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From the Dojo to the Classroom: Applying Martial Arts Coaching Skills to Teaching Legal Writing

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When it comes to martial arts, I'm definitely a late bloomer. My husband convinced me to try Brazilian Jiu Jitsu ("BJJ") during my first year of teaching legal writing at Pepperdine, when I was just shy of my thirty-ninth birthday. I was hesitant, having no prior martial arts experience; he told me it was a good way to get in shape (leaving out the part about rolling around on the ground trying to choke people). But like many BJJ practitioners, I quickly became obsessed with the sport. As I advanced in rank and skill, I had the opportunity to attend a twelve-week BJJ coaching program. After I completed the program and started teaching martial arts classes, I realized that many of my newly acquired coaching skills were transferable to my legal writing classes. Gradually I began to incorporate some coaching techniques into my law school classroom, and I was pleased with the results. Explaining advanced concepts became easier, students were more motivated, and I was enjoying classroom time more than ever.

Over time, I realized that my coaching techniques were effective because law students are not so different from adult martial arts students, especially at the beginner level. Both sets of students must deal with challenges like fear and frustration. Perhaps the biggest obstacle is the "inner game" —the negative, critical self-talk that gets in the way of peak performance.¹ The same techniques that push

¹ Angela R. Mouton, *Performance Coaching in Sports, Music, and Business: From Gallwey to Grant, and the Promise of Positive Psychology*, 11 INT'L COACHING PSYCHOLOGY REV. 129, 131 (2016), available at

martial arts students past these obstacles can help law students achieve their legal writing goals.

In this article, I will share some of the coaching techniques I have acquired over the years and how to effectively apply them in the legal writing classroom.

I. Positive Framing

Martial arts, especially BJJ, can be complicated and overwhelming for beginners. A new student is confronted with a dizzying array of takedowns, sweeps, armbars, and chokes. Watching a black belt's seemingly effortless demonstration of technique can be more daunting than encouraging. Experienced coaches deal with these concerns through positive framing. As the name implies, this technique has two components.

- Framing provides context for students to make the technique more understandable. For example, the coach may explain that a particular technique is used in self-defense when a larger opponent grabs you from behind. Now the student knows what problem the technique is trying to solve, which is crucial to enhancing adult students' readiness to learn.²
- Positive framing puts students in a positive state of mind before they even start to learn. An important component of positive framing is describing techniques as achievable with practice, rather than difficult for all but the most "naturally talented" students. This type of framing helps achieve the "growth mindset," instilling in students a belief in their capacity to learn, which in turn leads to better results.³

In the legal writing context, positive framing can enhance student learning when teaching skills that may seem complicated or abstract to a new student. For example, a professor could frame a class on citation by discussing the purposes that accurate citations serve in legal writing, such as enhancing credibility and avoiding plagiarism. The next step would be applying positive framing: "Mastering legal citation allows you to show off the depth and breadth of the legal research that supports your analysis." The professor should avoid negative framing: "Legal

http://organisationalpsychology.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Volume_11_No_2_September_2016.pdf#page=19.

² MALCOLM KNOWLES, *THE ADULT LEARNER: A NEGLECTED SPECIES* 43, 46-47 (1973) (explaining that for adult students, readiness to learn is rooted in their need to learn, *e.g.*, to solve a problem, rather than a requirement or expectation that they learn).

³ Carol Dweck, *Carol Dweck Revisits the "Growth Mindset,"* EDUC. WK., Sept. 23, 2015, available at <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/09/23/carol-dweck-revisits-the-growth-mindset.html>.

citation can be difficult and tedious, but it's an essential part of becoming a skilled legal writer." In the latter example, the implied message to students is that you expect them to fail *and* to find the class boring.

2. Shading

The shading technique is a fundamental component of teaching Gracie Jiu Jitsu, a style of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu focused primarily on self defense.⁴ When teaching a new technique—say, an armbar—the coach will start by showing the students the properly executed technique. The coach then demonstrates at least three more times, adding progressive layers of detail.⁵ The first demonstration explains *what* is happening (“I am hyperextending my opponent’s elbow”); the second explains *how* (“I pinch my knees together and clasp the opponent’s arm to my chest while leaning back”); and the third explains *why* (“This makes it harder for my opponent to escape.”).⁶

Shading helps coaches avoid information overload, which is especially critical for new students at the “unconscious competence” stage of learning.⁷ At that stage, too much detail creates frustration because students do not know even enough to recognize their own mistakes.⁸ Shading also provides the benefit of repeated exposure.

Likewise, legal writing professors can avoid the temptation to provide all relevant information at one time. Too much detail introduced too early can create excessive “cognitive load.”⁹ Following the shading formula, a professor may start with a basic framework for a writing or analytical skill, focusing solely on the

⁴ See *GJJ vs BJJ: What's the Difference?*, WATFORD GRACIE JIU-JITSUI, <https://www.watfordgjj.co.uk/gjj-vs-bjj-whats-the-difference/> (last visited May 29, 2020). Fans of mixed martial arts (“MMA”) may recall that in 1993, Royce Gracie dominated the very first Ultimate Fighting Championship (“UFC”) using classic jiu jitsu techniques against other combat styles such as boxing, Pancrase, and Savate. Thomas Gerbasi, *Revisiting UFC 1: The Beginning*, UFC.com, Nov. 11, 2019, <https://www.ufc.com/news/revisiting-ufc-1-beginning>.

⁵ GRACIE JIU-JITSU ACADEMY, INSTRUCTOR MANUAL 3 (4th ed. 2010, Addendum 2014) [hereinafter GRACIE INSTRUCTOR MANUAL].

⁶ *Id.* at 4.

⁷ Linda Adams, *Learning a New Skill Is Easier Said than Done*, GORDON TRAINING INT’L, <https://www.gordontraining.com/free-workplace-articles/learning-a-new-skill-is-easier-said-than-done/> (last visited May 29, 2020). The Competence Ladder is the common name for Noel Burch’s four stages of learning. *Id.* Burch defines the four stages as unconscious incompetence, conscious incompetence, conscious competence, and unconscious competence. *Id.* In the martial arts context, understanding a student’s position on the competence ladder informs the coach when diagnosing roadblocks to learning.

⁸ See Adams, *supra* note 7.

⁹ Terri L. Enns & Monte Smith, *Take a (Cognitive) Load Off: Creating Space to Allow First-Year Legal Writing Students to Focus on Analytical and Writing Processes*, 20 LEGAL WRITING: J. LEGAL WRITING INST. 109, 110-13.

mechanics of the new concept. In time, the professor can explore theory and creative application with students.¹⁰

I recently used shading when teaching rule synthesis to 1Ls in the fall 2019 semester. In the first class, I used a simple exercise familiar to most legal writing professors involving analogical reasoning and produce.¹¹ As students sorted through an absent produce manager's rules for displaying apples and peppers, I held back from transitioning to an in-depth discussion of *stare decisis*. Over the next few weeks, students grappled with articulating synthesized rules in their memos. Mid-semester, I used a more complex rule-synthesis exercise, this time making explicit connections to analysis of case-law precedent.¹² The improvement in understanding was visible both on my students' faces and in their subsequent memos.

3. Purposeful Praise and Correction

When you mention martial arts to adults of a certain age, the movie that comes to mind is *The Karate Kid* and the militant training style of the Cobra Kai dojo.¹³ In reality, the best martial arts coaches know that students thrive when receiving purposeful praise and correction, rather than negative reinforcement. The praise-to-correction ratio is key; some coaching programs advocate a three-to-one ratio of praise to correction,¹⁴ while others advocate praise-correction-praise, or "PCP."¹⁵ The consistent thread is the focus on praise-oriented feedback. Correction-oriented feedback undermines student confidence and motivation by focusing on weaknesses instead of capitalizing on strengths.¹⁶ This creates real problems for martial arts studios, given that adult students can simply quit once they have had enough.

Another aspect of effective feedback in martial arts is the concept of purposeful praise. Although a student may be glad to hear "Good job!" from a coach, superficial praise does little to reinforce the ability to execute complex martial arts techniques. Expert coaches understand that purposeful praise advances mastery of technique. Rather than a simple "Good job," a coach can say, "You used good hand

¹⁰ See also *id.* for a related concept the authors refer to as "scaffolding": providing more directed instruction at the outset, then "fading" the scaffolding over time as students gain mastery and independence. *Id.* at 114-16.

¹¹ CHARLES R. CALLEROS & KIMBERLY HOLST, LEGAL METHOD AND WRITING I: PREDICTIVE WRITING 114-15 (8th ed. 2018).

¹² *Id.* at 107-09.

¹³ THE KARATE KID (Columbia Pictures 1984).

¹⁴ GRACIE INSTRUCTOR MANUAL, *supra* note 5, at 44.

¹⁵ I learned this method while taking coaching classes at my first martial arts school, 10th Planet Van Nuys (in Van Nuys, California). 10TH PLANET VAN NUYS, COACHING PROGRAM MANUAL 4 (2014) (on file with author) [hereinafter 10PVN COACHING MANUAL].

¹⁶ See, e.g., Mareï Salama-Younes, *Towards a Positive Sport Psychology: A Prospective Investigation in Physical Practice*, 4 WORLD J. SPORTS SCI. 104, 105 (2011), available at [http://idosi.org/wjss/4\(2\)11/4.pdf](http://idosi.org/wjss/4(2)11/4.pdf).

position when applying the lapel choke. What can you do next time to keep your partner from escaping the position?"¹⁷

Likewise, legal writing professors can help students understand that mistakes are an essential part of learning by conveying that message through purposeful praise and correction. Legal writing scholarship abounds with research and best practices on providing student feedback.¹⁸ Certainly the idea of acting as a coach when correcting student writing is not a new one.¹⁹ What I find helpful about the martial arts approach is its simplicity. The initialism "PCP" keeps me mindful of my ratio of praise to correction in evaluating students' papers.²⁰ Limiting corrections has also helped me develop patience and confidence in my teaching ability. I realize that I can hold back and tolerate some mistakes when I know I'll have future opportunities to address them. And, like many professors I struggle to provide meaningful praise that complements the learning process while not seeming superfluous or hollow. In those times, I fall back on what I have learned as a coach. Instead of praising best efforts, I focus on levels of mastery: "The topic sentence of this case illustration paragraph nicely summarized the key rule from this case. Next time, think about how providing more detail about the facts of this case can reinforce your subsequent analysis."

4. Guru Status

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is a combat sport. Although most adults take classes for physical fitness or as a hobby, the techniques are designed to inflict pain and injury.²¹ At the same time, most students are afraid of injury, and new students can

¹⁷ Purposeful praise can also reinforce a student's growth mindset. See Dweck, *supra* note 3. For example, Dweck contrasts two statements a teacher might make when a student has a less-than-optimal performance: "Great effort! You did your best," and "The point isn't to get it all right away. The point is to grow your understanding step by step. What can you try next?" *Id.* at 4.

The first statement reinforces a fixed mindset because it implies that the student's best effort led only to suboptimal performance. The second statement promotes a growth mindset, reinforcing the notion that the student has the capability to continue learning. Although these examples were written with schoolchildren in mind, the concepts can be readily adapted to adult learners.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Anne Enquist, *Critiquing and Evaluating Law Students' Writing: Advice from Thirty-Five Experts*, 22 SEATTLE UNIV. L. REV. 1119 (1999) (compiling and analyzing advice on providing student feedback from a survey of thirty-five experienced legal writing professors).

¹⁹ E.g., Kirsten K. Davis, *Building Credibility in the Margins: An Ethos-Based Perspective for Commenting on Student Papers*, 12 LEGAL WRITING: J. LEGAL WRITING INST. 73, 86 (2006) (explaining that adoption of a coaching persona can establish goodwill with students and increase their perception of the professor's fairness and ethos).

²⁰ See also *id.* (stating that a balance between praise and criticism can help students be more receptive to feedback).

²¹ See, e.g., *What Is Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ)*, RENZO GRACIE, <http://www.renzogracie.com/jiu-jitsu/> (last visited May 29, 2020). In training, students are taught to "tap out"—either by saying "tap" or tapping on their partner or the mat—to avoid injury. Unfortunately, even in training accidents and injuries abound. I have a metal plate and nine screws in my ankle as a result of a wrestling-style takedown. See *Was It All Just a Dream?* JIU-JITSU MAGAZINE, June 2017, at 18

be especially fearful of dangerous techniques, such as chokes.²² As a result, trust is an important component of the coach-student relationship.

The “guru status” coaching technique enables coaches to build trust and enhance credibility by demonstrating expertise.²³ For instance, as a coach I could talk to students about my experience competing in jiu jitsu tournaments or attending seminars taught by prominent black belts. Establishing the students’ confidence in their coach helps to lower the psychological barrier created by fear and distrust.

For some legal writing professors, guru status can be elusive. Touting accomplishments can feel boastful or egotistical. Nonetheless, it is important for law students to perceive that they are learning essential skills from expert teachers.²⁴ Students will place more trust and confidence in the professor if they believe she is qualified and credible.²⁵

Even the humblest of professors can find subtle ways to remind students of her expertise. Martial arts coaches can promote their guru status by competing in tournaments or attending seminars. Legal writing professors can do the same by sharing with students the many things they do to stay relevant in the field—presenting at conferences, writing scholarly papers, or doing pro bono work, for example. Sharing bygone experiences (*i.e.*, “war stories”) may be useful for providing context or teaching cautionary lessons, but true guru status is best achieved by emphasizing the care that the professor takes to stay current and relevant.

5. Conclusion

As you may have realized, these coaching techniques are congruent with the legal writing community’s best practices for developing skillful legal writers and future lawyers. I hope that by applying these techniques with a coaching mindset, you’ll find them to be as useful and effective as I have. And, hopefully I have piqued your interest in checking out a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu class at a nearby dojo. (If so, then please skip over footnote 21 before you do.)

(describing my ankle injury and subsequent post-surgery promotion to blue belt, stripe one by Brazilian Grand Master Flavio Behring).

²² Ricardo Castaneda, *The Irrational Fear of Injuries in Jiu Jitsu*, JIU JITSU TIMES (June 22, 2017), <https://www.jiujitsutimes.com/the-irrational-fear-of-injury-in-jiu-jitsu/>.

²³ 10PVN COACHING MANUAL, *supra* note 15, at 13, 15.

²⁴ See, e.g., Davis, *supra* note 19, at 92 (describing how professors can enhance credibility and ethos by taking on expert personas and sharing legal practice experience and important values with students).

²⁵ See *id.* at 99 (explaining how students may place more trust in feedback from a professor perceived to be “a knowledgeable, authentic, trustworthy member of the community to which students aspire”).