

An International, Interdisciplinary, Innovative Discussion Platform for Real Estate & Legal Education in HK

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Dr L H Li

This project, basically, is an experiment Alice and I did two years ago, a TDG-funded project. And we have been trying to include these elements in our programmes.

So basically, in our faculty, in my own department, we have this Surveying Studio within our programme called BSc Surveying Programme, which is basically a real estate programme for those who are not familiar with the term “surveying”. We know that in both of our programmes, we are looking at some similar issues. And then we have worked out some common areas that real estate students and law students might have, in particular about common law, property rights, and all sort of things revolving around land, so that’s why we decided to have that experiment.

And so, can I just explore with you what exactly is our Surveying Studio. Surveying Studio basically is what we call a crown jewel in our programme. We usually have the Surveying Studio in afternoons and we have the other lectures in the mornings so that students can attend all of them before they come to the afternoon meetings, and we try to consolidate all this different knowledge in law, economics, socio-economics, and then we ask them to carry out the tasks, purely on student-based learning mode. So we basically give them some topics to discuss first, from the newspapers, which are not considered to be technical, and reconstruct these stories into page-by-page scenarios for discussion. So usually we start with this warm-up exercise for the first few weeks such as debating about whether they should buy or rent in Hong Kong in order for them to get into the momentum of debate.

And after the warm-up exercise we go into the actual content of the Studio, we would have the simulated environment in which we ask students to imagine if they were one of these developers, what would they do. So we want to look into these important issues pertaining to their solving the real estate development problem such as finding the proper sites, planning guidelines and development controls on the site, cash-flow or financial situation of the hypothetical company for which the students work in the Surveying Studio scenario. And so the story would go on and on and on until they actually work on the designated site. And then they would have discussed all these important topics including the legal framework, the lease, control and all these things mentioned. And, at the end, they would use these to follow up. So this is one of the things that we gave them to work on [referring to the map on the PowerPoint slide]. In those sites circled in red [referring to the picture on the slide], these are some buildings from an actual project in Tseung Kwan O. We would re-organize the case so that we are now asking students to imagine what they would have done to these sites circled, the new phase of the development, including re-designing the outlook, reconsidering construction management, finance and marketing plans, etc on a weekly discussion basis with some more information being given to them every week. This weekly momentum progresses when more discoveries and discussions leading to more issues to be researched on each week. When considering working joint sessions with the law students, we encountered a major problem, which is coordinating the packed timetables of these two groups of students for physical meetings.

Ms Alice Lee

Maybe I can explain the programme that I have chosen. It's actually our JD Programme, Juris Doctor, which is actually a two-year, intensive programme. And in two years, all the JD students have to finish all the core subjects, with very limited space for their electives. So how do we make space for this collaboration? Because I chose my Land Law course, a twelve-credit course, I could support this experiential project. I invited my students and told them it's optional, i.e. if they wanted to participate, they could actually get a bonus mark. On that basis, we invited our students; on a trial basis, they would have this online session. Timetabling would not be a problem because they could just join the online sessions at their preferred timeslots. It would be convenient for both groups of students. So, they would just log in to this platform at about the same time.

Dr L H Li

I should just say that this first stage seemed to have good results, and then we moved to the next stage with the involvement of students from outside Hong Kong, from a university in Guangzhou. To maintain this way of contact and to get students to work together at the end we opted for an online format. To allow such interactions without compromising the existing tight teaching schedules of both the real estate and law students in the three programmes/two institutions, an experimental online mechanism is created using the RealtimeBoard platform. Now, a lot of people think why not Google? Because we were looking at a good product that worked for Mainland students and we know that anything through Google wouldn't be able to work in Mainland China. So we searched and we came across realtimeboard.com [referring to the powerpoint slide]. You can see that this, the first page of the login, students will each be given an invitation to join the board. So they were asked to log in at a specific time, and I would log in in my office to monitor their discussions and to respond to their questions if any.

Ms Alice Lee

Actually the screen shows that [referring to the PowerPoint slide] they would see, and we could see, not just their conversations, real-time conversations, but also their photos, their group photos, and the surveying students and law students were chatting with each other. And the most interesting discovery is that, actually, the law students were playing like a leadership role. They actually managed the whole site because they could not bear the messy layout of the conversations. Law students, by definition, are very organized. The JD students were making the decision, they said "OK, just have everything in columns, and make sure we're following one after another."

Dr L H Li

That's the second week when I logged in and I found all these boxes [referring to the PowerPoint slide], and I was amazed. Discussions were very enthusiastic and after a while they started to ask a lot of questions to each other and to me. This is very interesting because a law student actually asked me whether they needed to know very difficult Maths in order to be able to value property like our students can, and I said "no, you don't need to" and asked them "Do you want to change the programme now?" So in the end, at the final stage, we had an additional team of students from South China University of Technology and we asked all students to imagine that, now, the law

students would be the lawyers for our Surveying students, who were trying to find a site in Guangzhou with the help of the Guangzhou team. So [referring to the picture on the slide], that's the site they found on the top left, then we split the three groups of students into different boards to talk about the local restrictions, local law, and then the market environment. Once they joined the board, our Surveying students would be asking the Guangzhou students about investment environment, and the JD students would be asking them about the legal requirements and restrictions in purchasing land in Guangzhou. By chance, when we were doing that, it was just a few days after Chinese New Year, and everybody was going back home in the Mainland. It was possible for them to continue the discussion because of the online programme. [Referring to the map on the slide] These are the places that all these students were in when they're back in their hometown. We could all log in wherever we were, and the online programme allowed us to be truly learning without borders.

Ms Alice Lee

I think we have some Q&A time, so how about we show the rest of this quickly? [Referring to the PowerPoint slide] It's actually just a survey that we did, on top of the SETL, because we wanted to know how the students felt about this collaboration, their learning experience. And it seems that their feedback is very positive. But we do have some follow-up considerations. [Referring to the PowerPoint slide] So this slide is our JD students presenting their research to us, and [referring to another PowerPoint slide] that would be how they were assessed, based on their group presentations.

Dr L H Li

Basically, we asked them two things. One is, "what did you find interesting in the experiment?" Secondly, "what were the things on which you did not give enough advise to our Surveying students, especially things you had prepared for but had no chance to elaborate more or at all?".

Ms Alice Lee

Maybe we will share up to here.