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Integrating Doctrinal Legal Analysis into Undergraduate Legal Education: A Pedagogical Framework

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Abstract: Possessing legal knowledge does not by itself enable a student to decide a case. Actual casework calls for several further judgments. Students must choose the applicable norm, explain the meaning of its key terms, place the provision within the wider legal framework, and connect the facts with each requirement. Courses built mainly around institutions and established doctrines often leave this work in the background. The article brings it into the classroom through a teaching model for doctrinal legal analysis. Students verify legal sources, consult statutory commentaries when a text is unclear, compare connected provisions, and work through the record element by element. The same operations shape assessment. Teachers consider whether the chosen norm is valid and applicable, whether the interpretation rests on adequate reasons, whether related provisions are handled consistently, and whether the facts support the result. The model exposes the reasoning behind an answer. It also gives students a usable method for dealing with new cases and defending their conclusions.

Keywords: Doctrinal legal analysis; Undergraduate legal education; Classroom instruction; Application of law; Legal argumentation

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1. Introduction

An unfamiliar case file often exposes a gap in legal learning. A student may remember the relevant doctrine but still be unsure where to begin. The student must sort the facts, locate the governing provision, explain its wording, and decide whether the facts satisfy each requirement. Textbook-led courses do not always make this work visible. Their chapter structure gives legal knowledge a clear order, but teachers often compress the reasoning process into a finished answer. Students then see the conclusion without seeing the choices that produced it. Undergraduate law teaching has to cover concepts, institutions, and rules, but it must also train students to make those choices for themselves. Studies of legal dogmatics, legal interpretation, and case-

based teaching provide useful ideas. Even so, research has not fully explained what doctrinal legal analysis involves, how teachers should judge student performance, or how classroom exercises can build the required ability.

For purposes of law teaching, this article uses doctrinal legal analysis in a specifically delimited sense. It refers to the method by which students rely on valid legal norms, identify relevant sources of law, interpret those norms, coordinate their systemic relationships, and subsume facts under them in order to reach a case-specific legal conclusion. Doctrinal legal analysis shares with legal dogmatics a commitment to the constraints of positive law and to legal systematization. The discussion focuses on those aspects of legal application that can be translated into structured classroom tasks.

2. Theoretical foundations for introducing doctrinal legal analysis into law teaching

2.1. The positive legal order as the object of doctrinal analysis

Rules currently in force provide the starting point for doctrinal legal analysis. The analyst must establish whether a rule is valid, determine what it requires, and place it alongside other relevant rules. A legal provision does not operate on its own. The Constitution, statutes, administrative regulations, local regulations, and rules together form the positive legal order. Each source holds a particular rank and covers a defined range of matters. Legal dogmatics studies this order and requires legal judgments to be supported by positive law [1]. In China, the Legislation Law specifies who may enact each type of norm, how different norms rank, and when they apply. It gives students a clear basis for deciding which law governs a case. Classroom work should ask students to locate the relevant sources, check their legal force, and explain their choice. Such exercises move students beyond memorizing separate provisions or relying on personal views. Each conclusion must rest on legal authority that other readers can identify and examine.

2.2. Legal interpretation and the meaning of legal norms

Legal interpretation becomes necessary when the wording of a rule cannot answer a case on its own. Statutes deal with general kinds of conduct, but disputes arise from particular people, acts, and circumstances. The same term may also carry another meaning in a different provision or field of law. An interpreter must choose among the possible readings and provide legal grounds for that choice. Positive law regulates this work as well. Article 48 of the Legislation Law states when the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress may exercise the power of legal interpretation [2]. Yet official authority does not give an interpreter the freedom to make rules outside the statute. A proposed reading must find support in the words of the provision, its relation to other rules, and the aim of the legislation. These limits should guide classroom work. Students need to test different readings, identify the stronger one, and explain why it stays within the law. Such practice teaches them to reach and defend a legal meaning for themselves. Memorizing an answer supplied by the teacher cannot develop that ability.

2.3. Subsumption and the application of legal norms to individual cases

Rules speak in general terms; cases come as accounts of particular conduct. Moving from one to the other takes more than quoting a statute. The case record must first be recast in the language of law. Students select facts that could affect the outcome, group them under the conditions of the relevant norm, and put aside the

rest [3]. They then take each condition in turn and explain whether the evidence establishes it. Once that work is complete, the argument can be expressed as a legal syllogism: the norm provides the major premise, the legally framed facts supply the minor one, and the decision follows as the conclusion. Subsumption joins these parts in an actual dispute. A clear account allows others to trace the path from evidence to judgment and question a weak step. Repeated practice turns doctrinal knowledge into a usable way of deciding cases.

3. Components of law students' competence in doctrinal legal analysis

3.1. Identifying applicable legal norms

A sound legal argument depends on the authority chosen to support it. Before looking for provisions, students must work out the legal character of the dispute and the relationship at issue. That framing directs the search across the law in force. Any rule they find remains only a candidate until they check its binding status and reach. The inquiry is practical: Does the rule cover this type of matter, these parties, the relevant time, and the place of the events? Students also have to separate provisions that can ground the judgment from rules that merely help explain it. Commentaries and academic sources may clarify a difficult point, yet they cannot take the place of binding authority. The initial choice of law sets the frame for every step that follows.

3.2. Interpreting legal norms

A provision may support more than one meaning, especially when it uses broad concepts, general clauses, or uncertain terms. At that point, students face a question that ordinary understanding alone cannot answer. They need to define the exact dispute over meaning before choosing a position. The statutory words set the outer frame. The rule's purpose and its connection with surrounding provisions then help narrow the choice. Students compare the possible readings against these grounds and decide which one has the strongest legal support. An adequate answer also marks the boundary of the chosen meaning and explains when it stops applying. Textbooks and teachers may provide a settled conclusion, but that conclusion cannot replace the student's reasoning. The reasons offered for the choice show whether the student can interpret law.

3.3. Systematizing legal norms

The ability to systematize legal norms requires students to understand a particular norm within the broader legal institution to which it belongs. Legal norms may stand in relationships of superior and subordinate authority, general and special regulation, or principle and rule. Reading a single provision in isolation may therefore produce conflicts in application. Students must identify the hierarchy and function of relevant norms and address coordination, overlap, and conflict among them so that the interpretation of an individual norm remains consistent with the governing legal institution and the legal order as a whole. Systematization is consequently a necessary condition for converting the identification and interpretation of norms into a complete legal determination [4].

3.4. Subsuming case facts under legal norms

The ability to subsume case facts under legal norms requires students to identify legally relevant facts by reference to the constituent elements of an applicable norm and to determine whether the facts satisfy each element. Case files contain many facts of ordinary life, but only facts capable of affecting the legal characterization of the relationship or the resulting legal consequence are normatively relevant. Students must

extract material circumstances from the case record, relate them to the elements of the norm, explain why each element is or is not satisfied, and then reach the corresponding legal conclusion. This ability connects norms and facts and is a central indicator of whether students can use legal knowledge to solve concrete problems.

4. Criteria for evaluating competence in doctrinal legal analysis

4.1. Validity and applicability of selected legal norms

Several provisions may appear relevant to the same dispute, yet only one may provide the proper basis for judgment. The evaluator should begin with the source. Who enacted the rule, was the required procedure followed, and was the rule still in force? A failure at this level leaves the provision unable to support the decision. The inquiry then moves from legal existence to case fit. The chosen norm must reach the conduct, persons, time, and place involved. Overlap creates a separate problem. The Legislation Law resolves it through legal hierarchy and the rules that give priority to more specific or later provisions. These checks show whether the student has selected authority that can lawfully carry the conclusion.

4.2. Justifiability of legal interpretation

When a student's interpretation is reviewed, a plausible conclusion is not enough. The reviewer needs to see how the student reached it. One part of the inquiry follows the reasoning forward: Do the premises support the result? The other works backward: What support does the law provide for those premises? Legal argumentation describes the two inquiries as internal and external justification [5]. External support may come from the words of the statute, the provision's connection with surrounding rules, its purpose, and relevant legal principles. A list of sources adds little on its own. The student must explain why those sources favor the proposed meaning and how they work together. A defensible interpretation has a clear path from premise to conclusion, a legal basis for each step, and reasons that another reader can examine.

4.3. Coherence in the treatment of relationships among legal norms

Coherence is grounded in the unity of the legal order. Legal norms form an integrated whole through their hierarchical authority and institutional functions, and the meaning of an individual norm is confirmed within this broader set of relationships. Coherence has three dimensions: compatibility between superior and subordinate norms, coordination among norms at the same hierarchical level, and value-based continuity between specific rules and legal principles [6]. Evaluating the treatment of normative relationships thus requires asking whether a case-specific determination can be situated within the existing legal order and whether it can form, together with related norms, a stable and coherent legal interpretation.

4.4. Rigor of subsumption

The rigor of subsumption is grounded in the legal syllogism and element-based legal analysis. The legal norm constitutes the major premise, the legally characterized facts constitute the minor premise, and the legal consequence follows from the relationship between them. The quality of subsumption depends on whether all relevant elements of the norm have been identified, whether the selected facts are legally relevant, and whether the conclusion follows continuously from the established premises. The elements of the norm provide a framework for classifying facts and delimit the range of facts that may properly enter the legal

determination. The more complete the correspondence among normative elements, element-related facts, and legal consequences, the stronger the inferential foundation of the conclusion. Completeness in covering the elements, accuracy in classifying facts, and continuity in the reasoning process therefore provide the criteria for evaluating the rigor of subsumption.

5. Instructional strategies for integrating doctrinal legal analysis into classroom teaching

5.1. Legal research tasks for identifying applicable norms

Legal research tasks should be organized around the issues in dispute and should specify such basic conditions as the time and place of the conduct and the legal status of the parties. Students first reformulate factual disputes as legal questions. They then derive search terms from the relevant parties, conduct, and legal relationships and locate, in sequence, the core statutory provisions, related provisions, implementing rules, and judicial interpretations. For every norm located, students must verify the issuing authority, hierarchical status, effective date, scope of application, and amendment history. Under Articles 98-106 of the Legislation Law, they must also examine legal validity, applicable conflict rules, and the institutional authority to resolve conflicts among norms. If a conflict must by law be submitted to a competent authority, students should identify that authority and the applicable procedure in their legal research worksheet rather than purporting to determine the priority of application on their own.

To make the research process visible, students may be required to prepare a legal-source research table that records the title of each authority, the specific provision, its current validity, its relationship to the disputed issue, and the reason for its applicability. Instructors may also alter the date of the conduct or the legal status of a party and require students to recheck the relevant version and scope of the norm. Through this process, legal research becomes more than keyword searching: it becomes the problem-oriented selection of legally relevant norms, and the identification of applicable law acquires a transparent foundation in recognized sources of law.

5.2. Statutory commentaries as tools for interpreting legal norms

Statutory commentaries consolidate the legislative history of a provision, its central concepts, doctrinal debates, related norms, and judicial approaches, and thus provide an organized body of material for legal interpretation. An instructor may select provisions involving indeterminate legal concepts, general clauses, or disputed limits of application. Students first develop a preliminary reading based on the provision's ordinary meaning and then examine the alternative interpretations and supporting grounds presented in the commentary. They must distinguish interpretive conclusions from the reasons offered for them and identify the statutory wording, systematic position, legislative purpose, and judicial practice on which each view relies.

Classroom discussion can then compare competing interpretations. Different approaches may begin from the same text but reach different conclusions because they assign different significance to systematic relationships or normative purposes. Students should explain how an interpretation is anchored in the wording of the provision, how it is supported by related norms, and what limits of application it produces. Where a proposed solution goes beyond the range of linguistically possible meanings and requires teleological extension or teleological reduction, students should distinguish legal interpretation from the

further development of the law. They should also determine whether a genuine gap in the law exists and explain the institutional purpose and normative justification of the proposed development. The final analysis should follow the sequence: interpretive issue, alternative readings, normative grounds, weighing of reasons, and interpretive conclusion. Statutory commentaries organize the relevant materials and index the available positions, but the conclusion must rest on the student's independent assessment of the legal reasons.

5.3. Norm mapping and systematic interpretation

Systematic interpretation can be taught effectively through norm mapping. Instructors may select cases that simultaneously engage general and specific provisions, general and special laws, or substantive and procedural norms. Taking the core provision that generates the legal consequence as the central node, students locate relevant definitional provisions, supplementary provisions, exceptions, cross-referencing provisions, and liability provisions, and use connecting lines to indicate the relationships among them. On the vertical dimension, students examine the basis of authority for norms at different hierarchical levels. On the horizontal dimension, they compare the subject matter, constituent elements, and legal consequences of the relevant provisions and determine whether they apply cumulatively, alternatively, supplementarily, or to the exclusion of one another.

After completing the map, students prepare a short explanation of the order in which the norms apply, why the core provision directly governs the case, and how other provisions supplement or limit its operation. When norms potentially conflict, students should propose a method of coordination by reference to hierarchical authority, special provisions, and the purpose of the relevant legal institution. The map makes the normative structure visible, while the written explanation reveals the logic of application. Together, they transform dispersed provisions into a coherent normative framework capable of supporting a case-specific conclusion.

5.4. Element-based analysis for subsuming case facts

Rather than retelling the case from beginning to end, element-based analysis starts from the rule that controls the legal outcome. Its form depends on the subject. A civil law course may use the basis of a claim, while criminal law may focus on the definition of an offence. In administrative law, the same method can be built around the conditions for lawful action. The class separates the chosen rule into specific questions about the person, conduct, object, fault and other required conditions. A five-part chart can be used to record the element, relevant fact, supporting proof, disputed issue and tentative finding.

Students sort the facts according to their legal relevance instead of following the order in which events occurred. Agreed matters need little discussion. More attention goes to an element that remains uncertain or may decide the case. Students clarify what the element requires, compare the facts supporting each position and state whether the requirement has been satisfied. They should not fill factual gaps with assumptions. If the available material is incomplete, the missing information and its effect on the conclusion must be made clear. This approach separates three different tasks: interpreting the rule, establishing the facts and applying the rule to those facts. Unsupported conclusions are therefore easier to identify. A teacher may later change one decisive detail, such as the actor's knowledge, the timing of an act or the seriousness of the harm. Students then reconsider only the elements affected by that change. The revised reasoning can be presented as a legal memorandum. Although its form may vary, the memorandum should show the applicable rule, the factual basis for each finding and the resulting legal consequence. The reader must be able to trace every

conclusion to both law and evidence.

The exercise leaves four records: a source chart, an interpretation sheet, a norm map and an element review chart. Together, they reveal whether students have chosen the correct authority, explained their interpretation, understood the links between rules and connected the evidence to each element. Since these records are produced during the analysis, teachers can find weaknesses early and students can revise their work before reaching a final conclusion.

6. Conclusion

The central purpose of integrating doctrinal legal analysis into classroom teaching is to require students to assume responsibility for constructing legal conclusions. Statutory provisions are transformed from static items of knowledge into grounds for case-specific judgment, while case facts enter legal reasoning only after they have been screened and organized by reference to normative elements. Classroom learning therefore moves from receiving conclusions to formulating and justifying them. This transition depends on a sequenced curriculum, case materials involving genuine disputes about applicable norms, and instructor guidance directed at the reasoning process. Different fields of law must adapt the framework to their own normative structures. When training in doctrinal legal analysis becomes a stable component of everyday teaching, it can create sustained conditions for students to develop disciplined legal reasoning and can provide a foundation for advanced legal study and professional practice.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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