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Paying It Forward to Build the Perfect Lawyer

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Paying it Forward to Build the Perfect Lawyer

Much has changed since I first started teaching legal writing as an adjunct professor in 1995. Back then, students actually used books to research and Shepardize, thought through answers to their own questions before looking them up on the internet, and more often than not, preferred in-person meetings to email. My, how times have changed! However, several things have not changed since 1995: my passion for teaching and reaching my students and my commitment and dedication to knowledge of my craft, thorough class preparation, and constructive feedback.

My primary teaching goals each year as a legal writing professor are simple: 1) to teach students to write, research, and practice law effectively and creatively; 2) to help students internalize sound legal writing practices by providing extensive, clear feedback on drafts and graded assignments; and 3) to model professionalism and respect in the practice of law.

In my classes, I ensure that students learn concrete, practical, and transferable skills that they can and will use for the rest of their legal careers. To combat the frustration that many of my students feel when they first realize that legal writing and being a lawyer is not a science, but instead an art to be

mastered, I reassure them from the outset that eventually all of them will learn to “write like a lawyer” and become full-fledged members of the legal discourse community. To bolster this reassurance and gain student buy-in to what initially seems to some like an unattainable goal, I use my classroom as a place where students learn by example and doing. My classroom is a place where student opinions are respected, individuality is not quashed, and the professor is not always right. When I first started teaching, one semester out of law school, I thought that I had to know all of the answers because I was the professor. I now realize that my students teach me something in every class. I embrace learning from my students, many of whom look at a fact pattern or legal problem differently than I do.

Throughout my teaching career, my students have frequently called me a “velvet hammer,” and I embrace this description. I am a challenging professor with high standards for my students. I believe, however, that I should have the same high expectations for myself that I have for my students. If I expect students to give their all to my class, then I need to give them my all in return. Giving my all to my students is time-consuming, yet invaluable and extremely rewarding. One

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way that I give my all to my students is by providing them with honest, helpful feedback on their writing. Constructive and significant feedback on student drafts and work product is critical if we want to teach students to become good legal writers and lawyers. I make sure that on each assignment every student knows both what she did correctly (because many would not otherwise know they did something correctly) and what needs to be improved. This feedback level, while perhaps daunting at first, helps students move forward to the next assignment or the next job task, confident in what they are doing well and poised to do better on the areas in which they need to improve.

So what, you may ask, does this self-reflection have to do with you, my loyal readers? For those of you who haven't yet read between the lines, these are all practices and techniques that you should use as partners, senior associates, or anyone who has the opportunity (dare I say pleasure?) of supervising a junior attorney. How you act and react to those you oversee is critical in producing skillful, self-sufficient lawyers. A little bit of patience at the outset goes a long way in teaching new lawyers to be the future stars of their profession; a short-term investment will produce a long-term payoff.

Now, sure, the real world practice of law is different from the ivory tower we call academia, but the same principles apply. Law school teaches students how to think "like a lawyer," how to write "like a lawyer," and even how to dress and speak "like a lawyer," but it does not and cannot teach students how to be adept lawyers in a particular practice area. Much of learning to be a lawyer happens on the job as a junior attorney who, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, waits eagerly to soak up the knowledge and expertise of her elders. It may seem counter-productive at first to invest the time to teach new lawyers. It seems easier and faster to do each task yourself. But if you spend time teaching these skills, your apprentices will become the great lawyers the legal community needs to fortify the profession in the future. It's easy to forget that we were once junior attorneys with little idea of what we were doing. We all had great mentors who made us better. We, too, should pay it forward to build the perfect future lawyer. ■

Questions, comments, or suggestions, novice or expert, are welcomed at dspratt@wcl.american.edu.