

FROM THE COURTROOM TO THE CLASSROOM: REFLECTIONS OF A NEW TEACHER

BY STEPHANIE HARTUNG

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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.

Seven years as a public defender in Oakland, California, made me nothing if not tough. So last year, when my family moved to the East Coast and the opportunity arose to teach legal research and writing at Suffolk University Law School, I welcomed what I anticipated would be a break from the intensity of my former job. Although I was happy as a public defender and, in many ways, felt that I had found my calling, the work had taken its toll on me. At the same time, I worried that teaching might not invigorate me the same way that litigation had. I wondered if teaching the mechanics of legal writing and analysis to first-year law students could nourish my public defender soul.

As the first day of class approached, friends and colleagues warned me about the difficulties of standing up in front of first-year law students. "Are you sure you want to do this?" I was asked more than once. I shrugged off the questions. Given my litigation background, I felt relatively confident. As a public defender, I had become accustomed to hostility from all directions: the middle-aged client who could not accept that he faced 25 years in

prison under California's draconian sentencing laws, the hostile jurors who regarded me with as much disdain as they obviously felt for my client, the former prosecutor-judge who gave little more than lip service to defense attorneys.

If nothing else, the gritty and often thankless work had given me nerves of steel. As a regular visitor to the county jail, I had grown accustomed to the stench of bologna and cleaning products wafting through the concrete hallways, as the impossibly heavy metal doors clanked behind me. On one occasion, I had represented a man accused of robbing a young woman at gunpoint, where the primary evidence against him was the eyewitness identification by the victim. After several weeks of trial, convinced that my client was innocent, I had stood next to him as the jury read the verdict, nearly immobilized by the fear that I might not be able to prevent an unimaginable injustice. When I heard the words "not guilty," I felt an overwhelming rush of relief and accomplishment. By comparison, talking to a class of first-year law students seemed like a walk in the park. At least no one's life or freedom would depend on me.

My first lecture was a two-hour course overview and law school orientation. Aside from discussing the various components of the course and what would be expected of the students, I planned to introduce them to the American court system and stare decisis—not exactly simple concepts. Knowing the students would be expecting a brief first class, I hoped to keep things light. I planned to share some of my law school and legal practice experiences, and I hoped to open things up to a conversation with the students about their understanding and expectations of law school. While I didn't have a clear idea at the time exactly what kind of teacher I wanted to be, it wasn't my style to be intimidating. I wanted my students to feel comfortable around me so that they would open up in class.

As I walked into the lecture hall to teach my first class, I was far more nervous than I had anticipated. Suffolk has a beautiful, new high-tech facility across from the State House in Boston. The building's façade, with its regal pillars spanning the entranceway, suggests that important things are

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taking place inside. I walked into a cavernous lecture hall with high ceilings and windows overlooking Boston Common. I hoped that what I had to offer these students would measure up to the weighty expectations of the law school. When I entered the classroom, I was shocked at how quiet the students were. They all looked so serious and stern. I began my lecture, but was surprised by how hesitant most of the students were to engage in any kind of dialogue. One woman toward the front of the room bore her eyes into the desk in front of her, as if fearing that any incidental eye contact with me might result in my grilling her *Paper Chase* style. Many other students peered furiously at the materials I had just handed out, similarly avoiding eye contact at all costs.

As I made my way through the material, I felt increasingly like a bad comic in front of a tough crowd. I was lucky to get a chuckle or a muffled laugh here and there, and only a handful of eager hand-raisers (the type who would draw eye rolls from their classmates before the end of the semester) participated in what I had hoped would be an open discussion. By the time the two-hour class was over, my throat was dry and I was bathed in sweat. Feeling depleted, I started to doubt my ability to be an effective teacher.

In the days that followed I began to think more about my first year of law school. Although it wasn't so long ago, it was strange that I had such difficulty remembering the details of those first few weeks of class. Was it so brutal that I had blocked the whole thing out like an unbearably bad memory? As I spent more time thinking about it, I realized that, in many ways, I had been that woman toward the front of the class, staring down at my desk, paralyzed by the fear that I might be called on and revealed as somehow less capable than my classmates. Although I entered law school as a confident young woman who had done well in college and spent time traveling around the world, the first few weeks of class somehow deflated my confidence. The feeling gradually changed, although I couldn't point to exactly when or how, and by my third year I was much more relaxed and confident and regularly participated in class.

Once I remembered the evolution I had undergone as a law student, I began to see my own students in a new light. Maybe I was a bit easier on them—and on myself—realizing that their reticence was not necessarily the result of an ineffective teacher so much as a product of their own fears and insecurities. Perhaps I had expected too much too soon. I decided the best thing to do was to give all of us a little bit of time to get used to each other. Gradually I started to relax and let my guard down as well. Instinctively, I had been hesitant to reveal personal details about myself to my students, perhaps fearing that if they knew I was the mother of two young children (the youngest born only three months before classes began), they would not take me seriously.

But eventually, without consciously deciding to do so, I did reveal more about myself to my students. I was surprised at the effect it had. Two students confided in me that they were nursing mothers, juggling the pressures of law school with the hormonal roller coaster of new motherhood. Other students began to stop by my office frequently, talking to me about everything from sentence structure to frustration with law school cliques, or just to let me know that something we had discussed in class was coming in handy somehow. I began to feel a real affinity for and connection with my students.

While the triumphs and frustrations I felt my first year of teaching legal research and writing were perhaps less dramatic than those I experienced as a public defender, they were no less meaningful. Probably my most satisfying moment as a teacher came just after winter break. I had rescheduled my night class after a snow cancellation. It was not our usual time or place to meet and I was unsure how many students would show up. It was a minute or two before class was scheduled to begin and only a few students were in the classroom. As I stepped out into the hallway to look for stragglers, I could hear raised voices from the lounge area on the floor below. I looked down over the balcony and there in a cluster was the rest of my class, heatedly debating their spring memo issue—whether an Arab man was properly detained based on an unverified tip alleging

terrorist activity. In many ways the sense of accomplishment I felt was no less compelling than a not guilty verdict at the end of a jury trial. I knew that I had not only taught my students the fundamentals of legal research and analysis but also somehow managed to get them excited about it.

In the end I found my first year of teaching to be both more challenging and more fulfilling than I had anticipated. And along the way I surprised myself with how much I embraced the role of writing instructor. I never would have guessed that before the year was over I would receive—and actually read—e-mail messages entitled “the power of the semicolon!” Or that I would voluntarily add *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* to my summer reading list. Just the other day, as I read *Babar* to my three-year-old daughter, I was surprised to find myself getting irritated at the author’s repeated improper change of tense. I guess I’ve inadvertently developed the critical eye of a writing instructor as well. While there are days when I miss the rush of my old public defender life, I’m continually surprised at how much satisfaction I get from the student connections I’ve made and the knowledge that my course has made a difference—however small—in their lives.

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“Who dares to teach must never cease to learn.” — John Cotton Dana. In 1912, Dana, a Newark, N.J., librarian, was asked to supply a Latin quotation suitable for inscription on a new building at Newark State College (now Kean College of New Jersey), Union, N.J. Unable to find an appropriate quotation, Dana composed what became the college motto.

—*New York Times Book Review*, Mar. 5, 1967, p. 55.
