Good morning, everybody. My topic is Corporate Villains Taking the Bore Out of Law.

So a little bit of background about the course. So a company law is an undergraduate course which is part of the Bachelor of Commerce as well as the Masters of Commerce programs. So it’s for accounting students. The cohorts vary, so we’ve got small cohorts at Logan, around 40 this trimester, all the way up to 300 at Nathan. And the cohorts vary in diversity as well. So from that 300 at Nathan I would say nearly 90% of students are international. And it’s actually their first year at Griffith University because we have QIBT, the students come into – flow into Griffith University. So it is important to retain them. Where I sit within Griffith Business School is the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics. There are eight or nine law academics. We’re a service discipline. So you can think of us as, I don’t know, like the poor cousins of the Griffith Law School. Okay. We’re serving the other majors within the Bachelor of Commerce program, so we have economics, finance, financial planning and accounting majors. And the challenge that we have as law academics within the Griffith Business School, particularly with company law, is that they’ve only done one introductory business law course. And guess what? They get this when they start. Fantastic for building muscle mass. (Laughter) Terrible for actually creating positive perceptions about the course. So when you buy this package, the student is already thinking, “I’m in for one hell of a semester. This is going to be dry, boring, the lecturer is going to be boring, it’s going to be huge legal complex technical questions, blah.” That’s what they generally think. And that’s reflected in the SEC and SET data. And I’ll get to that shortly.

The other challenge that we have is that students’ learning level is not necessarily at its peak at the beginning of the lecture, so the traditional lecture model is, you try and break up the lecture with a series of interactive activities. And Biggs for example has that graph and it shows that their attention level is at their peak at the beginning of the lecture, then it drops; then you need to do an interactive activity, then it picks up; then it drops and you do another interactive activity. The problem with that is, and I disagree with Biggs – I know that’s sacrilegious, but – in my company law course the assumption is that their attention levels are actually at their peak at the beginning of the lecture. That’s actually an incorrect assumption. You’ve got students who have spent 10 hours at work, you have students who are rushing from tutorials, you have students who are talking to their friends, you have students who are on Facebook, you have students who are doing this at the beginning of the lecture – uh, that’s annoying; I just want to pick up the mobile phone and peg it against the wall. I think that would be rather therapeutic (laughter) but I can’t do that. So that’s a challenge. So their attention level is not at their peak. And that’s a challenge for me as a company law lecturer.
And the other problem is identified by Dyer, is that many students without a business background simply can’t relate to the subject matter. So with law students they’ve completed one year of a law degree before they tackle company law. Business students have just done one 10-credit point introductory law course. They find it very difficult to relate to the subject matter through human experience; hence their perception is that it is dry, boring and uninteresting.

So what have I done? Well, I’ve introduced corporate villains, and the relevant teaching method is narrative. So I adopt a storytelling approach at the beginning of the lecture to try and get them up to that peak attention level. So the two objectives of the practice was to engage students in learning by humanising company law. So company law is statute-based. In other words, there’s a lot of legislation, there’s a lot of case law. So there are all sorts of case names and references to legislation. But within the textbooks you don’t have the opportunity of putting a face to a case. And this is what it’s all about. You’re actually humanising the law. You’re demonstrating the relevance of the law for business students. So that was one of the objectives. And then the second objective was to create a more effective learning environment by simply capturing their attention at the beginning of the lecture.

So, in terms of the method, I have a reading guide each week in company law, and I put probably the worst picture of the corporate villain using Google images. Find the worst one, put the picture up there. So we have corporate villains like Christopher Skase, Rodney Adler from the HIH collapse, McDonald from James Hardie, so we have a variety of corporate villains during the semester. Put a face to a case. I select them based on their infamy. It’s got to have some entertainment value, as Jessie has pointed out in her last presentation. And it’s got to have relevance to the topic in that week’s lecture. So it’s not just a random selection. So if I’m going to pick Rodney Adler, I’m going to relate it to the director’s duties content in that week’s lecture. So there’s method behind my madness. In terms of the story, I ask the students right up do they know anything about the corporate villain, and ask them to name the corporate villain. So already I’m getting that interaction right at the beginning of the lecture, engaging the students. And what I try and do is, I incorporate their comments into my story, my narrative. So I appreciate the participation at the beginning of the lecture.

So the typical story is, I go through the villain’s personal corporate background, I describe their misconduct, so during the event – so during the event is actually the legal concepts interwoven into the story – and then I discuss legal consequences. So what happened – was it a breach of a particular section or sections of the Corporations Act? And then I do a post-script after the event. I use the technology in the storytelling process as well, so there is a fantastic Channel 10 video clip of Rodney Adler being led away from [06:35] Prison after serving three years and then being driven into a multimillion dollar mansion owned by his wife. But it personalises the story, and the students like the use of different technology, and there are some examples.

In terms of the evidence, really quickly, 99% of the company law students surveyed in 2010-2011 said I presented the material in an interesting manner. The moral of the story
is, you can’t please everybody. (Laughter) But maybe that’s not the moral of the story, but you know what I mean. And yes, it was statistically significant. There were 155 respondents as well. Okay, so two weren’t happy. And I like this quote, my favourite quote: “The lecturer was effective in communicating the subject matter, and made a seemingly boring subject surprisingly interesting and relevant. And I like my weekly fix of corporate gossip with mugshots to boot.” I like how they connected that, the corporate criminal to the photo and describing it as a mugshot. It also demonstrated relevance. I like the fact that they were able to put the learning material that I discussed later in the lecture back into perspective. So the students actually took the legal concepts out of the story, related it to the more technical knowledge that they were picking up later in the lecture. So it was actually consolidating their knowledge, which is reflective of a deep learning approach. And fantastic one at the bottom: “A brilliant way of creating interest in the week’s topic. Caused quite a lot of discussion after the lecture.” So they actually discussed these corporate villains, which is great.

To finish off, I presented this idea at a corporate law teachers association conference recently. The major criticism was, “Craig, that sounds great; it’s just entertainment. Oh, this is just entertainment. It is entertaining the students. You can tell a great story, but you’re just entertaining them.” And they are actually half-right. It is actually entertainment, and that’s why it’s called a lecture theatre. It’s a theatre. It’s entertainment. Yes. But what turns it from entertainment into engagement is relevance. You add the relevance. You make sure that you tell the story and relate that story back to the material that week. Add them together, and you’ve got engagement.

So as I pointed out, engagement is one of many weapons used in the retention battle. I was a program director for four years with over 1000 students under my wing. I know it’s a tough battle. You’re fighting a good fight, and you’ve got fantastic commanders in Professor Lucianne and Professor Wilson. That’s all. Thank you.

End of recording