



## ARTICLE

# Can I Teach You in a Hall? Can I Teach You on a Call? Can I Teach You from My Room? Can I Teach You on a Zoom?

**Kelly Gamble**

*Instructor of Legal Research & Writing  
Willamette University School of Law*

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Professors—and perhaps law professors more than most—can usually rely on the architecture of the place, the costuming of the participants, and even the nature of our audience for at least some of our success in the classroom. In a normal year, I know I benefit from the kind of people in the room: a captive audience who have been rewarded for sitting quietly and attentively for sixteen years. I benefit from the students’ relationships with one another: they enliven and enrich the class discussion and the classwork. I benefit from the very architecture: the class sits at desks oriented toward me, the professor, and we are in a building specially designated as Law School.

This year, I don’t have those advantages. I teach LRW on a webcam in a bedroom most days.<sup>1</sup> My students often aren’t even in the same city, let alone the same room as one another. They can stack as many distractions—from text messages to pets to children—as they can balance just out of view. I’m wearing a blouse and a blazer, but also, out-of-frame, jeans and socks and slippers. My white board isn’t

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<sup>1</sup> I spend my leisure time mostly wandering the other rooms of my house, fighting a war of attrition with my school-less children who are trying to put everything we have ever owned onto the floor.

a wall-sized affair, but a rectangle perched on a child's easel, only large enough to partially block the view of the guest bed (barely disguised with stacks of very important file folders). My students have lost access to the casual spaces where they usually form relationships. And every other week, I can't see all of their faces, and they can't see mine.<sup>2</sup>

Without the trappings of a normal semester, the pandemic has given me the opportunity<sup>3</sup> to go back to basics. When all the frills are stripped away, good teaching requires two things:<sup>4</sup> relationships and structure. With those two things, good teaching is recognizable under any conditions. In flats or slippers. In lecture halls or spare rooms. Without them, I'm just talking to strangers on the internet. I started this year determined to be intentional about both. Here's what I learned.

### **Good teaching (like good lawyering) is relational.**

During the pandemic, I have had the chance to watch the *Today Show*. If I'm being honest, like, every day. Sometime between March 23 and March 142 of last year, Hoda Kotb shared some advice about babies that is equally applicable to first-year law students, and probably loads of other kinds of people as well: they need to be talked to, and looked at, and listened to. That's pretty true of everyone, all the time, except maybe parents of young children during the pandemic who just want to be left alone. For five. Minutes. Please.<sup>5</sup> It is true of clients who are facing enormous problems they can't solve themselves and need a lawyer's help. And it is certainly true of first-year law students who are anxious and often struggling to keep their heads above the waves of new information that we send crashing down on them, especially that first semester. In a normal year, they build relationships with their professors and with one another that provide steadying influences over the course of the first year. But in a remote semester, or even in an alternative-week optional hybrid like we had, that is a lot harder to do. So how could I adapt my usual practice to meet the unusual circumstances of this academic year?

I had to know who my students were sooner and better than I usually do. There's no easier way to destroy a student's confidence or interest than revealing that they don't matter enough for me to know who they are. This is especially true in a semester when so many felt unmoored, overwhelmed, and often isolated in

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<sup>2</sup> We are in a hybrid model for our 1Ls with alternating week cohorts switching between remote and socially distanced, masked, in-person classes. *Willamette University College of Law Reopening Plan* (July 13, 2020), <https://willamette.edu/law/internal/students/osa/pdf/wucl-fall-reopening-plan.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> I chose "given me the opportunity" over "forced me." Please clap.

<sup>4</sup> Three if you count content knowledge. Which I do. But I find it's usually the easiest to come by for professors.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Caroline Bologna, *27 Funny Tweets That Sum Up 'Alone Time' For Parents Right Now*, HUFFPOST (June 8, 2020, 5:45 a.m.), [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tweets-parents-alone-time\\_1\\_5ecd23d5c5b63cafdc369c43](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tweets-parents-alone-time_1_5ecd23d5c5b63cafdc369c43); see also note 1.

unique circumstances. This semester, I had both the crutch of named Zoom boxes and the curse of masked in-person classes. We were in a hybrid format with alternating week cohorts, which meant that one week, I saw only their thirty faces in named, but randomly ordered Zoom boxes, and then the next week, I saw their bodies, faces covered, in assigned seats in a socially distanced lecture hall.<sup>6</sup> Like in other years, I practiced naming them from unlabeled headshots in our learning-management system. I also played a silent mental matching game, trying not to get caught staring before class. But it was harder than usual to learn their names because I couldn't rely on memorizing faces by geography in the room. So, I made three changes to my ordinary practice to get to know the students better.

First, I always ask students to fill out a short introduction for me at the beginning of the semester, but this year, I also had them create entries in a sort of "firm directory" for each other. In addition to the utility of mandatory introduction and contact information sharing, this allowed me to see both the way they presented themselves to me and the way they presented themselves to the class—it was not always the same. The difference added a layer of knowledge for me going into the semester and served as a jumping off point for discussions about professional conduct with diverse audiences.

Second, I spent even more time in office hours. At the beginning of the semester, I required every student to visit office hours for fifteen minutes. And then I regularly advertised office-hours visits both for curricular questions and as an opportunity to talk with someone outside their houses. Without a commute or having to pick up the kids (because they were home with me), I could extend office hours and get through everyone who wanted a visit any given day. I love in-person office hours, but I learned to enjoy online office hours. Not only did I get the opportunity to check in with students—who were often more candid from the comfort of their homes—but the ability to screenshare made reviewing student work much easier than my typical in-person experience of handing the laptop back and forth. The practice was so pleasant that even when things go back to normal, I will offer online office hours in addition to in-person ones.

Third, I organized socials, Zoom game happy hours, and socially distanced, very small-group outdoor picnics. I do not normally act as a cruise director, but I did not want to give up the energy, support, and risk-taking in the classroom that comes only when students are comfortable with each other and with me. I normally benefit from the relationships they build in the interstitial spaces of the law school that didn't exist this year. They can't drop by my office. They can't hang out with each other in the café downstairs. No one runs into anyone else in the hallway. Especially during our remote weeks, students appreciated the opportunities to talk to one another, instead of logging on only to listen.

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<sup>6</sup> I (only semi-seriously) made a rule that no one could change their hair all semester because it was their hair, most especially, that tracked both weeks. This is probably not useful advice for a semester in the Great Unmasked Future.

**Good teaching (like good lawyering) is transparently structured.**

While I built the relationships necessary for a successful class, I also tried to be transparent about the structure of the class. Students, like clients, benefit from understanding the process at the outset. Here's what to expect as the class (or case) progresses. I guide them through the process—what to expect and why, what parts are hard and what I need from them, what to expect from other parties or players, and how other audiences might view their concerns. For students, some of that happens naturally, or at least gets reinforced naturally, during a regular semester in which we (and they) bump into each other and talk about how things are going. Not so this year.

Structure and familiar expectations are life-preservers in a semester like Fall 2020. When everything is different and everything is tentative, being predictable is powerful. Students know what we're going to cover on a given day; they are comfortable with the kinds of interactions expected of them;<sup>7</sup> and they have multiple practice opportunities in the same modes as their assessments. While in the past I might have let each class speak for itself or in conjunction with the syllabus, this semester, I deliberately contextualized each class—how does it fit with what we've done before, what we'll do next, and within their future legal practice.

Being remote, or masked, has made me realize how much of my teaching is just making faces and moving around. Motion is my way of checking in, offering feedback, and engaging the class's attention. I can sympathize, joke, silence, or support with a look. I can wander, deliberately listening in on every group while they work through a problem. But stripped of my superpowers by pandemic restrictions, all the implicit work of faces (when masked) and movement (when boxed in by Zoom) had to be made explicit. I had to build scaffolding in advance that replaced the support work that unrestricted physical presence used to do. I always use activities, but with non-verbal communication, I probably relax into a longer lecture than strictly necessary and looser group-work protocol than ideal. I float around the room, eavesdropping on all their discussions. I pop students in and out of groups and give whole-group clarifications on the fly.

To make group work successful, either remotely or socially distanced,<sup>8</sup> the key was a prefabricated accountability system. In a regular semester, I walk around talking, helping, and monitoring progress. Online, I found breakout rooms made

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<sup>7</sup> I use a set of frequent low-stakes interactions (interactive lecture, group work, short presentations, games). Students build trust and rapport with each other by experiencing multiple mistakes and successes together. *Contra* cold calling, while familiar practice to professors, is a nerve-racking once- or twice-a-semester experience for many students.

<sup>8</sup> I used conference calls with headphones for group work during our masked, socially distanced in-person classes—an idea that came to me, I'm embarrassed to say, only after a few awkward classes of people shouting and trying desperately to inch closer to one another to communicate.

me feel silly, just staring at a blank screen, waiting at the dark window for everyone to come home. I didn't know what they were doing or how they were doing. Group work in the remote setting required more preparation. I had to give them structure that stayed in place without my hovering. I had to prepare more specific instructions and particular deliverables and appoint a taskmaster to keep them from wandering off the path. Basically, I had to offload to them some of the work that I normally do managing groups in an ordinary semester.

Shifting group work to written product<sup>9</sup> shared with me through Google Docs allowed me to monitor all the groups at once in real time, my second screen serving as a command center with a tab for each group. I clicked through methodically, typing comments and tips, keeping track of progress, and most importantly, targeting my breakout room drop-in visits for groups that seemed to need it most. While I love the walk-around during in-person group work, I will keep the Google Doc record requirement even when we return to normal, so that I can check in on everyone from the front of the room to better target my group visits or review them later to assess progress and help shape our discussion in the next class.

While the docs helped me monitor their substantive progress, I was still short on monitoring their professional conduct within the group—were there loafers? Jerks? Talented peer tutors to be commended and deployed strategically when possible? I couldn't tell, alone in the main Zoom room, or even from the front of the cavernous lecture hall. So, I also asked them to complete a group review (via Google Forms) at the end of class. They entered their names and the names of students they worked with. They rated their groupmates on a 1-to-3 scale. I explained that I expected everyone to get a 2. A 2 means, "good groupmate, would work with again." No comment necessary. They could rate a groupmate a 1 (poor) or a 3 (really great), but they needed to leave comments supporting those ratings. Students appreciated that very brief accountability measure. It gave them a(nother) reason to be engaged with the group work, and it gave everyone an ordinary reporting mechanism for unprofessional behavior.<sup>10</sup>

I want this pandemic to end for so many reasons, not least among them that I am desperate for regular in-person classes. Because the shift out of the ordinary classroom space stripped away all the comforts of my usual practice, it compelled me to examine the way that I teach. It helped me reinforce the foundation upon which everything else is built. I'm not saying it was a good trade, but this horror-show of a year has made me a better teacher.

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<sup>9</sup> Prior to the pandemic, students might keep idiosyncratic scratch notes of their group talk that would form the basis of their contributions to oral discussions later in class. With Google docs, they have to create a coherent written product, not just discuss the idea of a coherent written product in order to communicate with me. I have better overall access to their thought processes in real time.

<sup>10</sup> I don't get much unprofessional behavior, but in the black boxes of breakout rooms, I think the rating system helps keep it that way.