

GROUNDING THE HELICOPTER

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While I attended many fantastic sessions at the 2018 LWI Biennial Conference, the one that most resonated with my work was Emily Grant's session on "Helicopter Professors,"¹ based on her recently published article by the same title.² Professor Grant challenged her audience to think about the ways in which, while trying to support our students, we actually hinder their personal development. She argued that helicopter professors, much like helicopter parents, inhibit our students' development of judgment, problem-solving skills, and self-directed learning.

Listening to that argument initially, I was frankly a little smug, thinking that I was doing a good job hitting the right balance of setting high expectations, giving students the tools to meet them, and letting them be responsible after that. But then a few of Professor Grant's statements hit home, such as "We have to be willing to let them fail, even the ones we really, really like." Like many professors, I am comfortable letting students fail when they do not use the tools I give them or neglect to put in the needed time. But I recognized myself when Professor Grant talked about being overly permissive in accepting excuses for missed deadlines and providing redundancies and reminders that should be eliminated to make students responsible for class deadlines the way they will be in practice.

Even more challenging for me was Professor Grant's advice to use scaffolds (such as rubrics, handouts, and checklists) sparingly. I have been working recently on a number of projects related to "teaching for transfer," *i.e.* helping students to take what they learn in foundational legal writing courses and apply it effectively in externships, clinical courses, and legal practice beyond school. My most recent article, *Cracking Student Silos: Linking Legal Writing and Clinical*

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¹ Emily Grant, Helicopter Professors, LWI Biennial Conference, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (July 12, 2018).

² Emily Grant, *Helicopter Professors*, 53 GONZ. L. REV. 1, 3 (2018).

Learning through Transference, argues that legal writing and clinical faculty should work together to provide effective scaffolding that will help students link what they learn in our foundational courses to their work in clinics and into practice.³ However, Professor Grant argued that too much scaffolding creates helplessness, undercutting students' ability to be self-directed learners.

I've thought a lot about that observation since the conference, and I've realized that her challenge helps make my own thinking more nuanced. Handouts and other scaffolds are, as I've long thought, valuable at the beginning of our courses in helping students connect what we are teaching to their prior learning. Additionally, providing explicit scaffolding for students early in their learning helps them "stretch forward" to future applications of what they are learning so they can better remember and apply it later. However, Professor Grant is right that these tools should be used thoughtfully and that we should rely on them less as we move through our courses. For example, she argued that we serve students better later in our courses by empowering them to create rubrics or revision checklists rather than continuing to provide them these materials once students have learned enough to be able to do so. Similarly, I plan to shift this year to asking students to think about how what they are learning now will apply later, rather than always drawing those connections for them. I can better empower students by asking questions and by giving them space to explore than by providing everything they need myself.

I appreciate Professor Grant's insights on how to be careful about providing too much of a good thing, in a variety of different ways. I look forward to reflecting more deeply on other insights in her *Helicopter Professors* article about ways I can fine-tune my teaching to avoid unintended consequences from my attempts to support students.

³ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3234384.