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The Jury’s Still Out: Cognitive Development in First-Year Law Students
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Purpose of Study
The purpose of this study was to provide insights into the cognitive development and meaning making ability of first year law students. Designed from Baxter Magolda’s (1992, 1998 and 2001) longitudinal research on college student epistemological growth, the research looked at the effect of law school Socratic pedagogy on first year law students (1Ls) ability to construct meaning from the material studied in the classroom.

Research Question
Does law school pedagogy, specifically the Socratic Method, impact students ability to make meaning?

Participant Sample
Semi-Structured interviews were conducted with first year law students (1Ls). Five interviews with three males and two females similar in age. All participants were of the same class section as well.

Methods
Semi-Structured interviews were conducted in a grounded theory approach. Additionally a questionnaire was administered to determined the level of epistemological development.

Domains
- Role of Learner
- Role of Peers
- Role of Instructor
- Evaluation
- Nature of Knowledge

Themes
- Understand the information you are receiving
- High expectations to assist in learning
- Teaching v. Not teaching
- Formative assessment to show understanding
- Interpretation of knowledge based on beliefs

Results
- Data analysis revealed that the Socratic Method forces students to reconstruct what they have already constructed.
- Students who are clearly transitioning through the ways of knowing are reframing their thinking in the transitional phase.
- The domains of the ways of knowing are reverted to earlier stages because of the complexity of the legal society.

Discussion
In reality, the Socratic Method does impact development but the data suggest it is a positive impact. The method may need adjusting to allow for skills in addition to knowledge to be learned but overall law students are on the path of exiting law school farther along developmentally than students who do not go.

Selected References