Enhancing Learning Objectives in Legal Education: Comparing Smart and ABCD Strategies

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Abstract

The process of training future specialists of legal professions in higher education institutions of any country, today is subject to teaching traditions that have been strongly imprinted by the culture of that geographical space. The culture of teaching legal subjects is dictated by the particularities of the great legal systems. Although national legal systems differ significantly—even within the "major legal families"—we find it appropriate, within the present investigation, to identify the "ideology" of an effective and efficient methodology for training law students. In essence, the "legal education architecture" will strictly respect learning objectives.

By analyzing teaching traditions, curriculum frameworks, perspectives of labor market representatives, and the views of legal education beneficiaries, this paper evaluates the effectiveness of the SMART methodology—defined by its focus on specificity, measurability, achievability, relevance, and time-boundedness—and the ABCD model, which emphasizes audience, behavior, condition, and degree, in defining the learning objectives within the field of legal sciences. The analysis aims to demonstrate how the pedagogical principles advanced by

Malcolm Knowles and Benjamin Bloom can be implemented in a harmonious way and integrative manner, enabling universities not only to impart knowledge and develop professional competencies, but also to foster and reinforce fundamental human values among future legal professionals. However, in this research, based on the role of the jurist in contemporary society, we intend to formulate strategies for defining learning objectives in the context of new challenges to legal education: artificial intelligence, pandemic, economic security, migration, armed conflicts, environmental protection giving rise, already at university level, to scenarios that future legal professionals must not only reflect upon, but also address and respond to promptly.

In the paper, in order to demonstrate the theses formulated at the outset, we have employed theoretical research methods: analysis and synthesis. We employed deductive reasoning whenever necessary, as it is central to legal argumentation and, by extension, to legal activity. This emphasis on deduction does not diminish the importance of its counterpart, induction, nor does it reduce the relevance of combining analysis with synthesis and applying other complementary methods. Certainly, in order to substantiate the research results, we resorted to empirical methods such as observation, verification, and testing. Empirical methods specifically allowed us to identify qualitative indicators of learning objectives formulation strategies. Learning from experience and through experience is the key to the success of training valuable professionals in the field of legal sciences. In this regard, contemporary methodologies abound in methods and techniques of experiential learning. Therefore, in the proposed study, we will identify to what extent experiential learning fits into the strategies for formulating SMART and ABCD learning objectives. In the ideal version, a curricular standard at the law faculties will be thoroughly thought out by calibrating the learning objectives with the teaching techniques and methods that allow the most successful achievement of the training goals.

Keywords: strategy for formulating learning objectives, SMART model, ABCD model, training of future lawyers, teaching traditions

1. Introduction

The present scientific endeavor is a response to the continuous concern for the refinement of methodological and didactic tools in order to achieve the goals of university education for students in law faculties.

The educational process within law faculties is a complex one, and in addition to transmitting knowledge in the field of legal sciences, it is important to be designed taking into account the following factors: "learning culture" (the motivation of the beneficiary, learning methods and techniques), "teaching culture" (selecting the subject matter, structuring it, presenting the content).

Certainly, higher education in the field of legal sciences—similar to other domains within the social and human sciences—is currently undergoing paradigm shifts, being significantly influenced by the digitalization process. This transformation has led to a reduction in the traditional time allocated to direct student-teacher interaction, in favor of enhancing students' ability to navigate and utilize new technologies. As a result, the emerging connections between educational platforms and students imply an entirely different *modus operandi*, one that does not always foster universal human values. Under these circumstances, the long-term repercussions on the quality of professional training for future legal practitioners remain unclear and require closer examination. Another contemporary challenge facing legal education is related to the pursuit of inclusion, in line with broader ideals of equality and non-discrimination. Such positive actions, promoted by authorities responsible for higher education policy, must also be supported through the development and dissemination of methodological guidelines aimed at facilitating the adaptation of educational service beneficiaries to these evolving frameworks.

The heterogeneity of the actors in contemporary life has direct implications for the formation of traditions in university teaching. Nevertheless, it is imperative that the fundamental values underlying the formation of future legal professionals be clearly reflected in the pedagogical

approach, regardless of the geographical context in which the teaching and learning processes take place within law faculties.

The subject addressed in the present study has not been specifically explored by researchers in the field of legal sciences. However, certain theses relevant to this investigation have been examined within the broader context of studies authored by Ponkin I., Lapteva A., and Kurt S. Undoubtedly, the hypotheses advanced by the authors of this study regarding the relevance of learning objective formulation strategies may serve as a foundation for future research in this area.

2. Methodology

In this paper, in order to support the initial theses regarding the relevance, as well as the risks and opportunities associated with the SMART and ABCD models in the training of future legal professionals, we employed theoretical research methods, specifically analysis and synthesis.

Where appropriate, deductive reasoning was also applied, which, as noted by Ponkin and Lapteva (2021), constitutes "the heart of legal argumentation" in legal practice, and by extension, of legal activity more broadly. This does not, however, diminish the importance of inductive reasoning, nor of the interplay between analysis and synthesis and other complementary research methods.

By conducting deductive research, we inferred that effective legal education entails the implementation of both strategies—SMART and ABCD—as they facilitate the achievement of both short-term and long-term educational objectives.

To further substantiate our findings, we also employed empirical research methods, including observation, verification, and testing. These methods were particularly useful in identifying qualitative indicators relevant to strategies for formulating learning objectives. In this context, we conducted comparative analyses of teaching materials, curricula, and study plans, as well as student performance indicators across face-to-face and online instructional formats in both

full-time and part-time modalities. The analysis focused on law programs at higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, including the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, Moldova State University, the "Ștefan cel Mare" Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați.

3. Results and Discussions

To conduct this analysis, the university curricula for law programs from five accredited institutions in the Republic of Moldova and Romania were examined. The selection included publicly available program documents, accessed via institutional websites between 2020-2025. The qualitative analysis of curricular materials, in line with the objectives of the present scientific endeavor, was supported by interviews and feedback collected from colleagues—teaching staff from five higher education institutions—as well as from students involved in learning and assessment activities. This feedback was gathered when the authors of the present study implemented and experimented with both strategies for formulating learning objectives.

We begin our analysis of strategies for formulating learning objectives by referring to the learning model proposed by David Kolb. In his 1984 study, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Kolb argued that experience is the fundamental and unique source of knowledge—a thesis that forms the foundation of experiential learning theory. Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This definition emphasizes several critical aspects of the learning process as viewed from the experiential perspective. First is the emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to content or outcomes. Second is that knowledge is a transformation process, being continuously created and recreated, not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted. Third, learning transforms experience in both its objective and subjective forms. Finally, to understand learning, we must understand the nature of knowledge, and vice versa (Kolb, 1984).

Regarding the specificity of the teaching process in the field of legal sciences, it is important to initiate the investigation by citing the famous postulate of Thomas Hobbes.

Thomas Hobbes asserted that reason is the soul of the law: *nihil, quod est contra rationem, est licitum*; that is to say, nothing is law that is against reason; and that reason is the life of the law, nay the common law itself is nothing else but reason; and *æquitas est perfecta quædam ratio, quæ jus scriptum interpretatur et emendat, nulla scriptura comprehensa, sed solum in vera ratione consistens*; i. e. Equity is a certain perfect reason, that interpreteth and amendeth the law written, itself being unwritten, and consisting in nothing else but the right reason (Hobbes, 1840). Therefore, in our opinion, drawing from *the soul of the law* and *the heart of legal argumentation*, we conclude that the strategies for formulating learning objectives should be grounded primarily in reason and deduction.

Additionally, these strategies will be based on the algorithm that best addresses the needs of contemporary education processes: Bloom's taxonomy.

In 1956, Benjamin Bloom with collaborators Max Englehart, Edward Furst, Walter Hill, and David Krathwohl published a framework for categorizing educational goals: Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Familiarly known as Bloom's Taxonomy, this framework has been applied by generations of K-12 teachers and college instructors in their teaching. The framework elaborated by Bloom and his collaborators consisted of six major categories: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. The categories after Knowledge were presented as "skills and abilities," with the understanding that knowledge was the necessary precondition for putting these skills and abilities into practice. While each category contained subcategories, all lying along a continuum from simple to complex and concrete to abstract, the taxonomy is popularly remembered according to the six main categories (Armstrong, 2010).

In 2001 the taxonomy was revised by underscoring this dynamism, using verbs and gerunds to label their categories and subcategories (rather than the nouns of the original taxonomy). These

"action words" describe the cognitive processes by which thinkers encounter and work with knowledge:

Remember (Recognizing, Recalling), Understand (Interpreting, Exemplifying, Classifying, Summarizing, Inferring, Comparing, Explaining), Apply (Executing, Implementing), Analyze (Differentiating, Organizing, Attributing), Evaluate (Checking, Critiquing), Create (Generating, Planning, Producing) (Council of Europe, 2016).

To effectively achieve curricular objectives, it is essential that all actors involved in the teaching and learning process—particularly those from non-pedagogical fields—possess the knowledge and skills required to formulate clear and coherent learning objectives.

Based on the authors' experience in teaching university courses at higher education institutions with a legal profile in the Republic of Moldova and Romania, two essential approaches to formulating teaching objectives can be identified: the so-called ABCD and SMART models.

By using the ABCD formula, we will be able to create clear and effective objectives. It consists of four key elements: (A) Audience, (B) Behavior, (C) Condition, and (D) Degree:

A-Audience: Determine who will achieve the objective.

B-Behavior: Use action verbs (Bloom's taxonomy) to write observable and measurable behavior that shows mastery of the objective.

C-Condition: If any, state the condition under which behavior is to be performed. (Optional)

D-Degree: If possible, state the criterion for acceptable performance, speed, accuracy, quality, etc. (Optional). (Kurt, 2020)

Example of a learning objective formulated in accordance with the ABCD approach in the field of legal sciences: *After completing the seminar on international crimes (C), students (A) will be able to distinguish between war crimes and crimes against humanity (B) by accurately identifying at least 4 distinguishing criteria (D).*

In another approach, *learning objectives should be SMART*: i.e.,

S-Specific - Any objectives must be concrete, clear and unambiguous. It should target something specific – for example, clear understanding of a topic.

M-Measurable - The objective will include some indication of how learner progress may be measured.

A-Attainable - The objective should be appropriate for those undertaking it.

R-Relevant -The objective should be relevant to those undertaking the course.

T-Time-specific. The objective should specify the time parameters in which the task should be completed. (Council of Europe, 2016)

Example of a learning objective formulated in compliance with the SMART approach in the field of legal sciences: *By the end of the module on the right to liberty and security (T), students (A) will develop professional skills in human rights law (R) by analyzing and discussing the reasons and limits of the state's positive obligations in this area (S), as defined by the European Court of Human Rights' practice, and demonstrate their understanding through a written assignment submitted on the HELP platform of the Council of Europe (M).*

An analysis of the university curriculum of law faculties reveals a trend toward the SMART approach in the formulating learning objectives, which, according to the teaching staff, are more aligned with the content and specifics of legal disciplines: they are clear, accessible and predictable. Furthermore, the SMART approach undoubtedly the development of both general and specific skills that contemporary legal professionals must possess.

Learning from experience and through experience is the key to the success of training valuable professionals in the field of legal sciences. In this regard, contemporary methodologies abound in methods and techniques of experiential learning.

As an extremely efficient method in the process of acquiring knowledge and developing the skills of future professionals in the field of law, debate is frequently utilized. Debates focus on events and phenomena that spark intense discussions in society, where consensus for assessing these situations is lacking. Another method that allows active involvement of students is the

Socratic method, based on a discussion conducted through multiple rounds of relevant questions on a researched phenomenon, culminating in the deduction of legal reasoning, concepts, or principles. Problem solving involves organizing the learning process by moderating teaching activities in which students are tasked with formulating the problem, devising a strategy for solving it, and proposing solutions.

4. Conclusions

The university training of specialists in the field of law from the perspective of the organization of the study process does not differ much from the training of other specialists in the field of socio-human sciences. The process is presented as a complex one with inputs and outputs set according to clear, accessible, and efficient algorithms whose efficiency has been demonstrated over time.

The design of the training process in higher education institutions should be based on practical experience in the field. A holistic, deductive approach to the educational process is essential for the formation of highly qualified specialists. The strategies for formulating objectives, whether ABCD or SMART, are both relevant and effective in legal education. Additionally, the teaching staff should consider that the ABCD model is more rigorous, enabling the achievement of specific objectives and short-term tasks, making it ideal for seminars in the field of law. In contrast, the SMART model provides a global perspective on the academic content, being more flexible and promoting the development of a broad perspective, essential for achieving long-term goals.

The strategy of formulating SMART learning objectives, in our view, is the most effective way to develop the skills of future specialists in the field of law. It not only fosters professional skills but also social and personal skills, which promises high adaptability in the behavior of future lawyers to contemporary challenges such as artificial intelligence, pandemics, migration, armed conflicts, environmental protection, and more.

In the ideal version, a curricular standard at the law faculties will be thoroughly thought out by calibrating the learning objectives with the teaching techniques and methods that allow the most successful achievement of the training goals.

This study is limited primarily by the scope of the didactic support documents analyzed, which were collected from several universities with law faculties in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. The analysis also included direct observation of teaching practices. The conclusions are based on a qualitative interpretation of curricular content and instructional strategies.

The authors do not intend to impose their own vision on the design of legal education programs. However, drawing from approximately 20 years of personal teaching experience in the field of legal sciences, the authors advocate for a more holistic approach to this domain, through the integration of both strategies examined in this study—given the clear opportunities and benefits they offer.

The models discussed in this research are applicable to full-time, part-time, and distance learning programs in legal education institutions, whether civilian or military in profile.

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