

An online international knowledge sharing case study – exchanging UK-South African legal cultures. By **Beth Richards-Bray**, **Alan East**, **Stephen Hardy** and **Stephan van der Merwe**

Robots and the Law

In 2017, Coventry University in the UK established the Coventry Law School Advocacy Project in partnership with the Central England Law Centre. This move enables students to represent clients in front of appellate tribunals. To capitalise on this practical approach to clinical legal education, Coventry University's Law School and Stellenbosch University in South Africa embarked on an innovative advocacy programme.

The project began when Alan East of Coventry's Law School built on links developed by Coventry University and connected with Stephan van der Merwe, an attorney at Stellenbosch Law Clinic in South Africa. Beginning with visits by East to Stellenbosch and van der Merwe to Coventry, the details of the project began to take shape.

In November 2017, van der Merwe was the keynote speaker at a Coventry Law School conference presenting his research on the positive societal impact that can be made through the work of university law clinics. At this conference the technology used in this project was demonstrated live to an audience for the first time.

The collaboration culminated in a groundbreaking project: an online international learning (OIL) initiative joining academics, who also had backgrounds as skilled practitioners, and students from both universities via a "mobile robotic presence" (MRP).

This article explores the application of OIL projects to clinical legal education and by extension potentially business schools, which face similar issues, and the way in which MRP technology can enhance the educational experience for students. It also seeks to demonstrate how students develop intercultural and comparative legal competencies; enabling them to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on their knowledge, skills and attitudes.

This project is aligned with increasing pedagogical support for student learning which is authentic, situational and based in diverse learning environments. It brings real-world experiences into the classroom and allows students to be active participants in their learning experience. The technology offers the opportunity for business schools to link with other institutions worldwide, and to collaborate with industry partners to explore similar initiatives.

The "Double Robot" MRPs used during the OIL project work through the internet aimed to allow a seamless connection for students wanting to have complete mobility in the designated area.

However, there are two important caveats to this. First, the reliability of the connection depends on internet availability or the strength of the WiFi signal where the robots, which resemble tablets mounted, at face height, on a moveable device, are roaming. Second, they are not completely mobile; human intervention is needed to assist the robots to negotiate stairs or changes in floor level where there is no ramp.

An internet link is sent from the MRP to a student, who controls the robot by clicking the link and connecting to the web using a computer, tablet or phone. Using the MRP's visual and audio capabilities students can fully interact with the environment and its actors and, subject to the above-mentioned limitations, move around unhindered.

The OIL project's purpose was to enable Stellenbosch students to interact with students in Coventry; take part in client interviews; and join a mock tribunal hearing with a real judge. In so doing, the MRP technology enhanced the educational experience of the participating students, enabling them to develop intercultural and comparative legal competences.

The Coventry Law School/Central England Law Centre advocacy programme involved 24 Coventry University students assisting members of the public who were appealing against the refusal to grant their employment support allowance (a UK social security benefit). The students interviewed the clients, gave them legal advice and afterwards represented them at the tribunal.

The Stellenbosch students linked into this programme using the MRP technology; two Stellenbosch students were paired with two Coventry students. Over a four-week period the students worked together on a programme, facilitated by the use of a virtual learning environment, OpenMoodle and the MRP technology.

During the first week, the students participated in an introductory session where they met fellow students. Using MRP, Coventry students then took their Stellenbosch partners on a tour of the university. The students were divided into groups of four, consisting of two from Coventry and two from Stellenbosch, and were given projects to work on. In those groups, the Coventry students explained the cases they had previously dealt with and each group was handed their first case and began to prepare for the client interview.

During the second and third weeks, the Stellenbosch students used the MRP technology to observe their partner students interviewing clients on other cases. Following the observations, both sets of students discussed the case they had been allocated and how they would approach the initial interview for their assigned case.

Coventry Law School's purpose-built interview suite was the venue for the interviews, which Coventry students led, assisted by their Stellenbosch partners.

The robots enabled students sitting in the South African university, to be "present" in the interview room, playing an active part in the meeting. Prior to the interview, all necessary assurances were put in place to ensure the confidentiality of the interview and the details of the client's case. The relevant clients also agreed to participate in the project and to engage the Stellenbosch students through the MRP units.

After the interview, the student group reflected on the experience, the information obtained and discussed how this would be used to take cases forward. They then planned the case and, where appropriate, arguments were drafted to be presented to the Department of Work and Pensions aiming to persuade it to change its decision.

It was originally intended that the Stellenbosch students would draft the arguments, which would then be discussed with their Coventry counterparts. Various difficulties regarding the availability of information to assist the students with this were encountered, preventing the Stellenbosch students from drafting the arguments; this will be rectified in future iterations.

As a result of the Coventry Law School/Central England Law Centre collaboration, the UK students benefitted from the opportunity to appear in the tribunals assisting the client; however, this is not



possible for the Stellenbosch students. Therefore, the final part of the OIL project aimed to give the Stellenbosch students a taste of the tribunal experience. The students participated in a mock tribunal hearing led by a tribunal judge. Staff from the advocacy clinic played the roles of other tribunal participants such as a doctor, clients and opposition legal representatives.

Coventry University sees itself as a unique institution and with a unique approach to activities known as "the Coventry Way". This advocacy project is aligned with those values; it provides truly impactful value for the students, clients and the provision of legal services.

It allows students to represent clients in front of real judges, helping the local community and allowing more people access to justice. It facilitates intercultural education allowing students to interact with fellow students from different legal jurisdictions, thereby enabling learning to take place through different legal experiences.





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Also, it allows students to address the challenges of living and working in different societies as professionals, allowing students to understand a different jurisdiction’s legal problems. All of this through MRP, which is fast becoming a popular means of communication.

Projects which require participants to venture into new and innovative terrain inevitably have a measure of risk and will likely involve teething troubles that need to be addressed in future iterations of the project. This has been the case with the Coventry/Stellenbosch MRP OIL project.

Anecdotal feedback from the students who participated in the project emphasised the importance of ensuring stable and suitable ITC services to support projects that rely on digital equipment. Students were at times frustrated with interruptions to the internet feed and unstable WiFi connections, which led to unscheduled breaks in their MRP use. Other unforeseen technical challenges included audio feedback

at the controller’s end when MRP devices were in too close proximity to each other in small rooms.

Despite these challenges, the value of this project is that it enabled students to communicate in real time with their peers from different jurisdictions, allowing them to collaborate on legal cases and develop legal skills.

Both Coventry Law School and Stellenbosch Law Faculty provide excellent experiential learning through their law clinics. Both schools provide their students with invaluable social welfare experiences. This project brought the two together, enhancing the learning experience for students in both countries.

Coventry students found the interaction very helpful because they were keen to understand how Stellenbosch students approach a legal case. Even after taking account of the inevitable technical difficulties, Stellenbosch students who appeared in Coventry via the MRP, found this a valuable experience as it allowed them to experience how cases develop and to participate in a mock tribunal.

In September students from Coventry who took part in this project, will be visiting the law clinic in Stellenbosch.

The benefits of this kind of project are not limited to Law schools. Business school students can also benefit from the ability to work with students in other locations or with industry partners. There is potential to engage in joint projects where students work on real-world issues with businesses, or participate in university initiatives sharing knowledge and comparing approaches in different countries. MRPs also offer the opportunity for interdisciplinary projects, for example, bringing law and business students together internationally to work on real or case-study problems. The MRPs offer a new dimension to international activities; they allow international partners to have a presence in the room, providing a more practical, natural way for parties in both locations to interact, in a manner not possible with existing video-conferencing technology.

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