

WHEN THE PROFESSOR HAS NO CLOTHES

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Never convey anything other than absolute certainty when answering a question. Never talk about your kids. Never admit that the plan is not set in stone. Never dress too casually. Never show too much emotion. Never go too long without a professional-looking haircut. Never admit to having personal views on the third-rail—racism. Or on the other third-rail—sexism. Or the third third-rail—politics. And certainly, never give your students a glimpse of your bedroom.

These are but a few of the “nevers” that I have been conditioned to observe as a female professor without security of employment in a field that tends to be both dominated by women and undervalued by the larger legal academe.¹ Supportive friends, junior colleagues in the same position, and mentors have offered up some of these “nevers” as pragmatic advice. Many “nevers” go without saying, and I take them as a given because I live in the world—or, at least, I used to.²

I do all these things—or rather, I don’t do them—to establish my credibility with my students. The play is to hide just enough of who I am as a person to establish myself as a credible authority on the practice of law and legal writing and as a competent and fair teacher.

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¹ Renee Nicole Allen, Alicia Jackson, & DeShun Harris, *The “Pink Ghetto” Pipeline: Challenges and Opportunities for Women in Legal Education*, 96 U. DET. MERCY L. REV. 525, 526–27 (2019).

² There is a sizeable body of scholarship and commentary on the disadvantages female professors across fields face relative to their male peers with respect to student perceptions of their competency. *See, e.g.*, Kristina M.W. Mitchell & Jonathan Martin, *Gender Bias in Student Evaluations*, 51(3) PS: POLITICAL SCIENCE & POLITICS 648 (2018); Maggie Doherty, *Something Has to Give: ‘Professionalism’ Is Gendered—and Women Lose*, CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (Apr. 1, 2018); Annmarie Caño, *The Credibility Gap in Academe*, CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION (Dec. 6, 2017); Mary Katharine Fischer Clune, *Students’ Perceptions of Instructor Credibility: Effects of Instructor Sex, Gender Role, and Communication Style* (2009) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas), <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/5973>.

This credibility strategy has several flaws as a matter of principle.³ But in the current age, there is also a far more basic and practical problem. Over the past several months, it has been impossible for me to pretend that I am not a complex, multi-faceted person who occasionally makes mistakes. Since March, I have answered, “I am not sure” to myriad questions. I have adjusted the schedule and syllabus frequently to account for new emergencies and developments in the world beyond my classroom. I have had unplanned guest appearances by my young children to my office hours. I have choked up talking about Jacob Blake in a Monday morning class. Then a few weeks later, I abruptly had to pause mid-sentence during a Zoom feedback meeting with a student when my laptop lit up with alerts of Justice Ginsburg’s passing. And I have done all this from a makeshift desk in my bedroom.

In short, under the rules for establishing credibility that I had been teaching by, this professor has no clothes. I have been stripped of all of the regalia of credibility and competence that I put on in prior years.

And what has been the result? Some of the most productive and fulfilling interactions with students that I have ever had. In class, students seem more accepting of my complex answers to complex questions. They are more patient when I answer, “it depends,” and, instead of interrupting me to press for a singular answer, they hear out my explanations. In our feedback meetings, students seem less defensive and more receptive of constructive feedback. They also seem to accept my praise for their work more readily. They seem to trust me.

I have been reflecting on why these positive interactions are happening at precisely the moment when my credibility should be in

³ For one, it accommodates rather than challenges the institutionalized sexism that women face in academe and society more broadly. When I make these efforts, I tacitly accept that it is not enough to establish my expertise that I spent nearly a decade practicing law at one of the country’s top firms and almost as many years since then teaching legal writing and legal skills full-time. It also leaves unexamined the extent to which professors who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color are also placed at a similar and often heightened credibility disadvantage because of different institutionalized inequalities that I am privileged enough not to face as a white woman. See Kerry Chávez & Kristina M.W. Mitchell, *Exploring Bias in Student Evaluations: Gender, Race, and Ethnicity*, 53(2) PS: POLITICAL SCIENCE & POLITICS 270 (2020). My defensive posture also implies acceptance of the biases of the academe that undervalue my course and therefore my expertise.

doubt and have come to the following conclusion. In these unprecedented times, there have been two complementary shifts in the classroom dynamic that have made it easier for my students and me to trust one another and to engage as true collaborators.

The first shift is that the forced intimacy of working and learning from home has made it impossible for me to project a “sage on the stage” persona.⁴ Likewise, I am seeing pieces of my students’ lives outside the classroom that in years past would have been hidden from me. As a result, we are better able to actually see one another.

My students can more clearly see my intent—which has always been not only to coach them toward their best performance in the course, but also to equip them to independently meet the demands of the profession in the long term. That my students can see my intentions helps when I challenge them to answer questions for themselves. They are less likely to view my responses as prevarications and more likely to see them for what they are—efforts to help them push their work and their professional development forward.

For my part, I am more acutely aware of how vulnerable my students are and how much work they are putting into the course. The first year of law school has always been hard, and I have always accounted for that fact in my teaching. But the special circumstances of this year have led to workshops and conferences, messages from law school administrators, and moments of self-reflection highlighting the herculean task that our students are facing. With the challenges that students are facing front of mind, it has been easier for me to see the best in them and to think of weak points in their work as gaps in understanding that we can work through together. I have found it is easier to resist jumping to the conclusion that a student’s weak work is the result of a lack of effort, time management, or ability. This mindset was good pedagogy before the pandemic, but the current circumstances have made it easier for me to achieve and maintain it consistently.⁵

⁴ Alison King describes the “sage on the stage” as a professor “who has the knowledge.” Alison King, *From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side*, 41 C. TEACHING 30 (1993). The sage’s knowledge is complete and total. She is omnipotent in a way that I can only pretend to be.

⁵ One of the best pieces of advice that I received when I began teaching came from Andrew W. Williams, then and now the Director of the Lawyering Program at NYU School of Law. Andy urged me to never assume that poor work by a student was the product of a lack of effort, but rather to assume that what I was seeing on the page was the student’s best effort and to begin

While a change in mindset can be transformative, I do not believe that this shared spirit of openness between professor and student is solely responsible for the productive collaborations we have had this year. Or rather, I think it is not the only mindset that has shifted. This year students received the message, more directly and emphatically than in years past, that they are responsible for their own learning and must take the initiative.⁶ It is not news that student-directed learning is associated with positive learning outcomes.⁷ What has been new for me this year is that students have more readily accepted a leading role in their legal education. I have found that they are more willing to earnestly engage with me when I turn their questions around on them and ask, “Well, what do you think would work best here given your goals?” We are able to work together to get to the answers, precisely

each feedback moment by asking what the student had been trying to do in the particular passage and going from there.

⁶ With the rush to emergency remote learning in March 2020 and then again as the fall semester was about to start, a host of “tips for success” lists sprouted up on-line, some specifically aimed at law students and some designed for post-collegiate learners more broadly. A common theme on these lists was that students need to be proactive in a number of ways when learning on-line. *See, e.g.*, Christopher Drew, *Student Guide to Online Learning Success* (Aug. 14, 2020), <https://www.publicservicedegrees.org/resources/student-guide-to-online-learning>; Northeastern University Graduate Programs, *Tips for Taking Online Classes: 8 Strategies for Success* (Mar. 26, 2020), <https://www.northeastern.edu/graduate/blog/tips-for-taking-online-classes>; Shelley Awe, *How to Survive Virtual Law School and Maintain Your Sanity* (Mar. 16, 2020), <https://www.vault.com/blogs/vaults-law-blog-legal-careers-and-industry-news/how-to-survive-virtual-law-school-and-maintain-your-sanity>; Law School Success, *Six Strategies for Successful Online Learning* (Mar. 15, 2020), <https://lawschoolacademicsuccess.com/2020/03/15/six-strategies-for-successful-online-learning>; University of Colorado, Denver, *How to Succeed as a Remote Learner*, <https://www.ucdenver.edu/offices/office-of-information-technology/get-help/learning-remotely/how-to-succeed-as-a-remote-learner> (last visited Oct. 17, 2020); Minnesota State, *What Makes a Successful Online Learner?*, <https://careerwise.minnstate.edu/education/successonline.html> (last visited Oct. 17, 2020).

⁷ *See* Lindsey P. Gustafson, *Remediating in Teams*, 22 *J. LEGAL WRITING: J. LEGAL WRITING INST.* 56 (2018); Warren Binford, *How to Be the World's Best Law Professor*, 64 *J. LEGAL EDUC.* 542, 552–53 (2015); J. Christopher Rideout & Jill J. Ramsfield, *Legal Writing: A Revised View*, 69 *WASH. L. REV.* 35, 68 (1994); Alison King, *From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side*, 41 *C. TEACHING* 30 (1993).

because they walked into the course expecting that they would have to generate solutions for themselves.

I cannot help but think what will happen when the state of the world changes once again, as it inevitably will, and things return to something approximating the old normal. For my part, going forward, I will convert some of the “nevers” under which I formerly taught to a series of “sometimes,” and share a little bit more of myself with my students (though I will certainly go back to making glimpses of my bedroom off limits). My hope is that by doing so I can maintain the positive aspects of the vulnerability that the circumstances of this year imposed upon us all, so that my students can better see me. I have also recommitted myself to not assuming that I can prejudge why a piece of student work turned out the way it did and to asking questions of my students, so that I can better see them.

Re-creating some of the messaging around the necessity of students taking ownership over their own learning may be harder to do once the exigencies of this year have passed. However, this year will not be soon forgotten, and I suspect that it has reset many of the expectations that our future students might otherwise have had on entering law school. All of us right now, whether we are learning, working, or just navigating the day-to-day, have had no choice but to demonstrate tremendous resilience and agency. Our future students will come to us having become accustomed to relying on themselves while calling in reinforcements as needed and extending support to others when they can. In short, they will be familiar with both taking the initiative and benefitting from collaboration.

And so I will—as I have always done—highlight for my students that they are in charge of their professional development and that the first step toward building a successful career is assuming responsibility for their own learning. I will stress that they will learn more if they take the lead and affirm that I will be right there to support and guide them. But at the beginning of the next academic year, I will say it with more optimism, confidence—and credibility.