

JOSHUA AARON JONES

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Career-ready, analytical thinkers are created in educational settings that use a *whole community* approach. The best learning outcomes result from professor/student, student/student, and university/community engagements. The higher education experience must offer students and professors an ongoing chance to learn from each other, while at the same time improving the community in which the university is located.

Cooperative Learning

My classroom approach derives from my experiences in music and in the practice of law. In both settings, one person alone cannot develop and convey the end-goal outcome or the methods to achieve them. For example, in music ensembles, even with all participants and the director sharing identical notes on a page, the expression and interpretation of the piece relies on a mutual learning experience and experimentation. The same is true in law. Parties and attorneys to a case rarely disagree as to the facts, but it is the presentation and interpretation of those facts that persuades a juror, judge, or even the other side. Through cooperative techniques, case parties and attorneys, including in the most contentious matters, should form new insights and new considerations that will help prevent future problems – the “practice” of law. The practice of law is a collaborative profession, and so should be the law classroom.

I believe professors and students should collaborate in the classroom, using the same set of knowledge and facts contained in a text book, cases, or from research, in a joint venture for new realizations and policy considerations. The professor whose approach is to only serve as a fountain of facts, from which students absorb information to regurgitate on an exam, fails his students, himself, and the legal industry. It is through active engagement with our students, as well as insisting that they explore topics with each other, that the university community thrives.

The *whole community* or cooperative learning approach creates graduates who are ready to analyze and think independently but with a willingness to share and receive ideas and criticism from colleagues. For the professor, the philosophy fosters professional growth and development of new concepts for research, writing, and curricular evolution, whereas ego-focused lecture alone can lead to stagnation.

Developing Practice-ready Professionals

For undergraduate legal studies programs, students are typically of two types: those who aspire to law school and those who intend to work as paralegals. It is important that a legal studies program serve both - a feasible task. Both paths lead to the same necessary skills and knowledge; it is simply that the future attorney will be asked to acquire a deeper level of analysis and carry a heavier burden with stricter regulatory obligations upon graduation from law school.

The paralegal student should not be made to feel lesser than her future law student classmate, and I oppose treating the two student groups differently. It is important that the legal community move away from the idea that paralegals are mere secretaries and help prospective paralegals realize the importance of strong writing and research at the same level of professionalism that the industry expects of their attorney supervisors. Just as we want nurse practitioners to be as well-studied on a medication as their supervising doctors, paralegals must be as knowledgeable as an attorney about, for example, the elements of a tort. This issue is an ongoing discussion in the legal profession, and the point at which to instigate change is at undergraduate legal studies programs. However, law schools must also help future lawyers model strong skills for their future subordinates. Whether with employees or clients, attorneys must be able and willing to teach in the office. Thus, opportunities for team collaboration in law schools and public speaking events should be an essential piece of the law curriculum, beyond 1L mock trial/moot court presentations.

Employing the *whole community* philosophy to develop practice-ready legal minds, whether paralegal or attorney, requires community engagement. Undergraduate legal studies programs and law schools must help students access the local bar association and other law societies so that they and their professors are aware of current trends and needs in law practice. This is important for university statistics because students who are well-informed and who have realistic expectations about legal employment will be outstanding employees, and the legal community in which the university sits will be held in greater esteem, resulting in further engagement, programs, and fiscal sponsorships. Wherever I teach, collaboration with local law practice leaders will be an essential piece of my curriculum design.

Pedagogical Approaches and Assessment

I offer students a variety of learning methods. The order and extent to which any one method is used depends on the topic and the length of the class, but generally, a variety of pedagogical techniques finds a place in my courses so that all learning styles will benefit. Those are: lecture, group work, electronic resources, and writing assignments.

Typically, my class sessions open with a lecture to reiterate prior discussions and to introduce a topic, and then, with case studies, students work in groups for discussion, and finally, a writing assignment closes the session or becomes a graded homework task. Because today's students have developed in a mostly digital lifestyle, it is inevitable that the Socratic method will continue to lose prominence, as techniques to accommodate visual learners become the norm. Thus, careful employment of visual classroom elements is a necessity, such as diagrams, informatics, flow-charts, and video clips. Such materials should enhance the lecture, not stand-in-place of. The lecture portion of my classes typically incorporates multi-media sources, such as short video examples and audio interviews, and in classes such as Evidence, I introduce courtroom technology and emphasize on-line research skills.

Of the various methods, the writing assignments are, perhaps, the most important for a legal studies or law student. Law is a writing profession, whether working as a paralegal or an attorney. Every law class must develop and demand high-quality writing. Any lesser expectations diminish future opportunities for the student and harms the university's reputation. Unfortunately, the past decade has shown a steep decline in writing skills among entering freshmen and law students, and it is imperative that law programs implement a consistent writing approach across all classes, including early introduction of bar exam essay writing. As a member of the Legal Writing Institute, I often hear colleagues worry about the quality of writing coming out of undergraduate programs. I think the blame is probably misplaced, as the problem begins in elementary schools. My top priority, wherever and whatever I may teach, is to ensure that my students and the university that I represent are never among those schools from which law professors and employers dread to see graduates.

Recognizing that any class brings a variety of learners, my assessments accommodate each learning style. For example, written exams consist of multiple choice, true/false, short-answer, and essay, rather than only one type of question format. However, assessment is more than mere grading of an exam, which only measures a student's performance on one, random day. Assessment, even if ungraded, is a part of every class via discussion and group work, allowing for adjustments as my shortcomings or incompatibility with a particular class may become apparent. Flexibility on my part provides every student the opportunity to succeed, even if they failed to understand the material under a given presentation style.

For writing assignments, with the exception of a legal writing course, I do not grade grammar. However, I make a point to correct grammar for every student on every assignment, including short-answer exam responses. This labor-intensive feedback results in with obvious student improvement over the course of the semester, and it is very rewarding to see such tangible progress. The same developments can be made clear to a student with the maintenance of a writing portfolio that deposits work product from each and every course for an annual review with the student's advisor. Many of my students have commented that my extensive feedback on writing assignments has helped them realize recurring grammar and vocabulary mistakes and that they are better writers than when a semester began.

The Legal Studies Community

My passion for teaching is student-focused. I do not teach for the ego boost of lecturing to a crowd or to have my name in scholarly journals. I teach because I want to help develop professionals with exceptional skills and a humanistic point of view. These traits are necessities in the legal profession. Shaping minds for a positive and compassionate outlook requires genuine, empathetic concern for students as individuals, not as products. The proof that I live-up to that self-imposed standard is in my “always open door” policy. I want to help students find their own voices and philosophies, and I want all of my students to feel comfortable enough to consult with me outside the classroom.

I seek a place among a collegial faculty team that has similar philosophies, whether undergraduate or law school, and that has a sense of camaraderie between students and faculty. Such a combination benefits professors and students - both always learning from each other.