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## Seek Out Different Learning Experiences to Inspire Your Teaching: Vignettes from Flute Camp

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### I. INTRODUCTION

As legal research and writing (LRW) professors, we value and strive to model a commitment to lifelong learning for our students.<sup>1</sup> We also know that strong and caring student-teacher relationships are built, in part, upon the ability to express genuine empathy.<sup>2</sup> But how often do we, as teaching professionals, embrace an opportunity to push beyond our own familiar skill set and learn something outside of our proverbial wheelhouse, guided by the efforts of a teacher attempting to teach us? And is there a point in one's teaching career when the student perspective simply becomes too distant a memory to draw upon as a credible source of understanding and relatable example?

As I approached my tenth year of teaching LRW, I found myself pondering these kinds of questions. It had been over 20 years since I had first sat in a law school classroom, and I had only vague memories of feeling vulnerable in a new learning environment with a new set of peers. Even the waves of uncertainty I had felt as a new lawyer, and later as a new professor, had receded over time. But

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Anthony Niedwiecki, *Teaching for Lifelong Learning: Improving the Metacognitive Skills of Law Students Through More Effective Formative Assessment Techniques*, 40 Cap. U. L. Rev. 149, 153 (2012) (explaining that a major focus of law school education should be on “train[ing] students to be lifelong learners” so as to equip them to “transfer their learning [as well as their skill in learning itself] ... to the novel situations they will face in the legal profession”).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Kate Eliza O'Connor, “You Choose to Care:” *Teachers, Emotions and Professional Identity*, 24 Teaching & Teacher Educ. 117 (2008).

now, from my mid-career vantage point, I had some new concerns. I wondered if perhaps drawing on my own experience as a law student and new lawyer was starting to sound forced (maybe even a little corny) to my modern-day students. I also wondered if perhaps my fervent exhortation to embrace the goal of life-long learning was subtly being undermined by my own conduct. Sure, I attend conferences and stockpile CLE credits, I read a lot, and I am committed to mastering Google Scholar. But realistically, these are all learning pursuits I am well poised to absorb with a minimum of effort and little genuine growth. These pursuits do not require a different mindset, a new vocabulary, or the assistance of a teacher drawing from pool of expertise beyond my own—all things my first-year law students face when they arrive for orientation. And then I went to flute camp.

*Flute camp?* Isn't that for high school kids in the marching band? No, it's not that flute camp. This weeklong immersion program, hosted on a university campus and taught by three flute clinicians,<sup>3</sup> was aimed primarily at adult flute hobbyists. The “campers” who assembled in the summer of 2015, ranging in age from approximately 17 to 65, and hailing from at least four different states. They were armed with a variety of flute-playing skills, musical abilities, and performance backgrounds. This unique experience re-inspired the flute playing that I enjoy in my personal life. But it also replenished a professional well I feared was beginning to run dry by allowing me to see the world again from a true “student perspective” and to observe teachers—albeit in a different but transferrable context—handle “teaching moments” similar to those I encounter in LRW. Yes, attending a “flute camp”

<sup>3</sup> The clinicians held degrees in flute and flute performance; they were also active players and teachers of students at a variety of levels.

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may be a rather esoteric opportunity but, as LRW professors, we have much to gain by purposefully seeking out active learning experiences guided by a teacher in any setting: from horseback riding lessons, to culinary classes, to a calculus course.<sup>4</sup>

My week at flute camp inspired my teaching in many ways. In Section II, I offer three vignettes from flute camp capturing those moments when I was most deeply aware of the transferability between this experience and the teaching of LRW: (1) confronting a known weakness, (2) reinvigorating flagging motivation, and (3) observing a different kind of teacher handle a difficult question. While these vignettes are undeniably context-specific, each one also contains a broader nugget of insight into the psychology (and perhaps mystery) of learning. In the end, my aim is simply to give life to the concept that actively seeking out different learning experiences can greatly inspire teaching.

## II. VIGNETTES FROM FLUTE CAMP

### A. Confronting a Known Weakness

Practically no one at flute camp knew I was a lawyer or a professor. The focus remained unwaveringly on our “flute lives.” I had played from fourth grade through twelfth, participating in orchestra, wind ensemble, and marching band. But I had also left my flute under the bed when I drove off to college. Almost 20 years passed before I played a few notes again, initially just as a lark to entertain my five-year-old daughter. I took sporadic lessons and struggled to practice—mostly in the kitchen while cooking dinner. Then last winter my husband registered me for flute camp as a surprise birthday present. I was *quite* surprised. As the months passed between January and July, I became less and less sure of what to expect. The first person I met at flute camp on the night I arrived at the dorm asked if I was ready for “boot camp.” I smiled, thinking

how my colleagues and I refer to our law school’s LRW Orientation Week by the very same name. “Oh, that’s cute,” I thought. I should have been wrier.

Each day of flute camp followed a 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. schedule. It was grueling: rehearsals, practices, master classes, and lectures on a variety of flute-related topics. It had been years since I had played in an ensemble under the watchful eye and keen ear of a demanding conductor, and I found the clinicians intense. By Monday afternoon, I was roundly intimidated; the music was difficult, my peers appeared to be excellent sight-readers, and my arms, unaccustomed to hours of flute playing, were starting to shake. I became increasingly bewildered as trickier measures and two-octave runs roared past like a freight train. My internal commentator wryly observed that I *could* play this music; it would just take weeks to learn it. Weeks? I had *four days* before the culminating recital on Friday afternoon. How could I keep up? I was hitting wrong notes, I was missing entrances, I was measures behind. I fought back the urge to crawl under my chair.

It had been decades since I felt this exposed and vulnerable before a teacher and a classroom full of peers. And that’s when it hit me. My LRW program had recently hosted a conference on the “academically underprepared law student” and here I was—the analogously “underprepared flute player.” My sight-reading abilities and sense of rhythm—two fundamentals in music—had always been weak, and, like many students, I had developed a bevy of coping mechanisms rather than tackle these weaknesses. Basically, I was a clever mimicker; I could play any measure if someone else played it first. But this indirect approach wouldn’t work here, and I knew, with every mature but resisting bone in my body, I had to acknowledge these weaknesses and seek help. But how?

In the end, it wasn’t pretty. I stopped dead in the middle of the first quartet practice, admitted my weaknesses, and asked to double up on a part (playing the same part as another musician, so

“It had been decades since I felt this exposed and vulnerable before a teacher and a classroom full of peers.”

<sup>4</sup> Scared of math? See Matt Waite, *How I Faced My Fears and Learned to Be Good at Math*, Neiman Foundation (Nov. 13, 2013), <http://www.neimanlab.org/2013/11/matt-waite-how-i-faced-my-fears-and-learned-to-be-good-at-math/>. Waite, while teaching as a journalism professor, took freshman-level math classes at age 37, prompting “absolute terror that he wouldn’t do well,” but also the realization that math can be conquered through hard work. See *id.*

we became a trio). But, I added awkwardly, I was committed to improvement in the long-term. After a moment of surprised silence, the other three players nodded and life went on. In fact, life got better, because once word spread that I needed help with these fundamental skills, every other participant offered tips I am still using today.

Those moments of vulnerability on the first day of flute camp gave me tremendous insight into how I can best counsel law students facing down similar weaknesses with fundamental writing skills. Like many LRW professors, writing has always been my strong suit, so I sometimes struggle to relate to students in need of greater help with fundamentals. But having denied and hidden my weaknesses as a flute player only to have them resurface in a setting where I really cared to get them right, I now have a heartfelt and timely analogy upon which to draw, and that has inspired my teaching.

#### B. Reinvigorating a Flagging Motivation

By 10 p.m. on the Tuesday night of flute camp, I was overwhelmed. Six new pieces sat on my music stand, but I was too tired to practice. But because I could hear others playing up and down the hallway of the dorm, I felt pressured to do *something* productive. I pulled out the notebook in which I had been jotting down suggestions for practice, but now I wondered which to prioritize: Hand position? Breathing? Posture?

While flute camp for adult hobbyists was obviously not a competitive atmosphere, it still caused anxiety. It was hard to process so much information in such a condensed time frame. It was hard not to compare myself to the other “students.” It was hard to sleep in a dorm room. Tired and frustrated, I said to myself, “You could be home in six hours.”

Again, I called myself up sharply. Would you ever allow a student to react this way in LRW? The answer was certainly not. I knew it was time for “the talk” but this time (and the irony was rife), I would be having that talk with myself.

I am here to learn. Everyone is at a different stage of development. Know that you have strengths. Know too that you have weaknesses, and make progress on them every day. Rome was not built in day. Just like becoming a good legal writer, playing an instrument well requires a life-long commitment and daily practice. Make the most of this amazing learning experience, as it will soon be over. Be inspired by the others, but careful not to get caught up in a web of comparison.

The “talk” reinvigorated my flagging motivation and, reexperiencing the kind of frustration that led me to it, has inspired my teaching.

But the truly transferrable insight from this moment of clarity came later. I often tell LRW students that their law school classmates suffer from similar bouts of anxiety and self-doubt and that bonding with like-minded classmates can be a source of buoyancy. This truism can be hard to accept in the absence of concrete evidence, and I was about to find some. As I walked to dinner on the Wednesday afternoon of flute camp with two other women (both in their 60s), one of them said quietly that she felt overwhelmed, so much so that she had to have “a talk” with herself the night before. The other woman and I burst out simultaneously with, “Me, too!” This prompted us all to stop and laugh in a poignant moment of shared experience. We three were differently situated in our daily lives and in our flute playing, but we had all gone to flute camp to “grow.” And genuine growth in any setting tends to trigger moments of frustration where the goal becomes elusive and the road ahead a bit steep.

As an LRW professor, being able to say that I have had such a moment recently—as opposed to decades ago when I was in law school—gives me more credibility when counseling a student. It also inspires me to experiment with different analogies when trying to help law students navigate similar rough spots on their intensive journey.

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### C. Observing a Different Kind of Teacher Handle a Difficult Question

On the Thursday morning of flute camp, each participant was given an opportunity to play with a piano accompanist. I was firmly resolved to accept the opportunity, though I knew my knees would knock from waves of performance anxiety. I have rarely played with a live accompanist, but I value collaboration and firmly believe that the advice I give students as we prepare for appellate oral argument was directly on point: no one in the room wants to see a speaker/performer fail, confidence breeds confidence, and meticulous preparation is the best method of getting a handle on one's nerves. Forcing myself to experience and survive the inevitable anxiety in a supportive atmosphere was imperative. So I played. And when I sat down, I was relieved and proud of my own mettle.

But then I realized that a profound student-teacher exchange had just taken center-stage. The next participant—a very tall young man—had immediately raised the music stand up so high only the top of his head was visible. The clinician asked him to lower it, so she could see his face as he played his flute, and a polite but palpable standoff ensued. He said he needed the stand up high to see the music, but she suspected he was masking anxiety by shielding his face. When he protested, she took the middle ground, suggesting that even if he *was* confident and *could* play the piece beautifully (and she believed he could), he had already alerted the audience that he lacked self-confidence. Such an interpretation may indeed be incorrect and even unfair, she explained, but because it exists as a possibility, a performer must avoid any behavior tending to trigger it. She asked him again to lower the music stand and the room became very quiet. “But ... he really is tall,” offered another participant.

I watched the clinician closely. Substantively, I was 100 percent behind her. How often had I had seen law students fail to realize how body language and poor eye contact undermine a show of confidence at the oral argument podium? Emotionally, I empathized with the young man. Heck, I would play

with my back to the audience to shield my nerves if I thought I could away with it! And even assuming he was not “hiding,” I could see that he was now visibly nervous from the exchange. How often, I thought, had I left a student standing at the oral argument podium as “Exhibit A” while I talked to the class?

Eventually, the young man lowered the music stand a smidgen and, after the briefest moment of locked eyes between them, the clinician nodded for him to begin. My professor antennae sensed that this exchange would continue later in private, but that the class needed to move on.

I am still analyzing this exchange, from two simultaneous perspectives, and both inspire my teaching. First, I am convinced that the clinician, as a teacher of flute and herself an experienced performer, was right to enforce the height of the music stand as a nonnegotiable item. I agree with her that the player's behavior sent a dangerous signal to the audience. To me, it was akin to reading from a script when the judges are looking at a lawyer who will not (or cannot) look up, even briefly, to establish credibility and rapport.

But even if the substantive point is infinitely debatable, I benefited from seeing a different kind of teacher handle such a dicey point of performance behavior in front of a live class. Yes, I can enhance my teaching of LRW by watching my law school colleagues teach and react to the same kinds of questions and exchanges with students that I routinely encounter. But watching a nonlaw teacher gave me ideas as to how I might draw on nonlaw analogies to repackage certain points and reach even more students. I so often hear first-year law students talk of inspirational teaching and lessons imparted by football coaches, band directors, dance instructors, and youth pastors (to name just a few) on items that directly impact performance in law school—i.e., work ethic, time management, motivation, performing under pressure, self-reliance, and commitment to excellence.<sup>5</sup> As an LRW professor, I want to know more about how teachers in such contexts reach and motivate their students. Luckily,

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<sup>5</sup> That I still play and get excited about adult flute camp is a tribute to the lasting influence of my own high school band director. As an LRW professor, I find myself thinking back often to his methods and infectious intensity as a teacher/conductor.

flute camp gave me the opportunity to experience that first-hand, from a uniquely dualistic perspective.

### III. CONCLUSION

LRW professors should seek out different learning pursuits at different points in their teaching careers to strengthen and model their commitment to lifelong learning, to achieving a balanced professional life, and to excellence in teaching itself. I believe that law students appreciate nonlaw analogies in their

effort to navigate unfamiliar terrain and that they value genuine efforts to empathize with the student perspective. I also believe that, no matter how esoteric a lived learning experience may seem on the surface, a committed professor can find a myriad of different ways to use and be inspired by it.

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### Micro Essay: Practice Ready

#### When the Shot Clock Sounds ...

“Why did I fail this assignment?” asked a semi-indignant student.

“Well, you submitted it an hour late. Remember the late policy?”

“Yes, but I was having technical issues. It was a good paper.”

“What happens when a basketball player makes an amazing shot after the buzzer sounds on the shot clock?”

“Huh?”

“Any points for the physics-defying shot?”

“Oh. No.”

“Right. I don’t want you to lose a case because of your tardiness. You need to build good habits so that you don’t cost your clients money or liberties. Get the shot in well before the buzzer sounds, OK?”

“OK.”

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