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## UVA Law Professor Models New Way of Teaching with Technology



Professor Rip Verkerke redesigned his first-year Contracts course to have a "flipped" classroom model in which standard lectures are delivered online outside of class, while class sessions are reserved for discussion and group activities. Verkerke received a University of Virginia Hybrid Challenge Grant to remake the course.

The first-year students in University of Virginia law professor [Rip Verkerke's](#) Contracts course are concentrating on their laptops and clicking through content on a recent Thursday morning, but they're not distracted by Facebook or Twitter. They're taking a brief online quiz testing their understanding of a concept the class has just covered.

Verkerke is one of 10 University of Virginia professors to win a \$10,000 Hybrid Challenge Grant to convert a fall-semester course into a "hybrid technology-enhanced" offering ([More](#)). Though Verkerke has long been at the forefront of using technology in class — he's built course websites for over a decade and was the first UVA law professor to audio record all of his lectures — he has taken a quantum leap this year in reimagining how to teach Contracts with online tools and a new understanding of how students learn.

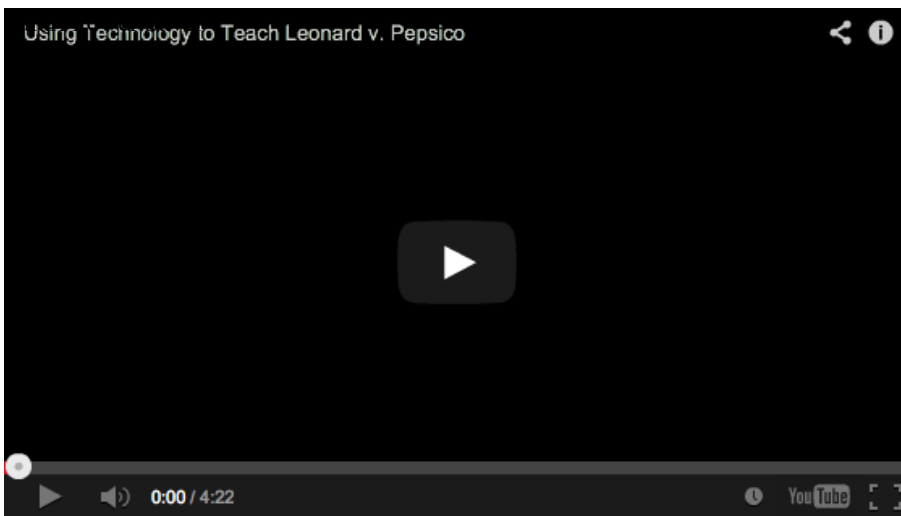
"I put all my materials and my course through an atomizer, and now 'I'm reassembling the bits in a whole new way," Verkerke said. "I've drawn the guiding principles for this new approach from research on teaching and learning, and from the insights of cognitive psychologists. The overriding goal is to harness the power of 'doing' to promote deeper learning for students."

Verkerke's redesigned course uses a "flipped" classroom model, in which students watch pre-recorded lectures outside of class and participate in more interactive learning inside the classroom, a practice now being touted by many educational experts. This model has become increasingly popular in undergraduate classrooms, Verkerke said, particularly for science and engineering instruction, but it has not been used widely in law schools. Paired with team-based peer instruction, Verkerke believes this method could transform students' learning experiences in traditional law school classes.

"I've always taught Contracts in a completely Socratic dialogue," he said, which means asking individual students a series of questions to illuminate a legal concept for the entire class. "So I have to think very carefully about which parts of the material really don't need that Socratic dialogue, that really are better just presented as a screencast video lecture so that students can pause, rewind, view again, easily take notes, and so on."

Now Verkerke records most of his lectures sitting at his desk in his office while navigating PowerPoint slides for students to view at home. Class time is primarily reserved for problem-solving exercises, small-group discussions and making sure that students understand the materials and lectures they covered at night. The course is supported not only by a binder of collected readings, but also a website that allows Verkerke to post materials, administer quizzes and participate in online discussion forums. It's a new way of teaching law, and a new way for students to learn it.

"The instructor is available to provide guidance and mentorship, to answer questions and to provoke students to think more deeply about the issues," Verkerke said, while admitting, "I am a complete novice at this approach to teaching. I feel like a first-year professor again. It's kind of exciting, but in a way it's also quite frightening."



Verkerke started thinking about changing his teaching model after reading about flipped classrooms in publications like the Chronicle of Higher Education. He recognized he was already spending a significant amount of time guiding students individually or in small groups outside of class.

"I think those individual and small group discussions are often some of the most valuable teaching I do," he said.

In May, Verkerke, who was also recently among the inaugural class of faculty elected to the [University Academy of Teaching](#), started to develop ideas about how to run a flipped course through the UVA Teaching Resource Center's weeklong [Course Design Institute](#).

Over the summer he experimented with online learning tools and settled on Canvas, an online learning management system that is also used by the Darden School of Business, to serve as a course website. He integrates other tools as well, including Learning Catalytics (for in-class surveys and quizzes), Panopto (for recording lectures) and Piazza (for online discussions).

Applying for UVA's competitive Hybrid Challenge Grant cemented Verkerke's commitment to the new model. Announced and awarded this summer, the grants are a new collaboration between UVA President Teresa Sullivan and the Faculty Senate to promote creative uses of technology that enhance on-Grounds courses.

"We tend to get set in our ways," Verkerke said. Designing a hybrid course "freed me of the rigid order that I had maintained before and allowed me to rethink the organization of each class session at a fairly

fundamental level."

Though the first-year students in Verkerke's class are new to law school, their Contracts course stands apart.



"It's really very different from all of my other first-year classes," Colin Downes said. "The classroom experience becomes a lot more informal and immediate because Rip has a good sense of where everyone's at and what he needs to focus on."

Classmate Shannon Hayes praised the amount of work it was apparent Verkerke has already put into the new course.

Colin Downes

"I sent him a message in one of the online resource interfaces at 11:49 [p.m.] and I had a response at 11:52 — I'm not kidding, that's a three-minute turnaround," she said. "That's absolutely insane."

Throughout the semester, students take quizzes at night so Verkerke can gauge their understanding of the materials. Most are true/false or multiple-choice, but the final question is open-ended and the same each time: "What aspect(s) of the materials in this module did you find most difficult or confusing?"

"The student responses are really revealing," he said. "Sometimes they'll ask very subtle and clever questions that raise interesting issues and provoke more discussion. So I've found that dialogue to be quite rewarding. I feel as though I'm doing something good for them in focusing on precisely the point they found confusing."

Downes said the work at night allows them to accomplish more in class.

"[Verkerke will] rework his lecture overnight in response to what he's seeing in the quizzes that are coming in," Downes said. "He's making an effort to make that feedback immediately a part of his pedagogy."



In a typical law school classroom, Verkerke said, students are reluctant to admit confusion, and there's not much time to explore which topics are most problematic, and whether all students understand a concept.

In Thursday's class, when the survey results on the projector screen show that the 30 students are split on the right answer, Verkerke breaks them into "law firm" groups (they gave themselves names like "The Corner," "Five Guys" and "Charlie's Angels") to discuss and come to a consensus on the correct answer. He circulates among the groups, occasionally dropping a key idea to get students on track, or confirming that they already are headed down the right path. When he reconvenes the class, they take the survey again. This time, they have it right.

"They'll discuss and debate and argue in their groups much more vigorously than they ever do early in

the semester or maybe even ever in a conventional class," Verkerke said. "They're going at each other and they're making good arguments, interesting arguments. And I get to listen in and guide them towards a better understanding of each question we consider in class."

Verkerke said he's noticed that students feel empowered by reporting the results of the group's discussion back to the entire class.

"It's kind of nice to be able to bounce ideas off each other and come up with our approach," Hayes said.

The students' first exercise was to negotiate their own classroom policies, guided by a series of surveys whose results could be viewed real-time on a projector screen.

"It was cool to see this graphical representation of how people's attitudes changed really quickly in response to things we were talking about in class," Downes said. "His goal for it was to teach us the difficulty of consensus-building in multiparty environments. That tool definitely made that exercise really interesting."



Shannon Hayes

Orchestrating class in this new environment can also be a challenge — one window on Verkerke's podium monitor shows what the class sees, another shows survey results, and still other windows may show PowerPoint or other teaching materials Verkerke has ready to project at any time.

"And then there's just the dynamic of how you move around the classroom, what you say when you get to a group, [and] how do you gauge when to cut off group discussion as opposed to giving more time — those are all things where I feel like I'm at the very beginning of discovering how best to teach using these new methods," Verkerke said.



In one classroom exercise, students were asked to distill five or six of the most important elements of the legal concept of restitution. The results appeared as a word cloud.

"It gave you this very visual sense of how people in class had weighted different elements," first-year law student Colin Downes said.

Unlike most law classes where grades are based on a single final exam, students' final grades will be based on multiple assignments throughout the semester, including frequent quizzes, written preparation for class, two midterm essay exams, simulations and in-class exercises. Instead of the traditional final exam, students will prepare a final learning portfolio in which they collect examples of their work throughout the semester and write an essay that documents the content, scope and quality of what they have learned, along with reflections about how they have developed as learners.

"A key part of developing the ability to be a lifelong learner is to develop the capacity for self-reflection," Verkerke said. "And the purpose of this part of the course design is to help students develop that skill."

Despite the time commitment and work involved, Verkerke plans to bring his new teaching method to his employment law classes in the spring as well — perhaps a greater challenge since it will involve a total of 100 students instead of the 30 in his current Contracts course.

"I will have to dial back the number of assignments that I comment on [online]," he said.

Verkerke said he is transforming his courses so that students are not simply "observers" in a classroom where a professor is engaging with only a few students. His goal is to have "as many students making arguments as much of the time as possible, and having them listen to their classmates' arguments and trying to persuade their peers and wrestle with difficult legal problems."

"In a way, I think it might be easier for someone who's a first-time teacher to construct such a class from scratch because I feel a powerful sense of inertia, a driving need to do what I did last year, because most students thought the course was terrific," he said. "Why shouldn't I just do that again? And I have to keep reminding myself I have an objective here. I am experimenting, but I also have some research-based principles that I'm trying to implement with an eye to improving the learning experience for students."