Is Art a Fad or the Future of Legal Education?

April 7, 2015

by Lorne Sossin

As this term and academic year draw to a close, the thoughts of several Deans will turn to broader trends and lessons learned. I wanted to share one such development based on my experience at Osgoode Hall Law School. This year more than any other, it is becoming apparent that art in legal education is no fad but. Art no longer seems like an interesting distraction or peripheral gloss in legal education, but is becoming central to our mission and how we can best fulfill it.

The other day I Chaired a thesis defense from Osgoode Ph.D. student Linda Ippolito on the role of music in legal education. Later in the week, Osgoode’s Law. Arts. Culture Colloquium welcomed Sara Ramshaw from the University of Exeter to explore the links between musical improvisation and law. On another afternoon in March, I attended a reading of the one-act play Osgoode Artist in Residence Catherine Frid had written as the culmination of her Informants and Whistleblower course. Osgoode’s other 2014-2015 Artist in Residence, Julie Lassonde, has constructed a large See-Saw installed in the centre of Osgoode’s main atrium as part of an interactive exhibition she has entitled, appropriately, Counterbalance. That atrium is now watched over by two large cedar carvings of a hawk and an eagle by the Indigenous artist Ya’Ya Heit unveiled last October as part of the Law School’s 125th Anniversary and to reflect the idea that the walls which house legal education are themselves canvasses on which to tell the story of our communities.

Traditionally, we see art as apart from law – that is, we understand law as something other than artistic expression and vice versa. Law, like art, embodies the human experience, from hope and joy to suffering and yearning. Advocacy is persuasion, and whether in oral, written or visual incarnations. Dispute resolution is at root a form of narrative or story-telling. We tell stories about factual events and even more important stories about what is just. The venue for this story telling, historically, has been the theatre of the courthouse, replete with staging, costumes and choreography. Once you start looking at law through the lens of creative expression, it quickly becomes apparent that art is not at the periphery but rather something core to law as a field of study and as a profession.

Beyond the explicit – at Osgoode, this would include the courses put on by our Artists in Residence, seminars on Law and Film and Law and Literature, the Law. Arts. Culture Colloquium mentioned above (with a companion blog) – art has also begun to infuse other areas
as well, from pedagogy to research. With the generous support of a donor, we have established the Fund for Innovation in Law and Media (FILM) which in turn will be a catalyst for the development of visual advocacy initiatives. Some of these will consist of public legal information through accessible YouTube videos (think the Khan Academy for Law). In another project, short documentary films will be shot with first person narratives from family and community members to accompany Gladue Reports in criminal proceedings involving indigenous defendants. We are building on even more ambitious projects south of the border such as Documentary & the Law at the University of Pennsylvania run by Professor Regina Austin.

Of course, art is thriving at law schools most of all because students are embracing it. The students who took part in Osgoode’s inaugural Artist in Residence Cindy Blažević’s exploration of the criminal justice system through a photo essay project on the shuttering of the Kingston Penitentiary themselves came to see both law and art differently. Students have collaborated on and explored a range of temporary exhibits in the Law School Library on Osgoode ranging from “The Face of the Ghetto: Pictures by Jewish Photographers from the Lodz Ghetto, 1940-1944” and the “Roma Rising” exhibits during 2013, to the “KomagataMaru Centennary” and “The Road to Justice” exhibits in 2014. Finally, students have launched their own art and law initiatives, such as “Framed Experiences” which feature student photo-essays from international human rights internships in the Global South in support of the International Legal Partners program.

My conclusion that art will play a central role in the future of legal education should at this point come as no surprise. I believe we are only at the cusp of the ways in which a variety of creative media will reshape how we teach, research and practice law. In short, law schools which can best harness the vibrancy and creative potential of art in legal education will be those that are best positioned to thrive in the future.

Lorne Sossin is a Professor and Dean of Osgoode Hall Law School. Follow him on Twitter @DeanSossin.