



Te Whatu Kairangi Award

Category:

Initiatives for progressing hauora
and wellbeing in education

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“My role as an educator is to see my students, in all of their complexity, with all of the worries and concerns and hang-ups they bring to class, and to encourage them: you are capable, you belong here, this space is for you also.”

However, back in 2012, Anna found herself preparing to teach her first law class for graduate students at a prestigious American university. She had never set foot in an American classroom before. She worried about whether she was equipped, whether she would be seen as an imposter, whether she would belong. So, she turned to her personal mindfulness/meditation practice, taking 5 to 10 minutes before each class to settle and clear her mind, relax her body, focus on her breathing, and to intentionally turn her care and attention to her students' concerns rather than her own.

In her decade of teaching law students since then – both in America and Aotearoa – she has found it is very often the case that students share these same concerns about entering the classroom. Whether academically inclined or not, fifth-generation students or first-in-family, first-years or finalists. Students have opened up to her about their feelings that remind her of her first day as a lecturer. They too worry about whether they are capable, whether they are imposters, whether they belong. They bring this stress and anxiety to class, and it can seriously impede their ability to learn and thrive.

Anna teaches Aotearoa's future lawyers at the University of Otago. Her largest papers, Evidence and Jurisprudence (with about 200-300 students per class) are crucial for future lawyers. They are also notoriously challenging papers, with a reputation for being boring, difficult to pass, and opaque. Her students often arrive with a good deal of anxiety about their ability to succeed, or feeling dispirited by their previous semester's results.

Despite these challenges, she finds it immensely satisfying to guide her students through complex legal doctrine and philosophy, and to inspire in them a deep and lasting appreciation of legal complexity and intricacies.

Anna is an empathetic, rigorous, and student-focused lecturer, a research-led teacher, and a national expert in her areas of law. She supports her students in grasping extremely challenging material by being an 'impressively clear and organised' teacher, striving to bring all students along with her as they dive into very technical material. Both inside

and outside the classroom, she recognises that health and wellbeing are the essential foundation for effective, lifelong learning.

Law is a uniquely challenging profession. Students need to learn not only the intricacies of complex doctrinal points but also the processes of legal analysis, critical thinking, and different writing styles. Furthermore, students must understand the philosophical context of law – not just what it is, but why, and how it can be questioned. No wonder the subject can leave them feeling on edge and anxious.

Anna's students say she has an exceptional ability to make complex material accessible. Law students often get overwhelmed by the large amount of technical information they have to grasp. She finds ways to help them understand more easily. For example, using a series of flowcharts to break down the legal reasoning into a step-by-step process.

“I can't stress enough how beneficial it is to my learning, how clear, organised, and deliberate she is. She ensures we learn to our full potential in her class. She doesn't just throw information at us, but considers how we will receive it and be able to apply it.” (Student evaluation 2021)

Anna dedicates time in the curriculum to addressing the monocultural nature of New Zealand law, and how the topics students study have been influenced by certain Western cultural assumptions (for example – the rule against hearsay shows a very Western distrust of oral tradition, which is at odds with te ao Māori). She supports her students to understand law as biased and cultural. Law is not neutral and objective, and she gets students thinking about how areas of law might be 'decolonised' towards biculturalism.

Anna has a sustained record of truly outstanding, 'exceptionally good' student evaluations. Over her six years at Otago, across all her papers (including those she was teaching for the first time), 99% of responding students have agreed or strongly agreed that her teaching is effective; and 99% have rated her ability to communicate ideas as excellent or very good. Her evaluations frequently yield comments that she is 'the best' or 'favourite' in the Faculty/University.

Anna believes it is in part her mindful pedagogy that makes her teaching so learner-centred and impactful. Students regularly report the positive impact in-class mindfulness techniques have had, not only on their learning, but on their wellbeing more generally, and in practice. While she ensures the exercises are optional, the uptake among students is very high. Some students have reported adopting meditation as a life-changing habit, not just in the classroom.

“The mindfulness sessions ... were incredibly helpful and kept me focused, so much so that I've started doing them outside class as well.” (Student feedback, 2018)

The work Anna has done encouraging her students to explore the benefits of mindfulness has led her to advocate for 'mindfulness in law' nationally. She does this primarily as founder and co-chair of the Aotearoa Mindfulness in Law Society, which aims to enhance well-being in the legal profession by educating practitioners, academics, and students on mindfulness benefits.

She has published two academic articles advocating for mindfulness in law (both in the *New Zealand Law Journal*), and she is cited in the leading textbook in the field, *The Mindful*

Law Student (2022), a key resource for students and educators wishing to learn about mindful pedagogy. She has presented on mindfulness to the Division of Humanities at Otago and to District/High Court Judges at their annual judicial wellbeing seminar (2022, Christchurch). She has also supported the teaching of her colleagues generally by leading two mini-symposia on teaching methods (2019 and 2023).

Anna is passionate about the benefits of mindfulness as a pedagogical tool for enhancing student hauora, wellbeing, and academic achievement. An award-winning teaching colleague commented on Anna's 'values' meditation break between challenging topics;

“It began in a rather thoughtful way, by you empathising with the upcoming exam anxiety among your students. You then led them through a practice of focusing on the breath, labelling their thoughts, feeling and acknowledging emotions and dispositions and then at the end recommitting to their values as individuals and why they were studying law in the first place. It felt profound. You could hear a pin drop during the exercise. “

As the leading voice of mindfulness in law in Aotearoa, she will continue to advocate for mindfulness in law schools, and provide support and guidance for any other educators interested in exploring contemplative learning techniques. She envisions a growing and self-sustainable community developing as she continues in this advocacy.
