.**

## **APPENDIX 3 –Role Play Scenario**

### **Equality Tribunal Hearing**

Thomas (31) and Anna (58) have been partners for the past 7 years as well as co-worker at “Lame Productions” for the past 12 years.

Anna is an atheist and although not openly discussing her beliefs colleagues would be aware of same.

The owners of “Lame Productions” discussed the situation. They agreed that:

- It was distasteful for an older woman to live with a younger man. The two supervisors are devout Catholics and they think that cohabitation outside marriage will condemn both Thomas and Anna to hell.
- Also, they object to a white man having a relationship with someone who is not white.
- They especially don’t like Anna because she doesn’t believe in God.

As a result of the above:

- Anna was transferred to Lame’s remote Basket Island office.
  - Thomas was promoted to the supervisor role which he was due to commence two months ago.
- Anna and Thomas have decided that their only option is to progress a case in the Equality Tribunal.

### **Participant One**

Anna now wishes to progress an action in respect of same with the Equality Tribunal and seeks your attendance on her behalf.

### **Participant Two**

Having received notification that a case is to be progressed against Lame Productions the owners have requested your attendance on their behalf.

### **Participant Three**

Thomas now wishes to progress an action in respect of same with the Equality Tribunal and seeks your attendance on his behalf.

### **Participant Four**

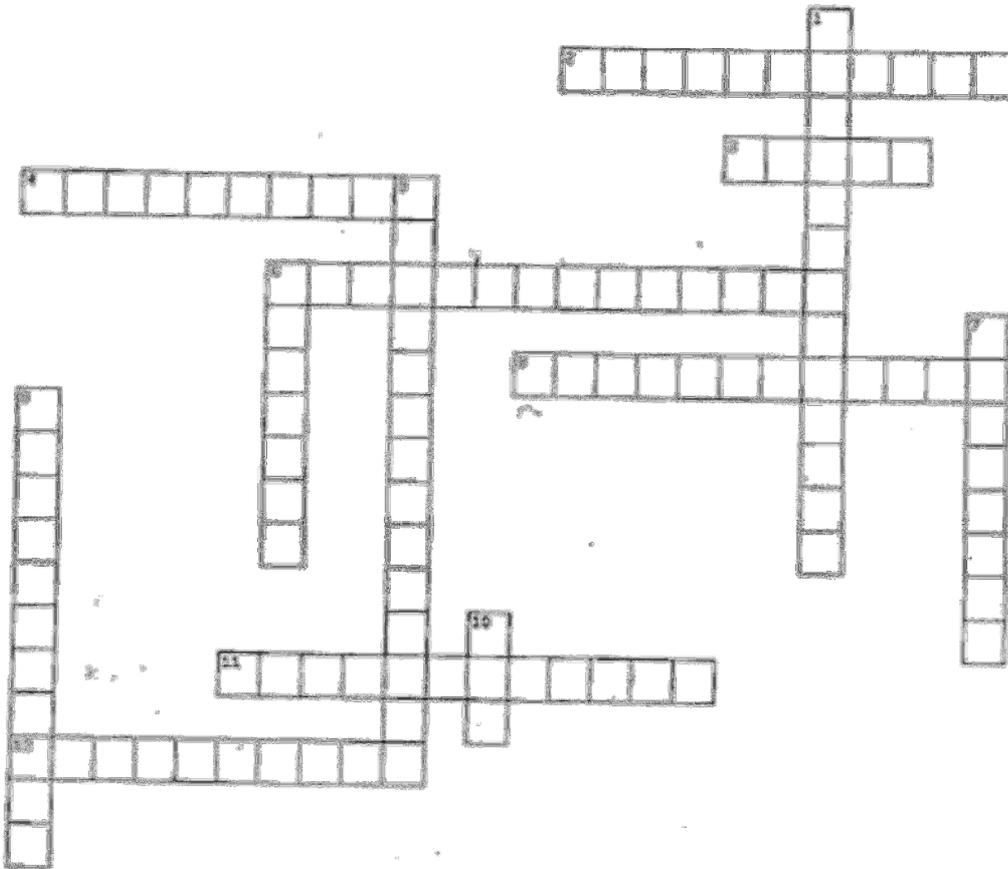
Having received notification that a case is to be progressed against Lame Productions the owners have requested your attendance on their behalf.

### **Participant Five**

You are acting as the Equality Tribunal. Your role will be to listen to all parties and make a fair and reasoned finding.



## APPENDIX 5 – Crossword



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<i>Across Clues</i>	<i>Down Clues</i>
<p>2. The current Attorney General.</p> <p>3. Founded in 1987 and incorporated in 1992.</p> <p>4. Appeal where the court does not hear evidence.</p> <p>6. Renewal is dealt with in the District Court.</p> <p>8. The courts power to hear a case.</p> <p>11. Factor for determining jurisdiction.</p> <p>12. A judge can be removed for stated misbehaviour or</p>	<p>1. In charge of the formal education of solicitors.</p> <p>5. Eroded by the Criminal Procedure Act 2010.</p> <p>6. The umbrella term that refers to solicitors and barristers.</p> <p>7. When a case is not heard in public, it is heard?</p> <p>9. The Irish legal system is built around a process know as an ? process</p> <p>10. Responsible for prosecuting indictable offences.</p>

## APPENDIX 6 – Jigsaw

