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Becoming a lawyer: the transformation of student identity through stories

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**BECOMING A LAWYER: THE
TRANSFORMATION OF STUDENT IDENTITY
THROUGH STORIES**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

CASSANDRA ELIZABETH SHARP, BA LLB (HONS)

Faculty of Law

December 2006

ABSTRACT

To study law is to invite change. Not just change, but transformation. In the process of becoming lawyers, students interpret stories of law, transform meanings about law, and construct legal identity. Desperate to make sense of the world in which they will one day inhabit, first year law students draw on resources from two cultural realms: the legal and the social. In particular, they use popular stories as one resource to interpret what it means to be lawyer, and as a result students occupy a central place amid the intersection of law, society and fiction.

This thesis is concerned with the interpretation and transformation of meaning about law and lawyering within the social and academic context of law school. Of particular concern are the stories that are interpreted and produced *through* the medium of television and *within* the context of law school. This thesis does not engage with the familiar debate over the way in which law is represented in popular culture, rather it offers a new scholarly perspective on *how* students use these images. Specifically, this thesis examines the significance of stories in students' construction of identity. It does so by empirically analysing the 'talk' of focus groups. These groups were comprised of first year law students, and methodologically sought to address the use of stories within meaning-making processes and the construction of identity.

Drawing from the analysis of these groups, the thesis shows that first year law is a transformative moment in the students' identity construction; and that students use popular stories to interpret (and then retell) the ways in which they view a career in law. It further demonstrates that in their storied responses to popular culture students are grappling with notions of ethics and desperate to become ethically aware. The thesis concludes by arguing that student discussions reflect the imbrication of stories, ethics and identity, and for this reason, urges that stories be given explicit pedagogic value within the law school curriculum.

THESIS CERTIFICATION

CERTIFICATION

I, Cassandra Elizabeth Sharp, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Law, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Cassandra Elizabeth Sharp
15 December 2006

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DETAILS OF PRIOR PUBLICATIONS

Parts of this thesis are based on material that has been published. The details are as follows:

Chapters 2 and 7 – Sharp, Cassandra, 'The "Extreme Makeover" Effect of Law School: Students Being Transformed by Stories' (2005) 12 *Texas Wesleyan Law Review* 233.

Chapter 7 – Sharp, Cassandra, 'Changing the Channel: What to Do with the Critical Abilities of Law Students as Viewers?' (2004) 13(2) *Griffith Law Review* 185.

Chapter 6 – Sharp, Cassandra, 'Scarlet Letter or Chastity Belt? What Legal Dramas of the Twenty-first Century are "Telling" Law Students About a Career in Law' (2002) 5(1) *Legal Ethics* 90.