

## A First-Class Exercise to Build Comfort, Caring, Character, Community, Confidence, and Curriculum

*Hearing all the great ideas on how to start a course in the recent Speed Share session made me realize that I start my course in a very positive way as well. This exercise has shown positive effects on many levels for student professional development while markedly improving the classroom dynamic. It takes a maximum of 20 minutes to do fully and would work well in a course or program of any size.*

*The process is:*

1. I tell the class we are going to start by setting up rules for running the course that we create together and agree on; they will apply to everyone equally (me included). Our focus is: What qualities do we choose to encourage, in order to generate the most effective, most positive, most professional classroom possible?
2. It works well then to break them into at least 5 groups (and more is better probably) to generate their lists in collaboration. To save time I walk around and just indicate groupings by where they are sitting. In my small skills class I break them into 7 pairs; in a large class I might use groups of up to 5 or so. I just tell them to turn to each other where they are sitting and share ideas. In a very large class (150?) I would do the same thing; if some are in 3's and some in 7's for their convenience, no matter. I ask them to have one person per group make a record as they generate ideas and remind them of the purpose: think of as many qualities/behaviors as you can that will result in the most effective, most professional, most positive learning and teaching experience for everyone.
3. The rest is largely student driven. I have long done this in normal classrooms; Zoom breakouts would work as well. Give them a few minutes to think together; people seem to finish after 5-7 minutes or so. The time in group probably makes the point with nothing else really; they are bonding, focusing together on what actually matters (whether they realize it or not at this point), feeling empowered, and this is relieving angst about the class or course as well.
4. I then have them go around the room, each group sharing one quality while I write them on a whiteboard (etc.). After about twice through all the groups, roughly 10-15 qualities, they are usually done, but I ask for any other qualities anyone can think of before we finish.

*\*TYPICAL LIST CONTENT: The lists generated each term have much in common; they typically differ only in details. They are always dominated by classic virtues, like cooperation, kindness, supporting and respecting each other, coming prepared, working hard, bringing their best, trying to learn the most, and being honest and helpful with critique or feedback. Sometimes they omit something important enough for me to add – but only with their agreement – often about timelines, sharing class time equally (not being silent and not dominating), and staying focused. (Side note: I personally do not allow laptops/tablets, etc. in my courses and explain why, before they register for the course; that definitely helps.) If I felt I did need to propose an addition or two to the list, I always explain why it is so critical for an effective course, and also for an effective lawyer in practice, and then ask if they agree with the addition.*

5. As they give me ideas for the list, I praise every idea genuinely. If the meaning is not entirely clear, I ask them to explain a bit more and we come up with a label that is clear to everyone. I ask if everyone is good with including each suggested quality. I also add a few confirmations about how critical certain qualities really are, both for class and for law practice as well, to start making really practical connections for them. My personal style is also to note where I personally sometimes fall down, but that I will do my best in the class. But the main focus stays on their lists and agreement among everyone.
6. When finished, we agree that we will do our best to run the class this way. I promise to type up and email them the list for ongoing reference, noting that the rules will apply equally to them and to me, and so we can all be responsible to maintain these agreements. If they see me or each other falling short in some way I ask them to communicate that (privately rather than calling me or others out in class), and I will do the same with them if I see something.
7. I always point out some quite impactful meta-perspectives about the list they just created, and I come back to them during the course whenever something happens to recall one of these great qualities. The first perspective is that they have listed probably all of the truly important things needed to become a great, not just a good, lawyer. This is always true, since, as mentioned, the lists always include the primary virtues that humans and lawyers could have. I emphasize that these things, far beyond their class rank or resume, will determine their professional success and reputation – an eye-opening and relieving truth for most law students. Second, I tell them absolutely that these are the very same qualities that will make them happy, and I promise to cover the research on that or to provide them a reading so they can see why that is true (more below on this). Third and almost equally important, I point out that all these qualities and behaviors are abundantly available to each of them – they are unlimited and there can be no competition for them (i.e., “Everyone here can be in the top 1% of the class for kindness, attentiveness, cooperation, a good work ethic,” etc.....)

8. To make that point and close the exercise I ask them if there is anything on the list that anyone feels they cannot accomplish with some attention. This is powerful, because, as mentioned, the answer is always “no.” The list is always ‘character-driven’ not ‘performance-driven’. Once they realize this, it is a huge connection for them. As above, I point out that law practice is just like this – your success, reputation, and happiness will depend on how you are, qualities like these that everyone can excel at, rather than performances and outcomes that are inherently zero-sum and anxiety producing.

**RESULTS** seem clear and consistent to me.

- A. There is a very tangible shift in the classes where I have done this, toward cooperation, respect, less posturing and comparing, and less stress.
- B. I am also more comfortable managing class time, not allowing students to dominate, and being mindful to watch my behavior and language to always be supportive.
- C. As mentioned, just having made the list is a powerful step in professional (identity) development; then referring back to it provides another positive and reinforcing message each time in the context of real behaviors in class. Always reminding them that their life in the profession will work precisely the same way again relieves their apprehensions about being “good enough” and what it takes to make it as a lawyer – whether or not they win the competitions for grades, journals, etc. I like to back this up with the research Dr. Sheldon and I did a few years ago, showing that the happy lawyers are all about integrity, relationships, and purpose, and not about ‘more/better/best’, though those material things are nice. In my professional skills course, I can work that information directly into the course content a bit later. If your course or program is not amenable to direct wellness content, you can just refer them to the study itself (SSRN.com, ‘*what makes lawyers happy?*’) or I have a tiny publication that explains it to them in brief and plain language.