

THE DISRUPTION OF MY TEACHING PERSONA

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How can I coach someone who doesn't show up on the field? How do I cheer on someone who does not seem to be engaging in the learning process with me? These questions have been on my mind throughout the tumult of 2020. Over thirteen years of teaching legal writing, I have honed a teaching persona in which I envision myself as a coach, leading and encouraging students toward growth in legal writing. I intentionally message being on their team and sharing their goals. Warmth and good humor flow through the room. From the start of our time together, I tell students that our class will be marked by high challenge with high support.

But with the shift to online learning in March of 2020 and the ensuing struggles with technology, health, racial inequality, and civil unrest, more students seem to be in danger of falling through the cracks. My classroom persona has depended on our actually being together in the same space. I have had to reimagine who I am in the classroom. Heck, I've had to reimagine what the classroom is. What had run like a well-oiled machine has been disrupted. I find myself wondering how to balance the need to adjust to the external challenges with the desire to stay true to the teaching persona I have developed and the philosophy that underpins it.

While I am still discovering what works best, I have found ways to stay true to my teaching persona in these challenging times, while developing new ways to connect with students. New pressures have certainly arisen—I don't want to shift from coach to nanny for the students who are struggling, and some of the things I'm doing are taking more time than my traditional methods—but I am still myself and they are still learning.

Development of a Teaching Persona

I have given a lot of thought to how I present myself and connect with students in the classroom because of my early experiences

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teaching legal writing. My first year teaching, I was straight out of practice and ambivalent about certain material in the assigned LRW curriculum. When I talked about citation, for example, I bored even myself, punctuated only by negative comments. The bottom line was how I honestly felt—you have to do it, but it's horrible. Shrug. In hindsight, my candor was not helpful for the students. At the end of that first semester, I nervously went through the course evaluations. A few were kind. Some were okay. Some were critical. This one stung the most, "get someone who wants to teach this class." That hurt because I DID want to be there. A LOT. What was getting lost? I regrouped for the spring, trying to incorporate some student feedback, but still not having a fully thought-out approach.

Fortunately, that summer I went to my first LWI Biennial Conference. It was 2008 in Indianapolis, and the plenary presentation was Mary Beth Beazley, Sheila Simon, and Hollee Temple talking about adopting a classroom persona. They discussed being the Rockstar, the Coach, and the Ogre.¹ Anyone there likely still remembers that session. They demonstrated how they projected an energy and persona into the classroom. I realized I needed to change my teaching style. I knew the material, but I was sending out negativity and getting back more negativity. If I wanted even remotely positive student energy, I needed to send out positive energy. I realized that the classroom is reflective.

I decided that my classroom persona would be that of the coach/mentor. I wanted to be on the same team as my students, our interests aligned. I worked with some experienced teachers, and I apprenticed myself to them. Over the years, I gained more confidence and observed the desired effect on my students. I regularly received feedback confirming that students saw me as supportive yet willing to challenge them to grow as legal writers.

What do my students need from me now?

When we moved to online classes in the spring of 2020, and as I have continued them though the fall, while now offering a Hy-flex option (meaning students can attend in-person or online), I have found that my reliance on student buy-in and reciprocation of energy has sometimes made for a difficult transition. I want to coach students

¹ See generally *Plenary Session at LWI*, LEGAL WRITING PROF BLOG (Jul. 16, 2008), <https://lawprofessors.typepad.com/legalwriting/2008/07/plenary-session.html>.

who are present and engaged. But they are Zoomed out, and often I am, too. When I am trying to connect with numerous little square pictures and see if they are on the same page with me, I can't even tell if they are still in our class or if they've opened another browser and are engrossed in something else entirely. When I have students both in-person and online simultaneously, even knowing where to look is a challenge. I'm grateful for technology, but I'm also concerned about students and whether they are getting what they need.

My sense, unsurprisingly, is that students are struggling. I have struggled, too. As the spring 2020 semester closed, the relationships built throughout the prior semester and a half carried us through. We were still on the same team, and we all limped over the finish line. The pandemic and the effects of racial injustice do affect all students, but not equally. Some students struggled more than others, and under the circumstances, I was as supportive and understanding as possible.

Certain aspects of my typical teaching persona, however, have always required students to show up and try. My high expectations include students arriving prepared, being mentally present, completing assignments on time, and making an effort. As a law school professor, that seems reasonable to expect. I don't want to lower those expectations. Now, though, I am finding that to keep the team intact, I am having to track them down. It's the high-school-coaching equivalent of driving to their house and pulling them out of bed when they aren't at practice. While the most serious of these concerns are only for a small group of students, they're enough that I have been rethinking my entire approach.

DISRUPTION: Annoying or an opportunity for growth, or both?

Where I have landed, so far, in our "new normal" is to keep my usual persona, but to vary the opportunities for students to connect with me. I have one live class a week with each of my two sections where I do my best to engage, push, and encourage, but I have assembled a collection of other chances to connect and sprinkled them liberally throughout the semester. These include small group meetings of 4-5 students to discuss their memo organization, citation study halls, more individual conferences, live grading, phone calls, emails, and videos. The more personal it is, the more effective it seems to be. I have made more of these opportunities mandatory, as well, to force those on the sidelines to stay engaged. It's more heavy-handed than my traditional approach, but some students seem to need that.

As most students are rarely on campus these days and not as connected to each other as usual, my hypothesis is that they are lacking the positive peer pressure of students discussing what they need to be doing.

An example that worked particularly well was the citation study hall. Our students have no Friday classes, so I invited them to come to my Zoom room for an hour and a half on Friday morning the week before a set of Interactive Citation Workbook exercises were due. As students arrived, I put 3-4 of them into each breakout room and I stayed in the main room. I encouraged them to work together, but I was available to answer questions. This format allowed them to connect and work together, just like they might have in our Commons area in person. About half of my students showed up, and many stayed even past the designated time frame.

As for individual conferences and live grading, Zoom has been a fantastic platform to share iPad screen and mark up their drafts while students watch. These discussions feel just as productive as, if not more productive than, sitting across a desk. From a coaching perspective, the big team meeting has its place, but individual attention helps course-correct the most. There's also a sizable number of students who do not feel comfortable asking questions over Zoom.

The biggest challenge so far, particularly with those who are struggling, is that I do not want to hound students and take upon myself all of students' life and course-administration burdens. Finding a balance between sending appropriate reminders and handholding is challenging. A coach can't step in the game for a player who is out; my students need to develop skills to manage their calendar and schedule, too.

Allocation of my time is the next biggest challenge. Creating all of these meetings and opportunities to connect is absolutely more time-intensive. Zoom fatigue is real. I am on screens constantly, in addition to the three hours a week I am both on a screen and in-person. These methods of connecting are taking a lot out of me, and I do not see my current pace as sustainable over the long term, while still maintaining other personal and professional obligations.

Sometimes discouragement sets in and I feel like I'm working 50% harder for 75% of my usual effectiveness. I'm not yet satisfied, but the challenge is worthwhile. Of course, I look forward to the day when I have all my students in one physical room again, but some of these additions will become permanent aspects of my class. The disruptions of 2020 have been unwelcome, yet I appreciate the chance to try new ways to walk alongside students and become a more versatile teacher,

coach, and mentor. It has been exciting to see that my persona can stay, it just requires some creative changes to my methods.