

# Oh No, Quinn's in Trouble Again



Quinn C. Law

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Fictional Character  
Quinn, a UTC Comm grad, has a propensity for getting in legal trouble. It's the job of Comm 4510, Mass Communication Law & Ethics, to keep Quinn in line. Follow Quinn on the semester long adventure.



64

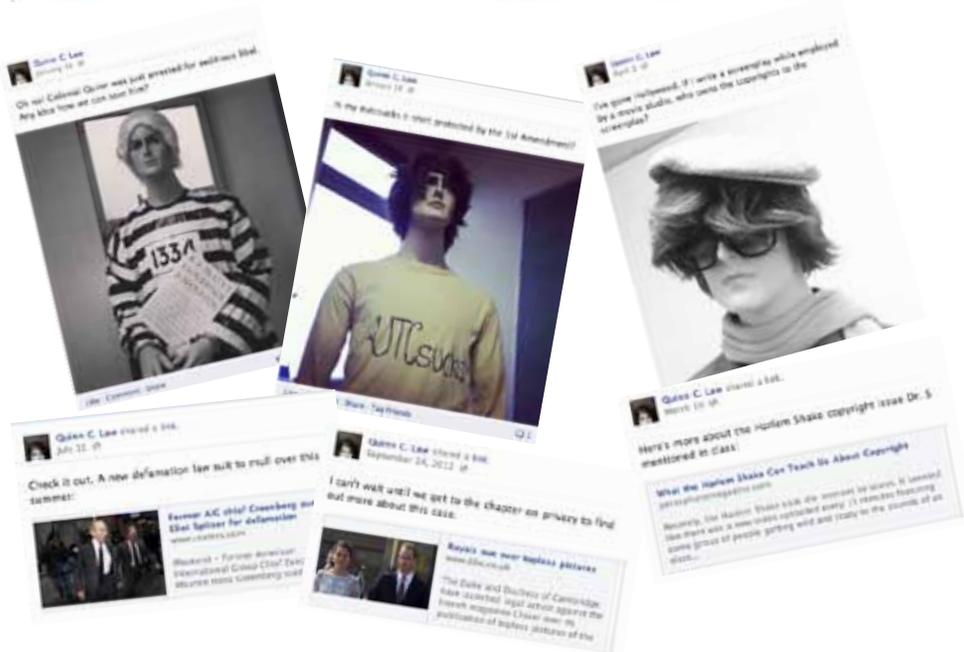


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**Using Team-Based Learning and a  
Fictional Character to Teach Media Law**

## Introduction

Undergraduate students often struggle through media law classes. Some students even complain that the classes are “too hard,” require too much memorization, and seem irrelevant to real life. Yet in reality, communication students need a strong foundation in legal concepts to be effective media professionals.

To make it more relevant, and possibly fun, a media law class was transformed from a traditional lecture course into a team-based learning (TBL) environment focused on solving the legal problems of a fictional character named Quinn.

## Rational

I recently took over a media law class that had a reputation, among students, for being incredibly difficult, irrelevant, and boring. In an attempt to make the course more relevant and even ‘fun’ without losing the rigor of the course, I choose to use a team-based learning approach to the class.

Team-based learning (TBL) is a teaching approach designed to encourage critical thinking and student engagement. In a TBL classroom, the focus is shifted away from the delivery of content through lectures to the application of knowledge through in-class group activities.

TBL provides a structured approach to learning in which students acquire knowledge through out-of-class resources, are quizzed on the basics of that knowledge through in-class individual and group assessments, and then apply that knowledge through group activities. While short lectures are used to clarify information students struggled with in the initial assessments, the majority of in-class time is dedicated to the application and discussion of concepts rather than the conveyance of information

through lectures (Sweet and Michaelsen, 2012).

To make the course more ‘fun’ and relevant I also created Quinn, a fictional character with a propensity for legal trouble. Throughout the semester Quinn was featured in a number of different legal scenarios – everything from being arrested for taking part in an Occupy movement to being sued for defaming a professor. During class sessions students worked in groups to provide Quinn with legal advice and to solve legal scenarios.

By the end of the semester students were able to effectively apply regulations and court cases to legal scenarios and provide Quinn with sound legal advice.

## Implementation

### Course Design

TBL classes are designed using a “backward design” approach. Instead of starting with a list of legal concepts or topics to cover, an instructor starts by identifying the course’s instructional objectives. For example, by the end of the semester I wanted students to be able to:

- identify and apply relevant regulations, common laws, and court cases to legal scenarios,
- identify the protections and limitations of the First Amendment,
- identify and apply key concepts related to defamation,
- demonstrate an understanding of basic intellectual property protections,
- identify and apply privacy torts and laws,
- demonstrate an ability to obtain access to public documents,
- generate a personal ethical statement, and
- apply ethical theories and guidelines to professional scenarios.

Once the course’s instructional objectives are identified, an instructor should use them to determine what topics to cover, what form in-class activities will take, and what means will be used to assess student learning (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008).

### Creating A Fictional Character

Next an instructor needs to create a fictional character to be used in legal scenarios. To make the character more ‘real’ try creating it a background story. For example, Quinn is an alumnus of our department who now works in the local media community. During the semester Quinn holds several jobs and is faced with a number of legal problems.

To give your fictional character a voice, try creating social media accounts for the character. Quinn has his own Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram feeds which he uses to communicate with students. The feeds provide Quinn with a means to ask for legal help and to share legal news he has found. (See [www.facebook.com/QuinnCLaw](http://www.facebook.com/QuinnCLaw))

To make Quinn come alive, a mannequin was purchased so that Quinn can regularly attend class and real-life legal scenarios can be staged. Although the use of a mannequin helped bring Quinn alive, it is in no way required.

### Designing Team-Based Activities

Integral to the TBL approach are in-class team-based learning activities. For a media law class, these activities can take the form of legal scenarios that teams are asked to solve.

Each in-class activity should be designed to lead students through the process of finding and applying relevant regulations and cases to the scenario. Students are

encouraged to consult course materials to help solve the scenario. At the end of each scenario, teams are required to report their decisions to the class, enabling a classroom discussion of relevant legal concepts, and why they may or may not apply to each case.

When creating legal scenarios look to news stories and legal cases for inspiration. Many of Quinn’s legal scenarios are based on real cases, but with some of the facts changed and simplified. For example, over the course of a semester Quinn:

- was thrown out of a university event when he wore an insulting t-shirt.
- faced a prior restraint when he tried to publish top-secret government documents.
- challenged a local law banning alcohol advertising near elementary schools.
- faced a number of copyright and trademark issues when he formed a band called the Jiffy Pops.
- and was sued by Kim Kardashian for commercial appropriation and publication of embarrassing private facts.

At times, it will be appropriate to create legal scenarios that do not involve your fictional character. For example, to make defamation more ‘real’ to the students a legal scenario was created using a story published by our local paper and involving real-life members of our community.

## References

Sweet, M. & Michaelsen L.K. (2008). “The Essential Elements of Team-Based Learning” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 116, p. 7-27.

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