

CREATING THE DYNAMICS FOR A “DYNAMITE” CLASSROOM

Debra L. Green, Florida Coastal School of Law

1. Goals of the presentation:

- a. Give an overview of the dynamics that generally make a classroom—and its teacher—“dynamite.”
- b. Learn techniques for turning your class into a vibrant, fun, challenging place where most students will:
 - i. Understand your expectations and want to meet them;
 - ii. Stay engaged throughout the semester with each class; and
 - iii. Follow your lead and do the hard work required to become independent thinkers and researchers.

2. Traits of a “dynamite” classroom:

- a. A “dynamite” classroom is one where the classroom feels vibrant and alive, one where the majority of students are engaged and have become active learning partners in their education. It’s one where:
- b. Students *understand the teacher’s expectations* for the class and for assignments.
- c. Students have a *sense of certainty about what’s going to happen with each class* because:
 - i. they’ve been given a syllabus that provides them with the readings for class;
 - ii. the professor stays on track with the syllabus and doesn’t get more than a week behind (and when this happens, the professor has a plan for getting the students back on track); and
 - iii. the professor has a well-organized plan for each class and follows the plan.
- d. The teacher *draws students out* for discussion in each class, and students feel they each have an opportunity to be heard and feel as if their ideas will be welcomed, even if those ideas were not what the teacher was looking for in the course of the discussion.
- e. The teacher *makes learning fun* by incorporating collaborative exercises, problem-based scenarios, role plays, games, etc. as a vehicle for learning research, analysis, citation, and other concepts and skills.
- f. The teacher *routinely incorporates technology* into the classroom as part of keeping students focused and helping them learn skills such as research, editing, analysis, organization, and citation.
- g. The teacher has a *basic understanding of adult learning styles* and uses this knowledge to deliver information to students in ways that help make the information accessible to everyone.

3. Common mistakes made by those new to teaching LRW, including doctrinal teachers who may have taught for some time but have little experience teaching a skills-based course:

- a. Being a “talking head” and giving little meaningful opportunity for discussion and feedback from students.
- b. Allowing a few students to dominate the class discussion, rather than regularly implementing techniques to solicit discussion from all students.

- c. Getting off track or not following the syllabus closely.
 - d. Being too esoteric in teaching a course that requires more hands-on learning in the classroom.
 - e. Being a “drifter” (i.e., the teacher drifts from topic to topic during the course of a lecture with no seeming cohesion, which makes it difficult for students to follow and understand what’s being said or how it relates to what the students are supposed to be doing).
 - f. Not taking into account various learning styles while planning topics or exercises for class.
4. **Understanding student learning styles as part of developing effective teaching techniques for the classroom:**
- a. *Myers-Briggs personality test* and its impact on the classroom¹:
 - i. Consider administering a Myers-Briggs test to your students during the first week of class to help students understand their individual learning styles and as part of helping you understand students’ learning needs.
 - ii. Most law students tend to be ESTJ types on the Myers-Briggs test, which means they tend to want clearly-stated goals; dislike complications; learn well with small-group interaction; enjoy simulations; are energized with by people and activity; want concrete applications of abstract concepts; want predictability and consistency; and want well-organized, logical presentations of information.
 - b. *Differences in how students absorb information* and what these learners need in the classroom: verbal learners; visual learners; oral learners, and aural learners.
5. **Managing your classroom and the students effectively as part of creating a dynamite class:**
- a. Poor classroom management leads to confusion and poor results for the students (and for you come evaluation time). Students—particularly 1Ls—want to know up front what you want and tend to have *personality types that want order, structure and consistency to their universe*.
 - b. Give students the “road rules” for the semester on the first day of class.
 - i. Develop detailed course policies that cover specific topics such as grading, number of assignments, attendance, plagiarism, etc.
 - (1) Put students on notice on the first day of class by either distributing the course policies in class or having students download this material and bring it to the first class. Opt for over inclusion, as opposed to under inclusion, with course policy information when dealing with first-year, first-semester students.
 - (a) If you’re going to be teaching in a program that has a good deal of coordination among sections, it’s highly likely the course policies will already be developed for your use.
 - (2) Take a few minutes to highlight some of the key points from the

¹See Techniques for Teaching Law (cited below in the bibliography) at 9-10.

- course policies with the students.
 - (3) Either include a provision in this material telling them they'll be responsible for reading and understanding all the information contained in the course policies, or have the students sign a separate sheet certifying that they've read this material. Taking these extra steps will help you avoid excuses or grade challenges from students later on in the semester..
 - ii. Provide students on the first day of class with a detailed syllabus that gives specific reading assignments, specific research and writing assignments, and specific deadlines.
 - (1) Either pass out copies of the syllabus or have students download it, and take a few minutes to cover some of the highlights from it with the students. Follow many of the same tenets discussed above for course policies.
 - iii. Establish the "tone" for the class:
 - (1) Tell students you expect them to respect different ideas and viewpoints, as well as each other.
 - (2) If you want a collaborative learning environment or some hybrid, tell this to students on the first day.
 - iv. Establish your credibility and assert control without inappropriately shutting students down.
 - (1) Special considerations in the classroom for professors who are women or people of color.
- c. *Have an agenda for each class*, and communicate that agenda to your students at every class.
 - i. Don't try to wing it—have a lesson plan for each class, and include in your notes the approximate amount of time you plan to spend on each topic to help the class stay on track and move through the material.
 - ii. Set out the agenda for the day in broad terms at the beginning of class to tell students what they'll be studying for the day, and stick to the agenda.
 - iii. Wrap up each class with a quick summary of what happened and quickly remind students about what you want them to do for the next class.
 - iv. Help students stay focused on the big picture by occasionally recapping points from previous classes so students have a sense of where they've been and how today's class will add to their base of knowledge.
- d. *Be consistent*, and when you have to make a change to an assignment or to the syllabus, give the students sufficient notice about the change.
- e. *Manage students and their personalities* as part of creating a dynamic learning environment.
 - i. Create opportunities for every student to speak and contribute to class, and avoid the perception of "playing favorites."
 - ii. Develop techniques for handling:
 - (1) The shy student who doesn't like to talk in class.
 - (2) The "helium hand" student.
 - (3) The "jokester."
 - (4) The "angry man."

- (5) The student who either:
 - (a) routinely gives the wrong answer to a question;
 - (b) routinely wants to get the class off track talking about a peripheral topic; or
 - (c) who's more advanced than the rest of the group.

6. **Quick tips on using technology as an effective tool to stimulate discussion and focus students' attention—and in the process, create your dynamite class.**

- a. *Don't be afraid to use technology in the classroom.*
 - i. Technology, when used well, has aspects that can appeal to verbal, visual, oral and aural learners.
 - ii. Learning to use technology effectively in the classroom can be done at any age. If your school has good technical support, ask someone there to help you learn how to operate the equipment.
- b. *Determine the type of technology your school has available and the type of technical support available when problems occur.*
- c. *Use PowerPoint or Presentations to help structure and organization your lectures, appeal to visual learners and focus students' discussion on the topics at hand.*
 - i. Build in prompts for questions and exercises, rather than using this type of presentation as a passive learning experience (which is something you might see in a CLE course).
 - ii. Build in more, as opposed to less, material so you can be sure you don't run out of material for the class to discuss.
 - (1) Run through your presentation and time it before coming to class until you become skilled enough to estimate how much material you can reasonably cover in a given class.
 - (2) Make enough copies of the presentation for everyone to have just in case the equipment fails. Students are also better able to focus in class on what you're saying if they're not as busy trying to write down every word.
- d. *Try some in-class, on-screen editing exercises by using a Proxima or an ELMO.*
- e. *Use WESTLAW, LEXIS in class and on screen to give students more hands-on experience, with you as their research guide.*
- f. *Use E-mail lists and web course pages:*
 - i. Class lists can help you communicate with students after class if new information develops; help clarify certain points made in class; give students "helpful hints" with doing their work outside class, etc.
 - ii. Course web pages can be a good place to keep your class syllabus, course policies, written assignments, and lectures so students can assess these materials easily (and won't have to bug you if they lose them or weren't in class on a particular day).
- g. *Incorporate Internet resources, when appropriate, as a learning tool. For example, when your students start studying oral argument, your state court may have actual oral arguments online that you can watch and critique with your students.*

7. **Limit lecturing and instead use various techniques to help students learn experientially and keep students engaged as active participants in their learning.**
- a. *Devise learning games* to make learning “boring stuff” interesting; for example:
 - i. Try your own version of “Jeopardy” for rote tasks such as citation, grammar and punctuation.
 - ii. Give a prize to the student who comes up with the right answer to a problem the fastest.
 - b. *Plan in-class and out-of-class group and problem-based exercises* to give students an opportunity to work together to devise solutions to problems
 - c. *Incorporate occasions for “planned chaos”* into your class as part of helping students become independent thinkers and researchers of the law. Simulated “emergency client problem” scenarios or more analytically complex written problems can serve as excellent vehicles for this teaching technique.
 - d. When lecturing, *use a “modified Socratic method”* as part of developing a dialogue with students, testing students’ knowledge of the material they’ve read, and making students active learners. Limit lecture, when possible, to no more than half the class time to allocate time for hands-on/experiential learning.

An Abbreviated Bibliography of Useful Resources

Textbooks

- Gerald F. Hess and Steven Friedland, Techniques for Teaching Law (1999).
 Rhonda M. Epper and A.W. Bates, Teaching Faculty How to Use Technology: Best practices from Leading Institutions (2001).
 Louise Harmon and Deborah W. Post, Cultivating Intelligence: Power, Law and the Politics of Teaching (1996).

Law Review Articles

- M.H. Sam Jacobson, “A Primer on Learning Styles: Reaching Every Student,” 25 Seattle U. L. Rev. 139 (2001).
 Vernellia R. Randall, “The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, First Year Law Students and Performance,” 26 Cumb. L. Rev. 63 (1996).
 Robert E. Oliphant, “Using Hi-Tech Tools in a Traditional Classroom Environment—A Two Semester Experiment,” 9 Rich. J.L. & Tech. 5 (Winter 2002-2003).
 R. Lawrence Dessem, “All We Really Need to Know About Law Teaching We Learned in Kindergarten,” 62 Tenn. L. Rev. 1073 (1995).
 Arturo Lopez Torres and Mary Kay Lundwall, “Moving Beyond Langdell: An Annotated Bibliography for Law Teaching,” 35 Gonz. L. Rev. 1 (2000).
 Mary Kate Kearney and Mary Beth Beazley, “Teaching Students how to ‘Think Like Lawyers’: Integrating Socratic Method with the Writing Process,” 64 Temp. L. Rev. 885 (1991).

Web Sites

- <http://www.wfsu.org/gavel2gavel/> (web site for viewing Florida Supreme Court arguments online).
<http://www.ualr.edu/%7Ecmbarger/otherpeople.html> (a good place to find out how professors at other schools have developed their course policies and syllabi for legal analysis, research and writing courses).
www.alwd.org (web site for the Association of Legal Writing Directors; contains good online materials on program design and other information vital to new teachers in the field).