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Bring It On: Adding a Spark of Joy and Connection in Your Classroom

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Last year, I faced a double challenge: teaching a synchronous, online, required advocacy course and doing it at 8:00 a.m. During the long, northern, Idaho winters, an 8:00 a.m. class meant that we met in the dark for most of the semester. During the first class, my students were visibly sleepy and participation was low. During the second class, I knew what to expect and tried to inject more energy into my teaching, attempting to liven up the students. The result: I succeeded, but was exhausted by 9:15 in the morning.

During the third class, I told the students that I would no longer be responsible for bringing the energy to class. Instead, at the beginning of each class, one student would have two to four minutes to “bring the energy.” I placed only one rule on the activity: whatever they did had to be law-school appropriate. After that, at the end of each class meeting I picked one student at random to bring the energy to the next meeting.

I was delighted with the results. I was no longer exhausted by the end of class and my students were no longer sleepy when my lessons started. Each student was thoughtful about the activity they shared. One student spent her few

minutes showing us her dog's tricks. One put his classmates into teams, and we had a quick tic-tac-toe tournament. Another student guided us in chair yoga, while her classmate guided us in deep breathing exercises a few weeks later. Some students told lawyer jokes, some showed television clips of lawyers behaving badly. A student who played on the University's golf team as an undergrad taught us how tips for better golfing could apply to law school, complete with a demonstration golf swing. One student even showed a clip from *The Office* with the ethics dance¹ and then we had a dance-off complete with a prize.

Adding a few minutes of student-led time to most class meetings had several unexpected benefits.

Supporting Students: Students learn best and “thrive when they can openly grapple with new concepts, make mistakes, and demonstrate their newfound and sometime fragile command of the material.”² Creating an environment that supports students requires positive professor-student interactions that depend on a trusting relationship between the students and the professor, the professor's investment in and enthusiasm for the course, and classroom rapport.³ In turn, students sense this support when professors show a genuine interest in working with students to facilitate their learning and create an environment conducive to learning.⁴ By placing few restrictions on the student-led minutes of energy, I was able to show that I trusted the students' judgment and that they could trust me (after I allowed the first lawyer joke). I was also able to show that I was invested in creating a learning environment.

Fostering Engagement: Beginning each class with a few unstructured minutes set a great tone for many of the types of activities we do in a legal writing classroom. For instance, I noticed that students were excited to engage in brainstorming activities instead of reluctant, and they engaged quickly and creatively. Moreover, the students planned thoughtful activities that benefited the other students. For instance, the chair yoga activity came the day a draft was due in class for editing, the deep breathing came during oral argument practice, and the ethics dance-off coincided with a lesson on ethics in brief writing. While at the beginning the activities were fun, the students moved on to trying to have the energy coincide with the syllabus for that day. I made sure to acknowledge how valuable these activities were, and students responded by continuing to engage in bringing the energy in ways that benefited themselves and others.

¹ This video is available at: <https://vimeo.com/111360699>.

² Emily Grant, *Beyond Best Practices: Lessons from Tina Stark About the First Day of Class*, 95 OR. L. REV. 397, 412 (2017).

³ *Id.* at 413.

⁴ *Id.*

Creating Connection & Community: Student learning is also enhanced when active learning is encouraged, and we can encourage active learning through developing community and helping students appreciate their interdependence.⁵ Moreover, once a harmonious and inclusive community is created, previously silent students will more freely voice their ideas.⁶ And one way to foster such a community is to create opportunities for student interaction.⁷ Several of the student-led activities required student participation and a willingness to let go in class and function for a few moments in a professional/social setting. Watching each other fake golf swings helped students laugh at themselves and enjoy a minute of connection. This helped students to express ideas later without feeling stupid and to engage in the learning, rather than the competition, of law school.

Teasing Out Creativity: Finally, these few unstructured and fun moments helped foster creativity in the classroom. Our students will be entering a profession in desperate need of creative problem solvers and creativity in general.⁸ The practice of law is facing an “era of on-going, tumultuous disruption” that will need creative new attorneys to effectuate innovation.⁹ Allowing the students a few minutes of freedom and rewarding their efforts can help foster a classroom that helps create creative attorneys.¹⁰ I noticed this immediately when doing brainstorming activities. Instead of general reluctance to participate, students were willing to engage—letting their ideas flow freely and supporting creative connections. I also noticed how students brought activities that related to the topic for that class. Their creativity conveniently helped me impart the lessons or better manage the classroom. For instance, deep breathing helped the students relax before the oral argument introduction, and I then included it in all the classes with oral practice.

At first, these might seem like silly, wasteful activities. But I would encourage you to think about adding a few minutes like this to your classes. I launched this class during the dark days of winter in an entirely Zoom class, but any legal writing classroom could benefit from “bringing the energy.” The benefits were numerous for both me and the students, making the few minutes spent on energy well worth it.

⁵ Paula Lustbader, *Walk the Talk: Creating Learning Communities to Promote a Pedagogy of Justice*, 4 SEATTLE J. SOC. JUST. 613, 627 (2006).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.* at 632-35.

⁸ Jason G. Dykstra, *Teasing the Arc of Electric Spark: Fostering and Teaching Creativity in the Law School Curriculum*, 20 WYO. L. REV. 1, 6 (2020).

⁹ *Id.* at 26.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 35-37 (noting that individual teaching styles that show enthusiasm, treat students as individuals, reward creativity, encourage risk-taking and approach problems with a sense of humor and playfulness can facilitate creativity).

A few words of advice. Take the time at the beginning to set out clear parameters. I begin all of my legal writing courses with a professionalism discussion, so I introduced “bring the energy” the class *after* discussing professionalism in the classroom. I was able to reinforce those professionalism concepts, like respect for diverse viewpoints and respectful communication when I gave the students the ground rules. Also, while I initially gave a two-to-four-minute limit, I occasionally allowed a few extra minutes when I sensed the students needed the activity. Likewise, I occasionally curtailed an activity. For instance, law students understand tic-tac-toe, so no group was ever going to win that competition. I had to call a draw. And, while students wanted me to participate in some of the silly competitions, I made sure that I couldn’t win. I didn’t want the students to feel any pressure to award me the prize. And trust me, my ethics dance was never prize-worthy!

Be prepared to still bring the energy during some meetings. Once I had created the activity, I had to carefully review my class plan to make sure that I could spare the few minutes and to ensure that no student was on the hook for certain classes. For instance, on the final class before the papers were due, I was in charge of the energy so that every student could devote their full energy to their writing.

Finally, be willing to lend advice to nervous students and spend some extra time to ensure smooth activities. I didn’t require my students to run their activities by me before class. Some of my students, nevertheless, reached out before their turn to seek my advice or ensure that I would find their planned activity was beneficial. I found myself encouraging shy students, reviewing video clips of lawyer jokes, and coordinating prize distribution. But these bonus contacts helped me get to know students individually and reinforced the support, engagement, and connection I always hope to foster.