

“All along we had been overlooking the possibility of projecting an ordinary word-processing program onto the screen.”

NOT READY FOR POWERPOINT? REDISCOVERING AN EASIER TOOL

BY MELISSA SHAFER, SHEILA SIMON, AND SUSAN P. LIEMER

The authors teach legal writing in the Lawyering Skills program at Southern Illinois University School of Law in Carbondale.

Teachable Moments for Teachers ... is a regular feature of Perspectives designed to give teachers an opportunity to describe a special moment of epiphany that changed their approach to presenting a particular topic to their students. It is a companion to the Teachable Moments for Students column that provides quick and accessible answers to questions frequently asked by students and other researchers. Readers are invited to submit their own “teachable moments for teachers” to the editor of the column: Louis J. Sirico Jr., Villanova University School of Law, 299 N. Spring Mill Road, Villanova, PA 19085-1682, phone: (610) 519-7071, fax: (610) 519-6282, e-mail: sirico@law.vill.edu.

Our Lawyering Skills program here at Southern Illinois University School of Law works as a team, and sometimes we even get scared as a team. We were fearful to take those first few steps beyond using the chalkboard in the classroom. In little time, however, our team figured out how to enhance our legal writing instruction and accommodate a variety of learning styles through the selective use of technology. And we never imagined we could catapult so quickly toward the forefront of technology users at our law school.

Know Your Tools

Last year our school purchased various technology tools, including smart podiums with accompanying SMART Board technology. Our legal writing team attended several training sessions offered by the information technology experts at our law school. We were earnest and attentive students. We listened carefully, took copious notes, and asked numerous questions. We heard about

the SMART Board’s Notebook, special markers, and magic eraser. Yet, despite our best efforts to learn this new technology at these training sessions, we simply had little idea how to operate or use it in our classrooms.

We decided that this year we would take one lesson plan and brainstorm the technology possibilities for presenting that material. We made an appointment with one of our in-house technicians, Rick Burkett. The secret for us was that Rick was well-versed in text and its uses. As we talked with him about our goals, we complained that PowerPoint is too linear. If you have one plan and only one way to get there, it works well. We told him that so much of our classes involve being able to work with the flow of ideas from the class, and the ideas could come in several orders. He understood; he is both a computer expert and a Ph.D. student in history. Like us, he is a word nerd. He casually mentioned that we could use WordPerfect on our smart podiums with the projectors just as easily as the PowerPoint program. It was that simple comment, almost an aside, that led to our moment of epiphany.

We discovered that we could use our familiar, old friend WordPerfect on the podium computer! All along we had been overlooking the possibility of projecting an ordinary word-processing program onto the screen.¹ We could project either prepared documents, off-the-cuff class contributions, or in-class edits for all to see on the SMART Board. We did not have to stick to inflexible PowerPoint presentations or limited Notebook functions.

Many of our classes involve small group work. Previously, we asked the students to write their groups’ results on the chalkboard. Now we can type each group’s “question presented,” for example, and it is instantly projected onto the screen. Now their work is highly legible. In-class comparisons and editing are easy, using all the functions of WordPerfect that we already use instinctively. Plus we can save the results from class discussion to post to The West Education Network® (TWEN®) or any other type of course Web site.

¹ If your law school does not have smart podiums and SMART Boards, you can still use WordPerfect in the classroom using just a projector and a laptop. Who knew?

In addition, we often want to note work well done, so that other students can benefit from good examples. Projecting a WordPerfect document with the sample student work for everyone to read on the screen does that job very effectively. Any document you create or save in word processing can be projected onto the screen. It is also cheaper than making photocopies (which, in a year of tight budgets, can be extremely helpful).

Select the Right Tool

In an hour we were able to see infinite possibilities for the use of technology in our classrooms. Not only did finding the right tech instructor help, but exploring the technological programs for a specific lesson really put it into context for us. It was essentially learning by doing, because we had a specific use in mind as we were trained. We three legal writing professors were also the only professors in the room, so we could focus on our unique needs and ask all the silly questions we wanted.

We had to stop and take a look at our whole tool belt to be able to see that somewhere in between the chalkboard and a laser light show was an appropriate use of technology for our writing classes. While you should have an array of tools at your disposal, including PowerPoint, you need to choose them appropriately.² Just because you have a cool, new tool does not mean it is right for the job. For example, to cut out a hole in drywall to put in an outlet you could use your brand new Milwaukee Heavy Duty Sawzall or you could use a hand saw. The hand saw is the better choice because it is easier to control for a small, precise task.³ The Sawzall has all the power you need, but it would be easy to go too far and too fast, and who wants to patch a gash in brand new drywall?

² For a discussion on the need to use new technologies judiciously, see Molly Lien, *Technocentrism and the Soul of the Common Law Lawyer*, 48 Am. U. L. Rev. 85 (1998). For warnings about the dangers of over-relying on technology in legal education, see David M. Becker, *Some Concerns About the Future of Legal Education*, 51 J. Leg. Educ. 469 (2001). See also Suzanne Ehrenberg, *Legal Writing Unplugged: Evaluating the Role of Computer Technology in Legal Writing Pedagogy*, 4 J. Leg. Writing Inst. 1 (1998).

³ Interview with John S. Rendleman, III, Esq., Sawzall owner (Sept. 4, 2002).

Always Take Safety Precautions

All power tools require certain safety precautions. If you use a Sawzall, you read the instructions first and then don safety goggles and gloves. We learned that when using word processing to project text onto a screen, our “safety goggles” were a hands-on practice session and an early arrival to class. During practice sessions, every professor had a chance to practice, not just watch the others. This chance to put our hands on the equipment made all the difference in our ability to use it in class. Also, we learned to stop slipping into the classroom just as the bell rang. We needed time to check the classroom equipment and to get everything turned on and running. Finally, we did not throw out our old, no-tech lesson plans. (This simple precaution was very helpful when one professor forgot her key to the smart podium.)

We have not given up on PowerPoint. In fact, our new technological confidence has helped us create two PowerPoint presentations to use in class this year.⁴ And when visual images come up during class rather than during advance planning, the best method may still be the chalkboard. But now we have not just the power of all these tools, we have the power that comes from knowing our old friend WordPerfect is available for us to select when it is the right tool for the job.

© 2003 Melissa Shafer, Sheila Simon, and Susan P. Liemer

⁴ We found helpful tips for using PowerPoint in Angela Caputo, *Four Pointers to Effective Use of PowerPoint in Teaching*, 10 Perspectives: Teaching Leg. Research & Writing 132 (2002). See also Maria Perez Crist, *Technology in the LRW Curriculum: High Tech, Low Tech, or No Tech*, 5 J. Leg. Writing Inst. 93 (1999); Lucia Ann Silecchia, *Of Painters, Sculptors, Quill Pens, and Microchips: Teaching Legal Writing in the Electronic Age*, 75 Neb. L. Rev. 802 (1996).

“While you should have an array of tools at your disposal, including PowerPoint, you need to choose them appropriately.”