

## BEING A BEGINNER AGAIN: A TEACHER TRAINING EXERCISE

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Teaching lawyering skills to first-year law students requires acculturating them into new processes and new jargon. It is easy for law professors to forget just how tough it is to assimilate so much new information so quickly. At the 1998 Legal Writing Institute conference in Ann Arbor, Mich., Professor Charles Calleros presented a wonderful plenary session in which he reminded the audience what it is like to be a beginner.<sup>2</sup> Professor Calleros taught us legal writing professors how to do a little flamenco dancing. An authentic flamenco band accompanied him, and before he finished, a few hundred professors were literally dancing in the aisles. As Professor Calleros taught us the lingo and the rhythms of flamenco dancing, he also explained in depth the techniques he was using to teach this new skill to us beginners.

A week later I was planning a training day for legal research and writing (LRW) and academic support program (ASP) teaching assistants, and I wondered how I could convey to them the same sense of being a beginner that I felt while flamenco dancing. I only knew a very tiny bit about flamenco, and I only had 20 extra minutes in the training session schedule. There was no way I could even come close to replicating Professor Calleros' excellent presentation.

I started thinking about what other skills I had outside of the law, other skills I could use as the basis of a training exercise. I considered everything

from snow skiing to calligraphy to making banana bread from scratch. I finally decided on classical ballet, because I suspected few of my teaching assistants (TAs) knew anything about it. Like flamenco, ballet has its own vocabulary in another language. And like flamenco, ballet has a cultural history that can deepen your understanding of it. I decided that the parallels to learning law, with its foreign jargon and historic underpinnings, would work.

You do not need to know anything about a dance form to create your own exercise similar to the one I used. You also do not need to be a true expert at the skill you decide to use. Perhaps you played chess in high school or played golf in your law practice days. Perhaps you know a variety of embroidery stitches or three ways to build a campfire. Any skill you are pretty good at could serve as the basis of an exercise to remind TAs or new professors what it is like to be a beginner.

Once you choose a skill, write out an exercise that you think will take about 10 minutes to figure out. Make the actual activity you are teaching very, very simple. It should be something you could just *show* someone how to do in a minute, if you were showing them instead of asking them to figure it out. But do use all the jargon associated with the activity; throw in lots of technical words. Then create a glossary of those terms on a separate sheet of paper. This glossary, of course, will serve as an analogy to the law dictionary to which first-year students constantly have to refer.

It may also be helpful to omit from your glossary one or two words that are so basic to your chosen endeavor that everyone who already possesses the skill would forget that beginners do not know their meaning. Let your teachers-in-training remember what it feels like to struggle with and be stumped by foreign terminology.

In the instructions that you write for your exercise, be sure to mention that it is an easy, simple, or basic exercise. Find a way to allude to the fact that there is a more difficult aspect to even this first step, but that the trainees need not worry about it for now. These types of instructions reinforce beginners' awareness that they know nothing and have a lot of difficult things to learn. As you write your exercise, make sure your trainees will experience similar daunting messages. Law

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<sup>1</sup> The information in this essay was presented at the Southeastern Regional LRW Conference held at Stetson University College of Law, St. Petersburg, Fla., on September 8, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Charles R. Calleros, *Reading, Writing, and Rhythm: A Whimsical, Musical Way of Thinking About Teaching Legal Method and Writing*, 5 *Legal Writing* 2 (1999).

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professors and TAs frequently give first-year students just such messages, heightening their apprehension about their ability to learn successfully. Of course, these messages are counterproductive to learning, because students who are not confident they can succeed are much less likely to do so.

When I used my ballet exercise with a large group of TAs, I did not tell them anything about it ahead of time. On the printed training schedule for the day, all I wrote for that time period was “Training Exercise.” I split the TAs into groups of three ahead of time and told them I was going to give them an activity to figure out. Before handing out the exercise, I asked each group to select the person who would show all of us what his or her group had figured out. I mentioned casually that it was a physical activity, so they might want to pick someone athletic. (One year these oral instructions resulted in the ballet steps being presented by a former state wrestling champion and a marine captain.) I also said that those who were already familiar with this activity should recuse themselves and just observe what the groups were doing.

It is helpful to the point of the exercise to have trainees work in small groups. If you are only training a small group to begin with, let them work together to figure out the activity, and then perhaps let each present what he or she learned. Most small groups will quickly devolve into the same dynamics seen in groups of first-year law students. One person in the group will say “I think that means this,” the others will assume she knows what she’s talking about, and soon the blind will be leading the blind, with the rumor mill in full operation.

After all groups have had 10 minutes to figure out the activity and then time to present what they learned, discuss with them why they think they were asked to do the exercise. The first question I always ask is “How did you feel when you were doing this?” These accomplished adults reply with words like “awkward,” “stupid,” and “lost.” They will probably be able to articulate why, and you may also want to show them how you stacked the exercise to elicit that result. Then ask them to articulate the analogies to the experiences of first-year law students and how law teachers can help make the acculturation process smoother.

The actual exercise and glossary I have used follows. Please note that the technical terms that I have not defined are “first position” and “downstage front.” If you know what those terms mean, feel free to borrow this exercise. If you do not know what they mean, you probably will be better off creating a similar exercise for a skill with which you are more familiar.

### Training Exercise

#### Instructions:

In this exercise, you will learn the first eight counts of a simple ballet. Read the steps below and work with your group to figure out how to do them. Do not worry about arm movements or head and shoulder alignment for now. To assist you, a glossary of terms you may not be familiar with follows. Remember to count.

#### Exercise:

*Facing downstage front, in first position.*

*Two counts for each step.*

*Plié.*

*Tendu right, à la second.*

*Tendu left, à la second.*

*Sauté.*

*(tip: You need to do a quick plié before the sauté.)*

#### Glossary

*à la second (from the French “as in second [position]”):* To the side.

*plié (from the French “to fold”):* Bend your knees, while keeping your feet flat on the floor. Remember to keep your heels down on the floor.

*sauté (from the French “to jump”):* Jump up. Land in plié.

*tendu (from the French “to extend”):* Point your foot, keeping your toe on the ground at all times.

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