



ESSAYS

How has learning a new skill or taking on a new challenge informed your teaching?

Life as a Teacher – Life as a Student – Life as a Teacher

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Few experiences have impacted my approach to being a teacher like being a student. In 2012, I entered the Ph.D. program in Higher Education and Student Affairs at the University of Iowa while teaching legal writing full-time. I hadn't been a student for 23 years, and it was both exciting and nerve-wracking to enter the classroom again. In addition, I was entering the classroom at the age of forty-two—much, much older than most of the other students, and sometimes older than the teacher. I learned some invaluable lessons that I now carry with me into my classroom.

Lesson 1: Students have lives, and they are balancing school with their lives.

When I am teaching—either in the classroom or in individual student conferences—I am totally focused on the students. Much to the chagrin of my family, I am not thinking about what to make for dinner, when to pick up my kid from soccer, or what I am going to buy my husband for his birthday. I am thinking totally and completely about communicating to the students effectively and seeking feedback from them about whether they are learning. And I always assumed,

perhaps foolishly, that the students were similarly focused on our course during class time and conferences.

When I became a student again, I didn't have that level of focus despite being deeply interested in the material. I was thinking about what to make for dinner. I was making lists of what to do in my legal writing class. I was thinking about how I was going to fit in exercise that day. During one class, in fact, I missed completely that we were signing up for presentation times. When I realized my mistake, the one day that was left for the presentation conflicted with a large deadline in my legal writing class (my real life). I wasn't a slacker. I didn't lack conscientiousness. I merely had a busy life.

Because of my new appreciation for the realities of my students' lives, I try really hard to give my students the benefit of the doubt, realizing that repetition is key, as is communication of important information in several ways. And I try to keep in mind that sometimes, when students react a certain way, it may not have anything to do with me, our class, or even law school.

Lesson 2: Students crave good organization and clear rules.

As a returning student, when each class began, I sat down with the syllabus and plotted out how I was going to make it through the semester with my job, my Ph.D. classes, and my life. When the organization and assignments were not clear or deadlines were in flux, it created great stress in my life, and sometimes something had to give (and it could never be my full-time job). My weeks and months were a juggling act; and if anything were to get off balance, the whole complex could come tumbling down.

We know so little about the lives of our students. Sometimes we find out from another student that one of our students is a single dad who is raising a nine-year-old child while also dealing with the death of his brother. Sometimes our students tell us that they are working twenty hours a week and taking eighteen credit hours to graduate early because they are running out of money or running out of time in this country. Sometimes we don't find out about a student's mental or physical struggles to get through the semester until after the semester is over.

Being a student again has taught me how important it is for a teacher to remain flexible while simultaneously being organized, and that lack of organization or clear rules adds stress to students' lives, the complexity of which we can only begin to fathom.

Lesson 3: It is hard to sit still and pay attention for any real length of time.

As legal writing teachers, we know the importance of doing a variety of activities in the classroom—to appeal to different learning styles, to practice various

skills, and to keep students engaged. But nothing made this concept clearer than going to a three-hour class after a long day at work. I learned the most in classes in which the professor provided opportunities for active learning, in large part because those classes kept me most engaged. When I was able to interact with other students or move around the classroom, I woke up and became energized. I also learned about my classmates and got a chance to appreciate their perspectives. The one class that was nearly all lecture and in which students had the option of doing the problems in advance was boring, and I often “zoned out.” Perhaps not coincidentally, it was in that class that I earned my lowest grade.

Lesson 4: Learning a new citation style is Very. Very. Difficult.

I didn’t appreciate the challenge associated with learning a citation system, nor did I understand why my legal writing students kept making the same kinds of citation errors, until I had to learn APA style. Now I feel only compassion for my students when they are going through that incredibly difficult process.

Lesson 5: Be human, and realize your students are human too. They will appreciate both.

Enough said.

Always Connect: How Studying Creative Writing Helped Me Become A Better Legal Writing Professor

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On the day of my first graduate creative-writing workshop, my professor walked into class with a stack of papers in hand. All twelve of us grew quiet; the week before, he’d brought a similarly sized stack that had turned out to contain

copies of the original first page of a story my classmate had turned in as a revision. My professor had brought the original to show how it was possible to revise the life out of a story, and he methodically worked through the original first page as compared to the new one to make his point. The fact that he was correct did not stop us all from feeling blindsided, and it did not stop my classmate from crying afterward.

This week, it was my turn.

The stack of papers contained the first three pages of my story, edited and condensed into one tight opening scene, printed on a single page. As my classmates read it, I caught them sneaking glances at me, trying to read my facial expression for a sign I was not handling the situation well, preparing themselves for another post-class bar visit spent counseling a sobbing classmate.

But there would be no sobbing this week. Once the initial shock of being critiqued so radically and so publicly wore off, I felt elated. I'd turned in a story I knew was weak, a story that was not yet where I wanted it to be, and this first page was a dramatic change.

"I didn't change a word," my professor said—insisted, really—and while he and my classmates fought over whether it was appropriate for him to be so hands-on with someone else's work, to impose his own vision on top of mine, I felt only gratitude. I'd gotten to see how an expert revises: with ruthless efficiency, stripping away excess to reveal the core of what matters. Only occasionally had he suggested actual changes to the language itself; more often he'd chipped away unnecessary words to reveal the more streamlined prose beneath, like a sculptor chips away stone until a person emerges.

In my own teaching, I want my students to feel a similar sense of elation at the thought of revising their initial, messy work into something gleaming and beautiful. My professor's approach and mine are somewhat different; he prided himself on being a Band-Aid ripper, inflicting brief moments of pain to show young writers what the healing process looks like, while I'm more focused on guiding students through the process of rethinking and rewriting so they feel a sense of ownership over the new version. But his lessons still resonate even as I've tried to find ways to make them my own.

One important lesson is about giving and receiving feedback. It's important to me that students learn to acknowledge that while criticism always hurts, moving through that pain can help writers reach a more productive place. Learning how to give feedback helps students learn how to receive it, and learning how to provide feedback in a more measured way can take the sting out when they're on the receiving end. This is one area where I've tried to take what I learned and expand on it, keeping the useful lesson about the value of feedback while removing the shock value of my professor's Band-Aid-ripping approach.

My professor also spoke often of the importance of connection in all its forms, from the technical level to the thematic, relying on E.M. Forster's edict to "only connect." Both considerations are relevant in legal writing, even if the means of

explaining them might differ. In legal writing, the concept of connection is even easier to discuss, in that I can direct students to literally draw arrows between rule statements and analysis in a structured legal discussion. But I've found myself broadening the concept of connection past the writing itself and into the classroom, encouraging my students to think about connection not just in their writing but in their lives.

Whenever I write something myself, I can hear my professor's voice whispering to me, helping me decide which words are really necessary, which words are meaningful and clear, which words have significance. I like to imagine I can serve that function for my students—that even when the course is over, I will be a benevolent presence, quietly reminding them to always connect.

Apologies from your LRW Professor, the Part-Time Creative Writing MFA Student

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Dear students:

I hope you experienced productive summers and are enjoying your second year of law school. As you begin submitting law clerk applications for next summer, I encourage you to revisit the memoranda and briefs that you completed in my legal writing class last year. With revision, they would make appropriate writing samples to accompany your applications. I'm sorry that I'm not on campus to help you polish your written work product. I've decided to use my sabbatical year to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing.

And it's kicking my ass.

After trudging in circles in your metaphoric shoes for a bit, I realize that I owe you an apology. These novice writing boots we share are exciting to slip into. I had anticipated that they would also be uncomfortable. But *this* uncomfortable? Now that they are rubbing my heels raw, I must say I'm sorry. Transitioning to a new discipline is no joke. The writing tasks you completed for my class were complex and frustrating. They required you to take risks and to make yourself vulnerable. I'm sorry that I was not more sympathetic to your struggle.

Recently I've been thinking that much of my instruction probably felt useless to at least some of you. You were novice legal writers placed in my care, and I made an effort to guide you. I gave you instructions, explanations, and examples. I answered your questions. I offered you templates. I shared my high expectations with you, and then I sent you on your way. I stocked your pantry with all the ingredients I would ever want to incorporate into a recipe, and so I expected you to serve me a five-star meal. You all missed the mark by a few stars, and I was not shy about telling you so. My blunt criticism grew from my desire to see you succeed.

But did you hear it that way? I doubt it.

Could I have been more realistic? More patient with you beginners? Those are rhetorical questions; please, don't answer.

I don't have a great track record confronting unfamiliar and strenuous demands. In college, I spent about a month—maybe two—rowing crew in the novice eight. I was undersized and overwhelmed. Five a.m. is not my best time of day; out on the water, I was cold, tired, and, obviously, full of excuses. I quit. My coach didn't try to stop me, either. That's probably because I didn't display enough strength, endurance, or—more importantly—discipline and grit to prove that I had real potential.

You know, the discipline and grit I lectured you about? The resilience I required of you? I didn't have it. I feel hypocritical reflecting on how eagerly I turned my back on crew because it was hard. And it wasn't even legal-writing hard.

That's not all. I continue to protect myself from failure with respect to other endeavors. In mountain biking, I am a perpetual beginner; fear of falling stunts my improvement. I brake when I should accelerate, and—at least so far—I've been unable to override that instinct. So I don't practice very often. It's just too exhausting. In tennis, I have plateaued, unwilling to fight through the barriers to improvement. My reaction time and legs are not going to get me to that ball, I think, and so I don't even try. My gear is in great shape, but my downhill cornering and my serve are not.

Legal writing was never especially hard for me. It was time consuming and taxing, but it was also enjoyable and intuitive. Even when I was a first-year law student, legal writing clicked. My ability to organize a legal argument far surpassed my ability to organize my office or my sock drawer. Concision and precision came naturally. Topic sentences and transitions automatically populated my documents. My attention to detail was high, and my knowledge of grammar and punctuation was solid. So while some aspects of the first year of law school tested me, my legal writing class and assignments provided a safe and comfortable escape from the curricular requirements that made me sweat.

I have digressed. Creative writing allows that in a way that legal writing does not. Creative writing permits me to wander, while legal writing demands that I focus. And creative writers get to ask readers to make leaps and connect dots,

while legal writers can leave none of that to chance. “Do the hard work, so your reader doesn’t have to,” you probably heard me say. “Hold your reader’s hand; lead her through your logic.” Did you understand what I meant? Did you know how to apply that advice? I thought you should, but now I see that those sound-bites may have left you more puzzled than prepared.

As a creative writing graduate student, satisfying reader expectations remains important, but I’m afforded new freedoms that allow for playful experimentation. Abandon chronology. Replace seamless logic with collage. Permit—no, invite—competing interpretations of my written ideas. I’ll share a secret: I am considering writing an essay entirely in the passive voice, complete with nominalizations and other surplus language that I am accustomed to excising from your writing and my own. “Show, don’t tell,” right? What better way to *show* the reader the challenges all those writing choices create than to lean hard on them, mocking their lack of utility while causing readers to pull out their hair at the roots? I could, but won’t need to, insert a signpost or other obvious transition for you when I finally return to the topic of this letter: how I may have shortchanged you in class. I’m learning a new set of rules, rules that represent a fairly dramatic shift from the legal writing fundamentals that I insisted you follow.

Exploring this new landscape is liberating and exciting, but it’s also terrifying. (Is that how you felt, too? Terrified? I was striving to cultivate in you heightened curiosity and a strong work ethic, not terror. If I created terror where it could have been avoided, I am so sorry.) In creative writing, with many of my default rules obviated, my templates obsolete, my instincts calibrated for a different discipline, I question every single writing decision I make, annihilating my productivity. My inner editor appears before I put my fingertips on my keyboard; and once I start moving, the foreign terrain drops like a trap door beneath me. I do see the holes I keep falling into, and so I try to jump over them, but each time I leap forward, I twist my ankle.

No, really. I have literally sprained my ankle three times this year because I have been lost in thought, brainstorming essays while walking. Writing is powerful; it can also be dangerous.

Many of you must have felt the same way in my class. While I told you that writing and polishing predictive and persuasive legal analysis was challenging, I forgot the bitter taste and gritty texture of your writing struggle until now, as I am eating it. I feel a bit like I do when I start down an unfamiliar trail on my mountain bike. I ride my brakes hard, disrupting my own momentum and stability. I worry so deeply about nicking a tree with my handlebars that I cause that very mishap. Did I ever tell you to stop overthinking things? How’d that go for you, because I tell myself the same thing, yet I am overthinking myself into collisions with trees.

I have not touched my mountain bike since my last fall. Meanwhile, in my class, after your paper score was low because you jumbled your analysis, omitted a key judicial decision, or ran out of time to proofread, you kept going. That is exceptional. It’s been easy for me to walk away from the discomforts I face as a

novice—to quit the crew team and to stick to comfortably cruising wide paths on my bike. In my legal writing class, you didn't get to walk away, and you didn't get to park yourself indefinitely in easy terrain. You had to push yourself through the self-doubt and pain. And you did.

Now that I am pushing through this writing, editing, feedback-receiving, revising discomfort like you did last year, I'm wondering: with my creative writing novice experience to build on, how can I make your classroom successors' journey smoother?

I think I'll tell more stories, and many of them will have no obvious connection to legal writing. Just as fiction can be a more effective vehicle than non-fiction for communicating important truths, stories from outside the world of legal writing—or outside the law in general—can convey critical lessons that help students strengthen their legal writing skills and develop healthy writing habits. Explaining and modeling best practices only got us so far. My refined approach will include more normalizing through storytelling. I'll talk about falling off my bike after hitting a tree; about quitting the crew and roller derby teams (yes, I tried that too, also very briefly); and about staring down a blank screen as a creative writing deadline looms. I used to question my legal writing colleague who spent class time showing students video footage of the perfect wave. (You know who you are. Please accept my apologies for doubting your technique.) Why? Now I think I might show my own students footage of a roller skater achieving a state of flow on the Venice boardwalk. It's a powerful metaphor for writing, so why not?

Also, I'm going to stop presenting the four-part Flowers paradigm as gospel. Remember that wisdom I shared with you, over and over and over again? Madman, Architect, Carpenter, Judge? I presented Flowers and her cast of characters as *the* formula for efficient writing, even though the paradigm offers me limited utility. It is a useful *starting point* for thinking about process and efficiency—an idealized version of what remains a messy, non-linear process for me no matter how hard I try to tame it. I can be more honest about that going forward. Flowers may be a tool, but it's not a guaranteed cure for writer's block, procrastination, or any other ailment. Because the process paradigm I preach neither magically improves my efficiency nor represents my true process, I suspect that it was not especially useful for some of you, either. Not one of you ever disclosed that to me; you are all far too polite. Flowers gave us a shared vocabulary in our discussions: "Send your judge away; bring back your madman!" But I'm not sure that, as I presented it, it offered us much more than a cute conversation code.

Facing impending deadlines on novel assignments has been a useful reminder for me of the paralyzing concerns that students confront when wading into the waters of an unfamiliar discipline. I have long understood that a student's delay in getting moving is not necessarily a sign of diligence deficiency; rather, it is often perfectionism that leads to procrastination. Students, including myself, spend an inordinate amount of time thinking, or really fretting, about an assignment, without placing any words on a page. To manage the silencing effect of perfectionism,

I have suggested madman freewriting—brainstorming without judgment or self-censorship. We discussed how seemingly far-fetched ideas may beget a winning argument, and so I instructed you to turn off your judge. She has no role in this endeavor until we reach the end of a long process. Send her packing for now.

It's nice enough advice in theory. But in practice? Please. I've been jogging and sprinting, and I've concluded that I cannot outrun my inner judge. Nor can I change my path to escape her critical gaze. She is behind my back, on my shoulder, and in my head. She is loud. She is insistent. She is silencing me. Now what? Inviting my madman in, giving her time and unimpeded access to my keyboard, has only gotten me so far. No sooner are my ideas on the page than I begin to attack them. That self-sabotage makes progress slow and painful. I plan to be honest with my future students about this. I am with them in this struggle.

Finally, I commit to enhancing the individualized feedback I deliver. I know that I drowned many of you with written comments, offering so much feedback that defeat sometimes eclipsed your drive. I imagine you feel like I do when my tennis teacher tells me to remember all the things we've been working on—swing low to high, keep my eye on the ball, stay light on my feet, and loosen my grip—then instructs me to relax and not think so hard. One can only implement so many pieces of advice at a time. My new feedback approach must prioritize, well, prioritizing.

It must also offer more genuine encouragement to keep moving in a positive direction. My MFA program has reminded me of the value of customized, open-minded, and encouraging reactions from mentors and peer readers; they have sometimes found promising nuggets buried in drafts that I am ready to toss. I've developed some habits to save time while evaluating, scoring, and offering constructive criticism on forty or so versions of the same analysis, each submitted with an anonymous number rather than a student-writer's name. I sometimes have given "positive" comments that have offered about as much value to your learning as a marshmallow can contribute to your daily nutrition. "Meeting the legal reader's expectations requires hard work. You're getting there; keep pushing yourself," I have suggested. "But how?" you might have wondered. "In what way?"

Or I have written, "I see your effort." Sometimes I have seen the effort, but other times that's been a fib. That's not fair. Going forward, I will always see the effort. Always. Even on a blank page. If the effort is not yielding dividends, I'll say that instead. And if I think a student has given up, I'll say that, too, and more. I'll tell students not to quit the team. To get back on the bike. To pick up the racket. "This is tricky," I'll say. "Here, let me show you."

In closing, again, I'm sorry that I'm not with you on campus to help you polish your writing samples, but I'm so glad to have joined you in the broad community of novice writers, struggling to adjust to the expectations of a new discipline. If you need me, I'll be icing my ankle in front of my laptop while working to extinguish self-doubt and generate compelling fiction. Above all, remember that you

remain at the beginning of a long professional journey. You have much to learn, but you've already demonstrated your great potential to me.

Sending admiration for your resilience and my warm wishes,

Your Professor

Author's Note: This essay is a slightly revised version of one short piece in my MFA thesis.

Montevideo: *Una Estudiante Otra Vez* (A student once again)

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I felt stupid.

Sitting in a small classroom, with classmates I'd just met, avoiding eye contact with a teacher I couldn't understand, I felt stupid.

I'd started this venture feeling smart, motivated, and confident. I was eager to master new skills, and my past educational experiences indicated that my hard work would bring success.

But no.

I'd arrived in Montevideo, Uruguay, just a week earlier, part of a sabbatical plan that combined learning Spanish with various writing projects. I was still settling into my apartment, still finding my way to the laundry, still unable to make my comfort-food brownies because I didn't yet realize that the Spanish word for "butter" varies among Spanish-speaking countries.

I'd gone to an informal gathering of teachers and students a few days before classes began, excited to meet my partners in this new venture. But instead of connecting, I'd felt like an outsider: too old, too foreign, too new to this culture. The teachers talked only to each other. The other students had already formed groups by the time I arrived.

Now, sitting in class, I felt stupid. I wasn't brand new to Spanish, so I'd expected at least the first day of class to be easy. But on Day 1 we were practicing

commands, my least favorite verb form. “Give me the book. Give it to me.” I couldn’t follow the pattern for conjugating the verbs and attaching a string of pronouns – “¡Dámelo!” Culturally, I didn’t believe I should be giving commands in my second language to people I didn’t know in a country I’d been in only briefly.¹

My teacher was obviously bright, but not so obviously interested in me, or my mastery of his native language, or my understanding of his native culture. In another awkward class a few weeks later, we translated and analyzed a song that was currently popular among teens. The words and their meaning were impenetrable. I did like the music, but we didn’t talk about that.

My classmates, mostly Germans, always seemed vastly more knowledgeable than I felt, in part because they spoke my language flawlessly and were thus mastering their third language while I stumbled over my second.

Where was my confidence? My motivation? Why had being a student again seemed like a good idea for an experienced teacher like me?²

I felt so stupid.

***Author’s Note:** Being a student again deepened my empathy for new law students. My experience mirrored theirs – arriving in a new city, seeking relationships during orientation, feeling overwhelmed in classes, struggling to transfer prior knowledge, and learning the culture of law school. My sabbatical experience increased my commitment to easing their transition.*

I Wish My Teacher Knew

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In July 2016, I moved my family—my husband, my two daughters (both toddlers), my two grouchy cats, and me—from Miami to Brooklyn. This move and its challenges have informed my teaching in small, but significant, ways ever since.

The move was destabilizing, even though we were moving completely by choice. We were moving for my job—a job I was really excited about. We were

¹ Later, I remembered that this form can easily be softened to a request with *por favor*.

² After returning, I researched andragogy—how adults learn—and presented my findings at a workshop held at Stanford Law School. *Experiencing Andragogy* (on file with author).

also moving so that my husband and I could live closer to our closest friends, which was thrilling. In the abstract, we felt nothing but excitement for our new life. In the real, we were stressed to the max.

Soon after we arrived in Brooklyn, I started going into the office. There was so much I needed to do. And I was doing it, getting everything settled so that I would be ready to teach in the fall. But when I was at the office, I was also worrying about the complete disarray at home. I was trying to act like everything was normal, when everything was not normal. How could it be? I had just moved the small circus of my life a thousand miles. I would be there at work, trying to unpack my hastily packed boxes; trying to make connections with my new colleagues; trying to figure out how everything worked at an institution that was totally strange to me; and I would find myself fretting over all the things you fret over when you move. Would our belongings ever get delivered? Would we ever figure out where to buy the one kind of squeezy mango that was the only food my older daughter would reliably eat? (Answer: no, I bought them on Amazon.) And would the cats ever forgive us? (Answer: not yet, four years and counting.)

Anyone who has ever moved—basically everyone—knows it taxes a person mentally, physically, and emotionally. When I was feeling stretched in this way, I wanted the world to show me some empathy and understanding. I wanted the kids' summer camp to understand that I couldn't get the health form because we didn't have a pediatrician, and I couldn't get a pediatrician because we didn't have internet in our barren apartment, and, even if I could've gotten a pediatrician, our insurance hadn't kicked in yet. And more, I wanted them to understand that I was never going to be able to arrange any of those things if I couldn't send my kids to summer camp for a few hours a day.

I know the cliché: Be patient with people, because you can never know the battles they are fighting. I agree with this approach to life! And before the move, I would have sworn that I treated my students that way. But I really didn't. The challenges of the move made clear to me that I hadn't been treating my students the way that I wanted to be treated—at least not the way I wanted to be treated when I was in the middle of a very stressful moment where my entire life was upside down. This really hit home for me when school started.

Right after the start of school that fall, I read a *New York Times* article about an exercise that third grade teacher Kyle Schwartz had done with her students.¹ It was simple. She asked her students to complete the sentence: I wish my teacher knew

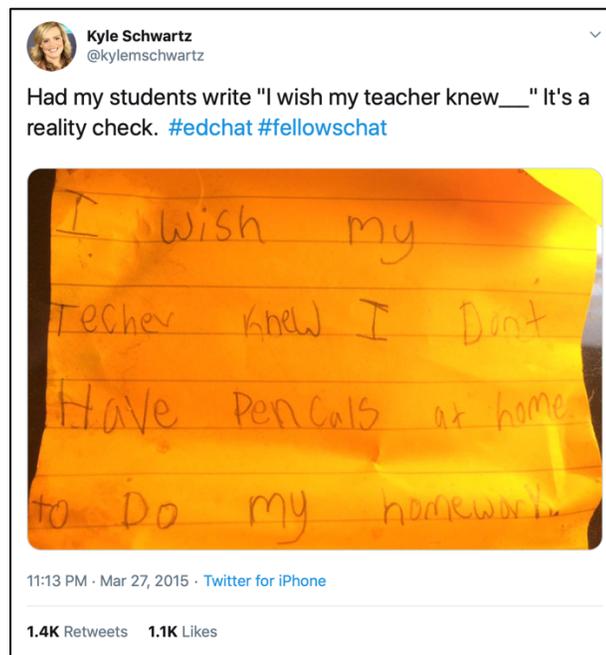
As Schwartz describes in her book,

Each student's response was unique. They responded with honesty, humor, and vulnerability. Sometimes their notes talked about their favorite sport. Sometimes students complained about conflict

¹ Donna De La Cruz, *What Kids Wish Their Teachers Knew*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 31, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/31/well/family/what-kids-wish-their-teachers-knew.html>.

with siblings or friends. They wrote about their home life and the people who meant most to them. Sometimes they articulated their hopes for the future and sometimes they explained obstacles they were facing. After completing this lesson, I was amazed at how well it helped me connect with my students. Their notes became a tangible reminder for me to truly listen to the voices of students in my classroom.²

Ms. Schwartz's exercise went viral after she tweeted some of her third graders' responses.³ They were powerful examples of how much her students were going through outside of school.



In reading about this exercise so soon after my move, I realized that I was teaching 1Ls who had just gone through or were in the midst of the same kind of destabilizing upheaval I had just experienced. And more so, they were starting a long, expensive educational endeavor that would change the course of their lives. And many of them didn't know anyone or anything about what was about to happen. And many of them were so young, fresh out of college, just barely adults. If an exciting and voluntary move had done so much to set me—a certified adult

² KYLE SCHWARTZ, *I WISH MY TEACHER KNEW: HOW ONE QUESTION CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING FOR KIDS* (2016) (quoted excerpt available at <http://iwishmyteacherknewbook.com/excerpt.php> (last visited July 6, 2020)).

³ Kyle Schwartz (@kylemschwartz), TWITTER (Mar. 27, 2015, 11:13 PM), <https://twitter.com/kylemschwartz/status/581655310344921088?lang=en>.

with financial resources and life experience—off balance, I realized that I had no idea how hard such a change must be for at least some of my students.

In this light, the issues I saw in class every fall started to make sense to me in a way they never had. Could this be why many of my students made the same small mistakes over and over? Could this be why they struggled to follow directions that I felt were clear? Could this be why they were late or missed appointments or didn't come to class prepared? My relationship with my students is often so focused on our class and the skills I want them to learn that I am shocked that they don't remember to spell *judgment* with one *e* or to add page numbers to a document. How can that be? How can they forget something I told them? *We talked about it in class!* After the move, it was plain why they sometimes forgot the minutiae that I wanted them to notice. They had so much going on.

Of course, not every issue that every student presents can be explained away with the simple statement, "They must have a lot going on." The fact that students' lives happen mostly outside of class and can be complicated and stressful can't justify low expectations or outright apathy on my part. Law school professors, and legal writing professors specifically, must help students satisfy expectations even when things in their lives are in disarray. After all, that is in many ways what work is: the thing you have to try to do well, even when everything else is out of place. But my move, and all the out-of-class complications it created, made me realize that deep empathy for my students was where I wanted our relationship to start. Why not show them the kind of understanding I had hoped for?

Like most professors, I ask my students to send me an introductory email at the beginning of the semester. I used to ask them to answer specific questions: where they grew up; lawyers (real or fictional) they admire; their favorite book (almost every student answered Harry Potter for this one). But that fall, and ever since, I have asked for something much simpler: what is something they wish I knew. Some answers are mundane: "I love lacrosse!" But others reveal the anxieties, pressures, and complexity that our students bring with them to law school: "I am the first in my family to graduate college, as well as attend law school." "I am the proud father of a two-month-old girl named Olivia." "I moved to New York from India by myself, when I turned 18, simply because I wanted a change." And by asking, I remind myself of the kind of professor I want to be (and of the fact that I am never—*never!*—moving again).

Author's Note: I wrote this essay "before." Before the pandemic, before the murder of George Floyd, before life changed in ways that I never expected. But the ways life has been upended in 2020 have only made it more imperative that we invite our students to share with us the challenges and circumstances they bring to our (online or socially distanced) classrooms and that we offer them empathy and understanding in return.