So Happy Together: Combining Legal Writing and Academic Success Program Teaching Methodologies to Create a 7-Week Introduction to Legal Skills Course

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Genesis of Course

- As part of 1L Curricular changes implemented last year, Legal Writing moved to second and third semester
  - Aimed at providing students more structured writing study after they’ve had a semester of doctrinal courses
- Intro to Legal Skills came from a desire to introduce writing skills in first semester
  - Focus on exam writing instead of memo writing
- Fall 2015 was the inaugural semester of this class
Introduction to Legal Skills

- Last 7 weeks of first semester
- First 7 weeks was Introduction to Legal Systems Course
- Designed to introduce students to exam writing and study skills as well as basic writing skills
  - Organization and structure of exam answers
  - Introduction to synthesis and analysis
  - Outlining and time management
  - Black Letter Law memorization
  - Core Grammar
Course grading

- Course is pass/fail
  - Designed to encourage students to make mistakes and improve skills without worrying about grade
- Strict requirements to be met to ensure students take course seriously
  - Core Grammar – must receive 90% on the post-test by November 24, 2015
  - Only 1 absence permitted
  - All assignments must be written/rewritten by November 24, 2015
Course substance

- Focus on intentional torts
  - Discrete area of law
  - Already completed by the time course began
- Writing intensive
  - Aim to get students to write each week and get quick feedback
- In class essays typically closed book
  - Tests students’ ability to memorize and utilize Black Letter Law
The class week by week
Week One

- Course introduction
  - Purpose of course
  - Review of syllabus
  - Requirements for passing course
- Introduction to IRAC as an organizational structure
- Court Systems quiz
  - Designed to test knowledge gained from Legal Systems class as well as reading assignment from Law School Without Fear
Week Two

- Give students outline assignment for next week
- Introduction to IRAC in case law
  - Burgess v. Taylor case
- In class exam question
  - Short Torts question - single issue, single-tort
- In class exam question review
- Discussion of IRAC handout
  - Thinking Through IRAC of An Essay Answer
- In class revisions to Court Systems Quiz
Week Three

- Students handed in outlines
- In class law assignment
  - Write rules in as much detail and you can recall
- Review of IRAC and exam organization
  - Common issues with in class exam from week two
- Review of deconstructed IRAC answer
- In class revisions to Court Systems Quiz
Week Four

- Review of outlines and in class rule exercise from week three with focus on ensuring students:
  - Can define terms used in outline
  - Know how rules fit together – ex: where defenses go
  - Outline effectively – ex: including operative language and professor’s in class hypos
- Review of sample Torts outline
- Introduction to outlining exam answers
- In class hypo – multi-issue, multi-party problem
- In class revisions to Court Systems Quiz
Testing the outlines

- I allowed students to use their critiqued outlines while writing in class hypo in order to test their outlines
- I asked students to see how well their outline performed for them
- Following class, students were asked to complete a survey on Blackboard about their experience
- 14 out of 23 students completed the survey
Survey results

- Benefits of outlining before writing
  - 8 responded that it helped
  - 5 responded that it helped a little
  - 1 responded that it did not help

- 11 students said they would outline exam answers in the future; 3 would not

- In comments, students noted that the time outlining took was a drawback. However, most noted that it kept their answers organized and focused.

- 10 Students found testing their outline to be helpful
  - Reported that they needed to add definitions, improve their rule explanations, and found where deficits were in memorization.
Week Five

- Review of common issues from week four hypo and hypo outlines
- Discussion of time management during exams
- Introduction to organization of multi-issue, multi-party problems
- Introduction to making an argument
- In class hypo – multi-issue, multi-party problem
- In class revisions to Court Systems Quiz
Week Six

- Reflective essay assignment given to students
  - Due two days later
  - Students given copies of all their critiqued in class hypos and asked to reflect on common strengths and weaknesses

- Working through Contracts hypo in class
  - Transferring skills to new topic
  - Identifying issues and relevant facts
  - Outlining answer

- In class revisions to Court Systems Quiz
Week Seven

- In Class Exam
- Components:
  - 10 multiple choice MBE questions – 5 Torts, 5 Contracts
  - 10 grammar and punctuation questions
  - Organization of disorganized exam answer
  - Short Contracts essay question
  - Short reflective essay
    - Asking students to, using portfolios we created for them, reflect on work in and out of Intro to Legal Skills class
Portfolio contents

- All critiqued Intro to Legal Skills essays
- All Professionalism essays critiqued by writing specialist
- For some students, rubrics from doctrinal professors for midterms
Reflective Essay Excerpts
When I was in math and computer science classes in high school, I continually ran into the same problem. The vast majority of the time I was reaching the correct conclusion, I was just not showing my work. In both of those courses, the process of reaching the conclusion was just as important as the conclusion itself. . . Fast-forward to present day, a common theme that all of my professors brought up was my jumping to the conclusion without showing how I got there.
Excerpt Two

After reflecting on my writing in legal skills I have found one common theme throughout my writing. This also happens to be the case for most of my midterm writing. The major theme that I found in all of my writing is I do not write all of the relative facts that go into an analysis. One thing I have learned is that very rarely are there any facts in a hypo that are irrelevant facts. I received the comment, “any other facts that support this conclusion?”, on multiple papers for the legal writing class. I also have received comments that say, “these are the right facts to focus on, but tie them explicitly to intent.” Based on receiving these comments on most of my papers in multiple classes, this is the main theme I have taken out of my writing.
I have learned that my writing benefits from the most basic of concepts, that of structure, organization, and the ability to develop arguments and counter arguments. My weaknesses in my papers are also reflected in my midterms. A lack of organization leads to an incoherent midterm essay, and a lower grade. Establishing organization early on, whether it be in the form of the IRAC method or another method, creates an easily read document while also guiding the answer.
Excerpt Four

- One of the other more noticeable things I need to improve on is using all the facts given to support my conclusions and strengthen my argument. Most of the facts given in a hypo are there to be used, not just to take up space.
After looking at the examples of writing I have accumulated over the semester, I have begun to notice some prevalent themes that are continuing to show up in my writing. Perhaps the most obvious of these is that I seem to repeat many of my basic points throughout paragraphs, especially in my Professionalism papers. I tend to repeat things either to take up space or to strengthen a point I am trying to get across. After having individual meetings about my Professionalism papers, as well as receiving feedback from the hypos I have done in Legal Skills, I have been able to come up with successful ways to cut down on repeating things throughout my essays.
Excerpt Six

- One major theme in my writing is my lack of clearly stating the rule of law. ... I will only state the main black letter rules and skip over defining the terms ... which leads to deficiencies in my analysis and ultimately confuses my reader and muddles my exam answer.
Our Post-Semester Reflections
Benefits of the course

- Provides more opportunities for students to practice exam writing
- Allows us to have interaction with first year students in advance of Legal Writing
- Students are able to get feedback quickly and can ask questions about that feedback
- Helps students better understand what doctrinal faculty want on exams
- Most students viewed the class positively
Things to do differently next year

- Improve faculty communication
  - Spend more time talking with the doctrinal faculty to ensure we know exactly what they’re teaching and they know what we’re teaching
- Be more realistic about time needed for each section of the class
  - At times we were trying to fit too much into our 90 minute class period
- Better convey to students the time requirements for Core Grammar
We are a meme!

HOW LONG YOU SPEND ON CORE GRAMMAR?

ALL DAY  ALL DAY
Questions?