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Law Teacher of the Year 2018 and 2019: In conversation with Lydia Bleasdale and Sabrina Germain

At the annual Association of Law Teachers Conference (ALT) 2021,¹ hosted online by Aston University in April, former winners Lydia Bleasdale (Law Teacher of the Year 2018)² and Sabrina Germain (Law Teacher of the Year 2019)³ presented keynote addresses. Lydia, an Associate Professor at the University of Leeds, presented a paper entitled 'Student Identity and the Pandemic'. Sabrina Germain, a Senior Lecturer at City Law School University (City, University of London), presented a paper entitled 'Disruption for Greater Inclusion in Legal Education'. Deputy Editor, Victoria Roper, caught up with Lydia and Sabrina after the conference to discuss their careers, what the award has meant to them and to further explore some of the themes in their keynotes.

Law Teacher of the Year is an annual award coordinated by Oxford University Press (OUP) and is presented to a leading university-level teacher of law in the UK. The candidates are judged on whether they display an approach to teaching that engages, motivates, and inspires students; demonstrate commitment to the development and support of their students as individuals; and involve their students in research or other academic activities to enhance the learning experience. The award is made following a rigorous and demanding judging process spanning several months, during which shortlisted candidates are visited by members of a judging panel who conduct extensive interviews with students and colleagues as well as observing a teaching session. Lydia and Sabrina were described by OUP as 'exceptional candidates motivated by their students'.

Victoria: *Congratulations Lydia and Sabrina on being holders of this prestigious award but also on your thought-provoking Law Teacher of the Year Keynotes which I had the pleasure of attending. Your papers both touched upon your own fascinating personal stories. Can you each tell me more about your respective routes into academia and your careers?*

Sabrina: Thank you very much for your kind words Victoria! It was an honour and a pleasure to receive the award and to be asked to deliver the Law Teacher of the Year Keynote at the ALT conference this year. Even though I wanted to one day pursue doctoral studies, my goal entering my undergraduate degree in Political Science and French Literature at McGill University (Canada) was to get into law school and become

¹Association of Law Teachers Conference 15th-16th April 2021' (Aston University) <<https://www2.aston.ac.uk/alt-conference-2021>> accessed 5 May 2021.

²Law Teacher of the Year announced at OUP's Celebrating Excellence in Law Teacher conference' (Oxford University Press 20 June 2018) <<https://global.oup.com/academic/news/10029734?cc=gb&lang=en&>> accessed 5 May 2021.

³'Law Teacher of the Year 2019' (Oxford University Press 5 July 2019) <<https://global.oup.com/news-items/archive/ltoty19?cc=gb>> accessed 5 May 2021.

a transactional lawyer. I was lucky to attend an atypical law school part of the French school of public affairs Sciences Po Paris. I earned a civil law master's degree in Economic Law and chose to further my studies by getting an LL.M. from Cornell University in the United States. Like my fellow classmates I sat the New York State Bar and got a licence allowing me to practice in the United States, but I went on to work for an international law firm in Paris. I worked as a corporate lawyer on mergers and acquisitions and capital market transactions, but I soon realised that it was not the career I had envisioned. It was at that time that I decided to apply to various PhD programmes. I was very glad to be awarded a scholarship from Cornell Law School and I found a great supervising team of professors, so I decided to pursue a JSD (American equivalent of a PhD) and write a dissertation on comparative healthcare law. During my time in Ithaca, I had the amazing opportunity to train as a law instructor in a maximum-security prison. This experience ignited in me the desire to become a lecturer and I was fortunate enough to be accepted as a visiting scholar at University of Cape Town and later at University of Cambridge to finalise my dissertation. During that time, I also gained some teaching experience in Europe at Sciences Po Paris and the London School of Economics. Personal circumstances had me look for work in the United Kingdom and I started my first full-time lectureship at University of Surrey and joined City Law School (City, University of London) in 2016 where I became a Senior Lecturer in 2019.

Lydia: I studied Law, followed by an MSc in Criminology. A few months after finishing that course I managed to get a one-year academic post at Manchester Metropolitan University; I then moved to the University of Leeds when a position came up there. Initially I was on a teaching and research contract, but a few years in I asked to change to a teaching and scholarship pathway (on which I was promoted to Associate Professor around 5 years ago). I've been here ever since – over 16 years now – and have been lucky enough to find my own path by taking on teaching and leadership positions which I've either been really keen to do from the outset, or have come to enjoy. I've been the Director of Community Engagement (pro bono) here since 2009, alongside being the Criminal Law module leader. I've also been Deputy Director of Student Education and Director of Widening Participation, and have held a Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence Fellowship.

Victoria: *Law Teacher of the Year is awarded to law teachers who enhance the learning environment and inspire and support students. How do you seek to do this in your teaching and why you were each respectively given the award?*

Lydia: It's probably fair to say I don't know why I won the award! I was in such a strong field and I suspect there wasn't much to choose between any of us, but obviously I was over the moon to win. I wouldn't say I could point to one single thing which inspires or supports students, partly because I think different things work for different students. I do place great emphasis on trying to personalise my interactions with them, making them feel part of our module community, or the pro bono community. This year, for example, I did this by asking them to send me 'moments of joy' each week (things which had made them smile, or laugh – pictures, news items, clips etc.), we shared our favourite music on a module Padlet, and (at the end of the term) I shared my 'CV of failures'. I wanted to

show them that nobody is completely successful all of that time, and that includes academically. I also try to keep the Criminal Law module current, not only by looking at the most recent case law but also by making the content feel relevant to them – I think that can help to inspire students to delve into some areas further. I think students find it easier to come forward and ask for support if they feel part of a community, so I do lots of small acts along the way in the hope at least one of them will make someone feel like they have a place in their community.

Sabrina: Like many other colleagues I of course seek to enhance the learning environment, inspire and support my students in many ways. The exact reasons why I was deserving of an award are not entirely clear to me. I certainly saw as much dedication, talent and care from my colleagues and the other Law Teacher of the Year finalists. It may be my alternative approach to teaching and learning that more particularly resonated with the panel. My undeniable passion for diversity and inclusion in higher education was highlighted by the colleagues that so kindly nominated me for the award. I also gave this element great attention when explaining and demonstrating my teaching approach to the judging panel. I've always wanted my commitment to researching questions of social justice to come through in my teaching methods, my choice of reading materials and most importantly in my relationship to students inside and outside the classroom. I remain convinced that as teacher we are invested with the mission to provide students with one of the most important gifts, giving them a critical mindset and a platform to express their ideas.

Victoria: *What has helped to shape your teaching practice and how do you share your insights and pedagogic innovations with the wider legal academic community?*

Sabrina: My atypical experience ranging from being a law instructor in a maximal security prison to being a junior lecturer to elite students at Sciences Po Paris and the London School of Economics has led me to cultivate an adaptable, non-traditional and dialectic teaching approach. I've come to realise that conventional approaches such as the traditional American Socratic method or the continental European passive lecturing of students can have a greater educational impact if they are supplemented with alternative teaching techniques. With each of my classes at City, I strive to cultivate my ability to think beyond the conventional law school setting to adapt to diverse groups of students. I'm most interested in first building a relationship with my students around the law to bring in their diverse perspective to enrich my teaching. I've had the opportunity to share some of my reflection on my training as a prison law instructor with the wider community in two peer-reviewed publications. 'Prison-based Education and Its New Pedagogical Perspective' an article that explores how challenging teaching environments, such as prisons, can inspire the development of new pedagogical methods and reveal the diverse responses of marginalized groups to the study of the law.⁴ I've also written a book chapter, 'For A New And More Diverse Comparative Legal Education' that explains how the teaching of comparative law in alternative venues helps to develop a more adapted training for future lecturers in

⁴Sabrina Germain, 'Prison-Based Education and Its New Pedagogical Perspective' (2014) 25(2) *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 196.

order for them to shape a more critical attitude towards comparative law and legal reasoning in traditional law school students.⁵

Lydia: My emphasis on creating a community and a sense of belonging definitely comes from my own experiences as a student. I didn't feel I belonged for a very long time, and it was my personal tutor (Professor Nick Taylor, now a colleague) who helped to change that for me. I've always tried to integrate that into my teaching practice, and of course the increasing amount of legal pedagogic literature has been a huge help too. I've also loved going to the annual Association of Law Teachers⁶ and International Journal of Clinical Legal Education⁷ conferences over the years – they have given me so many ideas to take back to Leeds. More recently, hearing from so many brilliant Law teachers through the Connecting Legal Education series has been so helpful in getting me to reflect on what I'm doing, and why.⁸ I try to 'give back' to the legal education community through publications and presentations, and mentoring. For example, my co-authored report on 'Undergraduate Resilience'⁹ has helped colleagues wanting to learn more about fostering a sense of community and belonging within their own learning environments, and my Keynote itself forms part of a book chapter (with Paul Maharg and Craig Newbery-Jones) covering the relationship between Covid-19, technology and educational spaces.¹⁰ I also act as a formal and informal reviewer and mentor, particularly around clinical legal education, which I really enjoy – the community is such a strong and friendly one.

Victoria: *Given that you both received your awards some time ago, I wondered if you could explain what the award has meant to you and whether it has led to any new opportunities?*

Lydia: It is a little tricky for me to answer this question, because I went on maternity leave not long after winning the award. However, it did give me the opportunity to give one of the keynotes at this year's ALT! I've also become a judge on the panel for the award, albeit I wasn't involved in 2020-21 because of personal reasons. I do think it has given me confidence to push myself out there more, and to put more faith in myself. For example, I've accepted more invitations to write books, book chapters and articles since, and I've become the co-lead of two national networks (Connecting Legal Education, with Michael Doherty and Emma Flint; and Advancing Wellness in Law with Caroline Strevens, Emma Jones and Richard Collier).¹¹ At the

⁵Sabrina Germain, 'For a New and More Diverse Comparative Legal Education', in Bart Van Klink and Ubaldus De Vries (eds), *Academic Learning in Law: Theoretical Positions, Teaching Experiments and Learning Experiences* (Edward Elgar 2016).

⁶'Association of Law Teachers Annual Conference' (Association of Law Teachers) <<http://lawteacher.ac.uk/event-resources/annual-conference/>> accessed 29 April 2021.

⁷'Turning Challenges Into Opportunities: Justice Education in Times of Crises' (Northumbria University, 8 March 2021) <<https://northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/news-events/turning-challenges-into-opportunities>> accessed 29 April 2021.

⁸'Connecting Legal Education' (Association of Law Teachers) <http://lawteacher.ac.uk/uncategorized/connecting-legal-education/> accessed 5 May 2021.

⁹Lydia Bleasdale and Sarah Humphreys, 'Undergraduate Resilience Research Project – Project Report', (Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence 2018) <https://teachingexcellence.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2018/01/LITEbleasdalehumphreys_fullreport_online.pdf> accessed 5 May 2021.

¹⁰For a forthcoming edited collection, Rachel Dunn, Paul Maharg and Victoria Roper (eds), *The Future of Legal Education: Reassessing the Purpose of Law Schools* (Routledge, forthcoming).

¹¹'Connecting Legal Education' (Association of Law Teachers) <http://lawteacher.ac.uk/uncategorized/connecting-legal-education/> accessed 5 May 2021; 'Welcome to Advancing Wellness in Law' (Advancing Wellness in Law) <https://advancingwellnessinlaw.wordpress.com/> 5 May 2021.

time of the award, I was so chuffed to have heard all the lovely things my students and colleagues said about me, and the award ceremony itself gave me a chance to thank my former personal tutor for helping me to get to that position. Since then, the award has come to mean something else: it was one of the last major professional achievements which my Dad saw, so that means a lot too.

Sabrina: was deeply touched by my City Law School colleagues' nomination and the exceptional support my students have shown through the judging process. This award means so much to me! The accolade was very delightful but it has also led me to reflect even more deeply on the role of legal educators in our law schools and in the wider higher education community. Since having received the award in 2019, I've invested myself more intensely in pedagogical activities, for example activities such as programme development as the director of the Graduate Entry LLB at City Law School. I've also been offered multiple opportunities that I'm very grateful for. One of them was of course being asked to deliver this year's keynote address at the Association of Law Teachers conference. I was also offered to actively engage in the activities and the organisation of two major associations that have close links with the legal education and legal research community. As of January 2021, I'm the Health Law subject section co-convenor for the Society of Legal Scholars conference.¹² In April 2021, I was elected trustee on the board of the Socio-Legal Studies Association.¹³ Both of these positions provide me with an opportunity to promote equality and diversity in our broader community of legal scholars and educators by taking on a leadership role in education and research.

Victoria: *In line with the overarching ALT 2021 conference theme both your Keynote papers explored the very topical issue of 'disruption'. Lydia, your paper focused on the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on the development of an undergraduate student's identity. Could you explain what you mean by this and what you called the 'loss of a communal sense of learning' due to the move to online teaching? Is this something you have also observed Sabrina at your institution?*

Lydia: As the pandemic has unfolded, I've spent time thinking about how we can replicate some of the opportunities students might ordinarily have to meet and interact with others in person, in an online context. I believe this is important because, according to social identity formation theory, our identities (for example, who we think we are, what we think we're capable of doing, whether we feel we belong within a particular setting) are influenced not only by self-reflection, but also by our interactions with individuals and groups. Collectively within HE we have been able to replicate some of those interactions online (helped in no small part by the experience of those who primarily teach online outside of the pandemic context), but what I think has been harder to replace are those moments when students 'randomly' connect with someone. That brings me to the 'communal sense of learning' - physically travelling to lectures or seminars together, talking before and after classes as you wait to enter or leave rooms, studying together, being able to see a lecture theatre full of people who you're studying alongside: all these seemingly small moments of interpersonal connection, which are

¹²The Annual Conference' (Society of Legal Scholars) <<http://www.conference.legalscholars.ac.uk/>> accessed 29 April 2021.

¹³'Welcome to the SLSA' (Socio-Legal Studies Association) <<https://slsa.ac.uk/>> accessed 29 April 2021.

actually useful in informing someone's identity, are harder to replicate online.

Sabrina: Although I've not been as involved in teaching as I typically am because of my maternity and sabbatical leave, I've still had sustained contact with colleagues and students in my role as Graduate Entry Programme Director. In some situations, specifically at the beginning of the first period of lockdown, just like Lydia, I felt that our final year students were losing part of their communal sense of learning. They found it very challenging to be socially distant and not have in-person interactions. But the physical space and virtual interactions that was brought by the pandemic seemed to have been most devastating to the first-year students that had a hard time finding their feet. My exceptional City Law School colleagues were creative in putting in place extra-curricular activities where we would provide students with an opportunity to simply be, interact, talk and bond. Our one-hour student café meetings were an opportunity for the entire cohort to interact virtually and to get to know us casually over a cuppa! These short moments allowed for students to connect with us, among themselves and re-create some of the group exchanges they may have had in person were circumstances different.

Victoria: *Lydia, you were also keen to reflect on this experience and focus on what we might learn as we move forward into future academic years. Sabrina was also eager to emphasise that disruption can lead to positive change, entreating us to 'delight in the experimentation and being off balance'. What do each of you think you have learnt from the disruption caused by the pandemic and do you believe teaching and support for students will change as a result?*

Lydia: Gosh, I'm not sure where to start! On a personal (and to an extent, professional) level, I learnt that I thrive with connections, so no longer being able to pop into someone's office or have a chat with a student in the common room was really detrimental to me emotionally. Social media and online events have really helped me to feel part of something, which was more important to me than I had realised. I actually loved the challenge of rethinking my teaching and working out how best to present it in an online world: developing online activities to go alongside the online lectures was genuinely fun, I enjoyed the creativity (although, as was the case for everyone teaching online – whether at university or school - I never felt I had enough time to get everything done!). As for future change: I would certainly like to see some of the online platforms continuing to be used. For example, being able to send all my tutees regular messages on Teams and to chat with them through that has been a great way of building up the relationship, more so than the more formal email – gifs can go a long way! I also hope the increased understanding so many of us have shown to each other (both staff and students) is something we can maintain.

Sabrina: The pandemic has been traumatic at a personal and professional level but also brought some solace. It has shown us how much growth can come from empathy and vulnerability and this is something I want to continue to transpose in my teaching approach. I believe the awareness that came from the pain suffered particularly significantly by ethnic minority communities because of inherent inequalities has reminded me of the importance to embrace alternative perspectives to enter into a more open and constructive dialogue. This starts with the diversification of our

curriculums, decolonisation of our reading lists and embracing diversity not just in our teaching methods but also celebrating diversity in authorship. I also strongly believe that now we must teach with more empathy to foster a sense of belonging because feeling valued and heard is the first step towards greater representation. Togetherness is also the most powerful way of understanding complex issues. More than ever before we need empathy, clarity and creativity in our approach.

Victoria: *Sabrina, your Keynote paper explored how the pandemic might be a catalyst for greater inclusion and diversity in legal education and greater recognition that 'open-mindedness is a strength'. How has the pandemic 'brought into sharper focus underlying inequalities' as you put it and how you think these might be addressed? Lydia, do you share Sabrina's optimism that the pandemic may lead to positive change in this respect?*

Sabrina: I'm convinced that the pandemic is presenting us with an opportunity for great realization and the possibility to address structural inequalities present in our sector. As educators we hold part of the solution to create greater equality and inclusion. The tools we provide students from under-represented background are crucial to help them progress in their careers and achieve professional recognition. Equally important are the opportunities we may hold that are not within reach for students from these backgrounds. We may not see how our networks enclose 'career-making opportunity', but a small gesture may provide significant opportunities. In this spirit, I have and will continue to make use of my professional experience as an international transactional lawyer to give career advice on pathways to international law firms and international organisations that may have been seen out of reach for some.

Lydia: As with securing any change, it's going to take work. I think there's a danger that things could slip back to how they were in some ways without that conscious effort to reflect on what worked well, for whom, and why, and how more inclusive practices can be maintained as we return to something resembling 'normal'. I recently came across the online shop (Woodism) of a father and his young autistic son - they have developed some of the young boy's phrases into artwork. One of them was 'I don't want life to go back to normal. I want it to go back to better'. I'm going to get that for my office.

Victoria: *In your paper Sabrina, you also gave a personal example of how challenge and disruption can lead to positive change. You discussed the challenges you faced as a law instructor at a maximum-security prison in the United States led to you amending your pedagogical approach and to embrace alternative voices. Can you tell us more about this? Lydia, how do you promote equality and diversity and alternative voices in your practice?*

Sabrina: I believe that what inspired me to adapt my teaching approach while teaching in prison continues to resonate with me. The unconventional teaching environment of a prison facility and the atypical experiences my inmate students had had with the law clashed with my traditional approach. As I consciously made an effort to enter into a dialogue with them, my examples became more relatable, we started creating a relationship around our discovery of 'legal things'. I tried as much as possible to explain legal concepts starting with concrete relatable examples. Their ability to critically think about the law also came from role-playing and the ability they discovered of

empathising with individuals that called on the law in various circumstances. I continue to use some of the exercises I developed with my inmate students in my Medical Law and Bioethics module. I strongly believe that alternative methods provide a more diverse learning experience.

Lydia: I don't think I do anything as impressive as Sabrina, but I've altered the Crime module so that we look at a more diverse range of subjects now (including things like hate crimes and coercive and controlling behaviour); I try to make use of a diverse range of sources, including spoken word and music, to bring my subject matter to life; and my first Criminal Law lecture of the year makes clear that a large part of the module's focus is on the systemic inadequacies of the legal system, and how these might be overcome. Within my Community Engagement role, I've tried to broaden the opportunities out so that students who might have caring or other responsibilities in term time can still gain the experience they want (for example, we have two projects which we recruit summer volunteers for, when some students find they have a little more flexibility). I think one of the most important things I can do is to create a safe environment for students and to then listen to them – that's how some of these changes came about, and I know that's how more will come about too.

Victoria: *One of the things I really liked about both your Keynote papers was the positive tone in the face of adversity. Any final optimistic thoughts on what the future of legal education holds and how we as educators can help to shape it?*

Lydia: I think we need to hold on to the sense of community – whether within our own institutions, or the sector as a whole – and really grasp the opportunity to run with that. Personally, I want to do that by continuing to make use of online platforms to connect with students who want to use them, and I want to take a greater role in supporting the careers of more junior law teacher colleagues (particularly those whose contracts focus upon student education: I think there can be a sense of feeling a little lost on those contracts, at times).

Sabrina: I'm happy that the positive undertone of my address came through! I strongly believe that as we presently stand at a crossroad we must listen, learn and improve. I would encourage us all, legal educators, to step out of our comfort zones. We must disrupt the status quo to create greater inclusion and perhaps all come to the realisation that in this discomfort we may be able to find the most fulfilment and to best way to engage with our students.

Thank you to Lydia and Sabrina for their 'warm, positive and insightful' contributions as one conference delegate described them. Judging of the 2020 Law Teacher of the Year Award was delayed due to the pandemic, but Emma Flint of the University of Birmingham has now been named as the winner.¹⁴ Congratulations to Emma. We hope to hear from Emma at a future Association of Law Teachers conference. The call for nominations for Law Teacher of the Year 2022 is expected in October 2021.

¹⁴Law Teacher of the Year 2020 announced after judging moves online' (Oxford University Press 14 April 2021) <<https://www.mynewsdesk.com/uk/oxford-university-press/news/law-teacher-of-the-year-2020-announced-after-judging-moves-online-425262>> accessed 5 May 2021.