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Law School Orientation: An Opportunity to Mentor One-Ls in the Tools of the Trade

By Valerie J. Munson

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The traditional law school orientation introduces incoming students to key administrative personnel, facilities, resources, policies, and procedures. At its best, it also fosters a sense of class collegiality and assures that new students receive at least a little information about what law school is like and a few key pointers on how they might go about being successful. It generally takes place over a few days’ time. But, might those few days be put to better use? Might the traditional orientation be expanded in time and deepened in content such that students have a firm grasp of the basic tools they will need to succeed in law school before the first day of the semester? My colleagues and I at Southern Illinois University School of Law thought so. This is the story of how we went about designing a new type of orientation experience for our students.

We first identified two key tools that first-year students must master and must master early to be successful in their academic careers: case briefing and analogic reasoning as taught through the use of IRAC. We decided to structure a full orientation week, renamed “Week One-L,” to denote its change in purpose and content, that would assure, as best we could, that each and every incoming student mastered the basic use of those two tools prior to the start of the fall semester. We adopted a varied method of instruction using classroom teaching, small group work, and individual work to teach case briefing and IRAC.

Specifically, we created a case briefing assignment midsummer, supplying incoming students with written and videotaped instruction about the nature and components of case briefing. We chose the cases to be briefed during orientation week in consultation with our Lawyering Skills faculty. The two cases were the first of the handful of cases that first-year students are provided for purposes of writing their closed memo in Lawyering Skills class. Thus, the case briefing exercises are fully integrated into the first-year curriculum.

On the first day of orientation, the students turned in their summer case briefing assignment and attended a class covering the basics of case briefing. That same day, students met their “faculty mentors.” The faculty mentors reviewed

1 Case briefing is simply a structured form of note-taking about the content of judicial decisions. While its exact components differ somewhat depending on the note-taker, a typical format contains the title of the case, the cause of action involved, the underlying facts, the procedural posture, the legal issues involved, the court’s holdings and disposition (e.g. affirmed or reversed the lower court), the court’s reasoning, the rules of law applied or formulated by the court, a noting of the existence of dissenting or concurring opinions along with a brief explanation of each, and notes about any questions the students might have about the case. See, Helene S. Shapo, Marilyn R. Walter & Elizabeth Fajans, Writing and Analysis in the Law 58 (6th ed. 2013).

2 Unfamiliar to older generations of practicing lawyers, IRAC is simply an acronym used for pedagogical purposes to assist students in recognizing and performing analogic reasoning. It stands for: issue(s), rule(s), application or analysis, and conclusion. See, Barry Friedman & John C. P. Goldberg, Open Book: Succeeding on Exams from the First Day of Law School (2011).

3 We completed a brief survey of what some other law schools were doing and found that a number had lengthened their orientation period to a week and that many were teaching skills such as case briefing and IRAC. However, we did not find any that relied on small group work to the extent we ultimately did or who integrated the orientation exercises into a class as we ultimately did.

4 Our use of faculty mentors for small group work proved key to reducing the anxiety that most One-L students feel at this point in their legal career. We received a great deal of feedback from students saying that they believed the guidance and encouragement they received from their faculty mentors throughout the week made them feel comfortable that they were “on track.” Our faculty mentors, in turn, reported that they received lots of questions and requests for guidance from their mentees. Apparently the small group setting reduced the shyness that many 1L students feel in larger settings.
the submitted case briefs overnight and returned them to the students at a workshop the following morning, together with a completed rubric and comments. Since each faculty mentor was assigned just three or four students, personal feedback could be both specific and targeted to the individual. During that second day workshop, students were also provided with a sample case brief, which was used by the faculty mentor to elucidate and correct common errors and misunderstandings. At a subsequent workshop with their faculty mentors, students were given the opportunity to rewrite their initial case briefs with their faculty mentor present for individual questions. Those rewritten briefs were then reviewed by the faculty mentors and returned to students with a rubric and comments. On the third day of Week One-L, students attended two classes. First, a mock Property class provided an analysis of the first case they had briefed, using the IRAC tool. This was followed by a second class teaching the basics of IRAC analysis as applied to hypotheticals. The students then had the opportunity to respond to two separate written hypotheticals applying IRAC analysis. Their analyses were submitted to their faculty mentors and again they received feedback by way of rubric and individual comment from those mentors.

They also had the opportunity to pose questions both individually and in their small groups. Finally, toward the end of the week, students attended their first Lawyering Skills class during which case briefing basics were reviewed again and questions entertained. During that class, students were assigned a second case to brief and they were subsequently given the opportunity to work on those second case briefs for an hour with their faculty mentors present and available for questions.

In short, the students received group instruction on case briefing prior to arrival on campus and twice during Week One-L. They received faculty mentor feedback on one case brief as well as a rewrite of that case brief and had multiple opportunities to ask questions in a group or individually. They also worked on writing a second case brief with faculty mentors standing by to answer questions and provide guidance.

In addition to their work with case briefing and IRAC analysis, the One-L students participated in three classes designed to provide them with the framework needed for a solid start to their first semester. One covered the nature of the U.S. legal system and the hierarchy of legal authority. Another dealt with the expectations of professors regarding student work before, during, and after class. And the third covered certain “keys to success” including time management, the setting of priorities, and the use of available resources on campus. Although the academic content of Week One-L at SIU School of Law is considerable, there is still plenty of time built in for socializing ...

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5 The rubric listed each of the parts of a case brief: title, cause of action, facts, procedural posture, issue, holding, disposition, reasoning rule(s) of law, dissents or concurrences, open questions, and provided a place to note whether each was present, accurately and fully stated and clear. Faculty mentors were encouraged to circle the three items on the rubric that the student should focus on correcting and also to provide positive feedback concerning parts of the case brief that were well done.

6 In order to achieve this desirable student-teacher ratio, our entire faculty participated as faculty mentors for the week. As mentors, the faculty continue their relationship with their small group of students throughout their law school careers, albeit on a less formal basis.

7 For purposes of this mock class, the group of incoming students was split into two groups so as to allow for greater participation. The students experienced a “real class” for the first time and also had the opportunity to reflect on the class experience itself.

8 All of the hypotheticals depended solely upon the case briefed by the students prior to arriving on campus and a statute quoted therein.

9 The rubric for the IRAC assignments set forth the IRAC elements: issue, rule, application, conclusion, and provided a space for the faculty mentor to indicate whether each element was present and fully, clearly, and accurately stated. It also provided a space for the faculty mentor to indicate whether the IRAC essay was well written using professional English.

10 The second case brief assignment was due at the time of the second Lawyering Skills class during the first week of the regular semester.
We believe that by providing our students with a thorough experience in case briefing and analogic reasoning using IRAC prior to the start of their first semester, we have enabled them to maximize their success in the early weeks and months of law school. By incorporating the use of faculty mentors in that process, we have also enabled our students to form a one-on-one relationship to which they can turn for support during their first year of law school and beyond.

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11 Since this is the first year we used our new orientation format, we are eager to assess what impact the focused teaching of case briefing and IRAC skills has on first semester One-L performance but such assessment must necessarily wait.

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**Micro Essay: Print Matters?**

**A Practical Defense of Print**

“... the report of my death was an exaggeration.” With this quip Mark Twain dispelled media accounts that he had fallen ill and died. The same can now be said of print. While libraries will carry far fewer physical volumes, the three-dimensional object is here to stay. Cataloguing librarians take heart! Consider the printer. Even when information can be read on a cellphone or watch, patrons demand access to the possibility of a physical copy. Consider also the plight of the first-year student who, never having the opportunity to peruse a shelf of court reporters, attempts to comprehend the case citation.

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