

June 2020

WHAT WORKS FOR ME (Part II)

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April 2020

Due to COVID-19, those of us that teach in law schools (or anywhere else for that matter) have had to retool our pedagogy this semester. It seems that all law schools were forced to reinvent themselves as on-line institutions (at least for the time being) and this presented myriad of challenges for both an institution's administrators and their faculty. The ultimate question though, is can we make it work (as best we can) for our students and ourselves. I believe that we can and are!

The student component in the formula is probably not as radical as the professor element. Our students are very resilient, they are tech-savvy, have already used much of the same technology we are now utilizing to teach their classes in their personal lives. As an example of how fully-entrenched with technology our students are, even their communication methods have evolved to incorporate texting as the most popular form, when actually talking to someone on the telephone used to be the norm. But for teachers, and especially those of us who are in the classroom face-to-face with students as our labor of love, the obstacles are not to be minimized.

Online teaching solutions are not necessarily obvious. Although the technology is there to facilitate a professor being "virtually" in front of their students (and for those students to be in front of their professors), it is not the same as true physical proximity. We cannot easily observe body language or easily read a class to see if a concept is understood or confusing to them. Additionally (and this semester I am teaching at Brooklyn Law School, Benjamin N. Cardozo Law School and Columbia Law School), students have the option of not participating on the video portion of the virtual classroom. Some of my students do so, but a great majority of them choose not to. The dynamic, then, is so alien from my regular classroom interactions, that there is something that can be definitely lost in translation. Yet, with all the impediments to having a "normal" law school class, I make it work. Here is how I do it and hopefully it will help those of you grappling with making the best of a less-than-ideal situation.

My first bit of advice is to become totally familiar with the technology you will be using for online training. Zoom and Blackboard have been the most popular vehicles for this, but the school for which you teach may have another software package as well. Understand everything you can about the program so that you will be in total control of the environment. For many of us, this may mean merely understanding how the mike volume and video icons work and to check them prior to each and every class session. The next item is to familiarize yourself with what type of information your computer screen will provide to you during class. I use Zoom in all three law schools, and with that medium, my students (listed as "participants") can either have their video cameras on or off. Although my camera is on, and I prefer my

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students to have their camera on as well so as to be able to “see” them, it is really their choice. The dynamic is clearly different when they are presenting to the class or responding to one of my questions and instead of seeing their faces, I can only see their name. However, because the technology is sophisticated, knowing who is speaking or asking questions helps a lot.

When I cold-call my students using Zoom, there is little difference between them being physically in a classroom or merely virtual. The problem that I encounter with a large class is that I am never positive if the student on whom I am calling is actually in attendance. Since the list of participants is too long for me to scroll down the list prior to calling out their names, I typically call on a student in my roster and wait until they unmute their microphones and answer. Sometimes they do not answer (either by not being in attendance, or unavailable at the time I call on them). In that case it is no different from calling on a student in class who either “passes” or does not know the answer to the question (at which point, after prodding them with using their best guess, I usually go on to another student).

For me, the most difficult aspect of using an online teaching platform is the inability to effectively utilize a blackboard or markerboard. When I teach using Zoom, my laptop camera can really only pick up my upper torso, and there is little camera-view for much else. A solution to this problem is merely to include a word document or power point slide and either download it to the class webpage documents or show it when sharing my computer screen. Although not as effective as writing the concept at the same time as I am teaching that point, it does the trick.

With three weeks to go before the end of the semester, the bottom line is to continue what we are doing and provide the best pedagogical presentation possible. Although there is no “one size fits all” approach to online teaching, there are some basic pointers that are universal. Our students began this semester with having us in the front of them. We are still “virtually” in front of the class, and as long as we do what we have been doing all semester long, it should work. The only wrinkle may be a technological glitch, which if it happens, will hopefully not last long. My last bit of advice is to utilize your school’s tech support. I often have them online with me just prior to the class time to confirm that the technology is working properly. Good luck!