



## ARTICLE

# “I Was But The Learner, Now I Am The Master”: Using the Protégé Effect to Accelerate Learning Outcomes

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Published: March 2025

My jaw dropped. She nailed it. She explained to our class not just where—but *how*—this 1L’s memo could be more synthesized, more precise, and more logical. I could not have done it better.

But remarkably, she was herself only a 1L. In fact, she was *the* 1L who authored the memorandum only a week earlier. And even more remarkably, several of her colleagues did the same thing with their own work in that same session, *only a few weeks into the semester*.

Like most legal writing professors, I frequently use peer editing, collaborative editing, and rewriting in my classes and have done so since I began teaching in 2009. Last year, looking to increase student self-direction, promote ownership and accountability, and drive students to engage more meaningfully with my feedback, I added something slightly different to the mix.

By combining “learning by teaching”<sup>1</sup> and self-reflection, I stumbled upon an exercise that students across the board called “[t]he most important thing [we did] for my writing” and “the best reviewing exercise we [did] all year.” It had the

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the benefits of learning by teaching, see David Duran, *Learning-by-Teaching: Evidence and Implications as a Pedagogical Mechanism*, 54 INNOVATIONS IN EDUC. AND TEACHING INT’L 476 (2017), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14703297.2016.1156011>.

added bonus of supporting students' professional identity formation and the development of countless non-cognitive skills. I was, of course, deliberate in designing this exercise, but I did not predict that this seemingly small twist on my tried-and-true tactics would have such an outsized impact on student outcomes.

## 1. Learning By Teaching and The Protégé Effect

"Learning by teaching" is generally credited to Jean-Pol Martin, who, in the early 1980s, asked teens to research and present parts of a foreign language curriculum to their classmates.<sup>2</sup> The result? Increases in motivation, self-confidence, and communication skills,<sup>3</sup> and proof that students may better understand material when they are asked to explain it.

The reasons behind this phenomenon are multi-fold, but one key explanation lies in the "protégé effect." Individuals "learn more effortfully for a teachable agent [e.g., another student, peer, or other audience] than for themselves."<sup>4</sup> This is true for direct teaching generally but even more so when the exercise involves interactivity.<sup>5</sup> Even the mere act of preparing to teach—i.e., reviewing the material and internalizing its meaning—can improve learning outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Generating, and ultimately delivering, explanations "requires learners to go beyond the information presented and make connections," and success "depends on the extent to which learners reflect on their own understanding and integrate the material with their prior knowledge – what is sometimes referred to as *reflective knowledge building*."<sup>7</sup>

Of course, this means that even asking a student to explain to her colleagues something like the concept of rule synthesis could be helpful in the legal research and writing classroom; however, we can amplify the effect of learning-by-teaching by making the task more personal, more concrete, and more interactive.

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<sup>2</sup> David Robson, *The Big Idea: How the "Protégé Effect" Can Help You Learn Almost Anything*, THE GUARDIAN (Sept. 9, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/sep/09/the-big-idea-how-the-protege-effect-can-help-you-learn-almost-anything>.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Keiichi Kobayashi, *Interactivity: A Potential Determinant of Learning by Preparing to Teach and Teaching*, 9 *Front Psych.* 2755 (2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6336728/>.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> Logan Fiorella & Richard E. Mayer, *Role of Expectations and Explanation in Learning by Teaching*, 39 *Contemp. Educ. Psych.* 75 (Apr. 2014) <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0361476X14000022>.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

## 2. The Exercise: “Teach Us”

The premise was simple: ask students to use their own written work product to teach the class how to identify and resolve common legal writing issues.

The specific exercise required students to:

1. Closely review my feedback on a recently submitted writing assignment.
2. Identify an excerpt (up to a page long) that they believed, as originally drafted, illustrated at least one of our class-wide areas of opportunity (i.e., “common issues” that I provided, including things like lack of synthesis, factual underdevelopment in applying the law, logical inconsistency, and similar topics).
3. Prepare to show the excerpt to the class (we used a shared Google doc for this purpose so that everyone could easily read and review) and explain *in their own words* how specifically it illustrates the issue, the motivation behind the original drafting choice, how to edit the excerpt to resolve the issue, and why that change would help. The also needed to be ready to field questions and comments from colleagues (and me).

Students had the benefit of my written feedback to help them prepare, but they could not use my comments verbatim in their explanation. I was confident that my feedback would be a guide for the exercise but not an “answer key,” because as any legal writing professor knows, students are not universally skilled in incorporating feedback effectively.

Students also could not use phrases like “you said” in describing the issue; they had to take ownership over it as something they could see in their own work. They also had to go beyond my comment to diagnose specifically how the excerpt illustrated the issue *and* how to correct it in future writing.

I hoped that by combining self-reflection with learning-by-teaching, self-editing, peer feedback, oral presentation, and classroom leadership, this session would have benefits beyond those of rewriting work product or traditional peer editing.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, I hoped it would:

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<sup>8</sup> I agree with Kirsten K. Davis’s assessment that, although peer review is often considered a nonessential part of the first-year experience, there are tremendous benefits of leveraging it early and often. Kirsten K. Davis, *Designing and Using Peer Review in a First-Year Legal Research and Writing Course*, 9 J. LEGAL WRITING INST. 1 (2003) (concluding that peer review improves students’ writing and editing skills, collaborative abilities, respect

- Drive students to engage more deeply and immediately with my feedback in preparation to teach their peers;
- Further students' sense of self-direction and ownership of their writing—including their missteps;
- Increase student confidence by giving them a chance to be “the expert” on their own writing;
- Build a sense of community in the knowledge that everyone received similar types of feedback and shared common writing issues; and
- Provide students with a blueprint for how to reflect on completed work, develop a plan for future growth, and monitor their progress.

I was not disappointed. It did all of these things. Students demonstrated that they could understand their writing issues far more quickly and effectively when they were required to explain them—not conceptually, but concretely—to others. Students who had struggled to incorporate feedback into earlier drafts proved that when asked to review it closely and explain it publicly, they were prepared to do so. When they were required to develop a solution to share, all of them were able to draft a better version than when simply left to process my feedback on their own (even if not every student's solution was a perfect fix). And in some cases, students admitted they agreed with the feedback but were stumped on how to resolve the issue; their colleagues then jumped in with excellent ideas based upon their own preparation for the exercise. It was inspiring to watch.

Importantly, our class had already engaged in several exercises involving peer review – including traditional one-on-one feedback and collective editing of peers' work as a larger group, where I display student work anonymously for the class to read and react to in real time. This was a critically important foundation. In my experience, students almost always recognize issues in others' work before identifying them in their own, and peer review allows them to recognize their skills in this area and gain the kind of clarity that can only be achieved through explaining your thoughts, ideas, and intent to others. Through traditional peer review, students become better *self*-editors—an observation I am not alone in making.<sup>9</sup> Traditional peer review thus laid the groundwork required to turn the editing lens inward in this collaborative and public forum.

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for their peers, and more). These benefits are similar to those recognized by undergraduate institutions. See, e.g., *Benefits of Peer Review*, Southwestern University (Aug. 25, 2020), <https://www.southwestern.edu/offices/writing/faculty-resources-for-writing-instruction/peer-review/benefits-of-peer-review/>.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Jo Anne Durako et al., *From Product to Process: Evolution of a Legal Writing Program*, 58 U. PITT. L. REV. 719, 731 (1997) (designing peer editing exercises in a legal writing course to “help students become accustomed to and more proficient at self-editing.”).

Given what I knew about learning-by-teaching, I was not surprised that the exercise worked, but I did find the magnitude of its impact on my students striking. But in thinking about the power of the protégé effect, it makes sense. This exercise required students to teach their peers about a topic of universal interest (because this exercise focused on a finite set of shared issues), meaning that my students assumed responsibility for not just their own understanding, but also for that of others. Preparation for this session required great effort. And because this type of material does not lend itself to memorization or summarization—i.e., it requires critical thinking—developing a strategy to teach it requires “generating quality explanations for others [which] is likely to result in [even] deep[er] learning.”<sup>10</sup> Interactivity of the session then increased both the stakes and the depth of understanding required.

Layer onto all of that the fact that the subject of the exercise was each student’s own writing, and they were even more motivated to demonstrate ownership over their work product, command of their strengths and areas of opportunity, and leadership among their peers.

In other words, my exercise had an outsized impact because each student’s explanation had to be rooted in self-reflection, diagnosis, and problem-solving connected to her own written work. This combination was perfect for amplifying the effect of learning by teaching.

### 3. Added Benefits: Non-Cognitive Skills and Traits

Given the importance of training lawyers not just to think like lawyers but to *be* lawyers, I was thrilled that this exercise both improved students’ understanding of how to improve their writing skills, and simultaneously challenged them in new and exciting ways. It gave them an opportunity to develop the characteristics that legal employers value most but believe law graduates lack<sup>11</sup>—things like confidence, self-direction, influence and advocacy skills, accountability and ownership, relationship-building, and leadership skills.

Similarly, law school faculty are, by now, very familiar with the 26 effectiveness factors outlined by Professors Marjorie M. Shultz and Sheldon Zedeck in

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> See Alli Gerkman & Zachariah De Meola, *Foundations for Practice: The “Whole Lawyer” and the Path to Competency for New Lawyers*, in 87 THE BAR EXAMINER 17 (Summer 2018) (illustrating a perceived “skills gap” and reporting findings from a 2018 survey that said 95 percent of hiring attorneys believed that recent law graduates they hired “lacked key practical skills at the time of hiring.”).

2011,<sup>12</sup> as well as the ABA's increased focus on providing students opportunities for self-reflection. This exercise checks the reflection box for obvious reasons, but it also specifically requires that students focus on several of the effectiveness factors—not just writing (factor 9), but also skills and characteristics like:

- Problem Solving (factor 3) and Practical Judgement (factor 4)
- Speaking (factor 8)
- Listening (factor 10)
- Evaluation, Development, and Mentoring (factor 17)
- Developing Relationships Within the Legal Profession (factor 18)
- Diligence and Self-Development (factors 24 and 25)

And perhaps most important of all, allowing our students to teach us and their peers sends a very public message that everyone's voice has value, which can help develop a community of more confident, resilient, and respectful lawyers prepared to be more decisive, provide better counsel, speak up when they have something to say, and generally add more value faster.

## 4. Conclusion

In short, this “learning by teaching” exercise leveraged law students’ innate strengths as issue spotters and pushed them to move from diagnosing problems to resolving them *in their own writing* more quickly. It asked students to spend time with feedback in a way that simply rewriting a paper does not, and to take responsibility for others’ learning in a way that motivated them to truly understand that feedback.

This exercise also asked students to be “confidently vulnerable,”<sup>13</sup> by owning their mistakes in a forum designed to make them feel—justifiably—like they are in the driver’s seat of their development. It sent the message that time spent listening to their explanation of the issue is time well spent – a vote of confidence from their professor and peers. And when students saw firsthand that they faced similar feedback and struggles, shared a motivation to grow, and were all making progress on their goals, it made every one of them less afraid to “fail.” They

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<sup>12</sup> Marjorie M. Shultz & Sheldon Zedeck, *Predicting Lawyer Effectiveness: Broadening the Basis for Law School Admission Decisions*, 36 LAW & SOC. INQUIRY 620, 629 (2011).

<sup>13</sup> The idea of “confident vulnerability,” in which an individual can “show he [is] okay with learning and mistakes without losing his credibility” is an important leadership principle that is generally well integrated into law school pedagogy but bears increased emphasis in first-year research and writing courses. See Dan Cable, *How to Build Confidence About Showing Vulnerability*, HARV. BUS. REV. (July 14, 2022), <https://hbr.org/2022/07/how-to-build-confidence-about-showing-vulnerability>.

learned by experience that sharing challenges is a good way to collaborate, improve, and learn. One of my students put that aspect particularly well: “[i]t was so nice knowing that other people got similar feedback that I did and everyone was invested in improving their writing.”

Students said they learned more through this exercise than any other. And I learned that although there are some (ok, many) things that I cannot fully teach them with any single writing assignment, I may be able to narrow that gap just by asking them to teach a little something to me.