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Optimizing the Classroom Experience by Collaborating with Colleagues

Karin Mika

Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, Cleveland State University, k.mika@csuohio.edu

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Optimizing the Classroom Experience by Collaborating with Colleagues



Karin Mika
Cleveland-Marshall College of Law

Collaborations with colleagues, whether those colleagues are legal professionals or one's doctrinal colleagues, can provide an enhanced learning experience for both professor and student in the Legal Writing classroom.¹ Through these collaborations, Legal Writing professors can provide more substantive knowledge on a subject matter than they may have been able to provide in an individual capacity during a classroom lecture. Moreover, multiple-source inputs to the learning experience provide various viewpoints with the potential to increase the knowledge absorbed.² Finally, collaborations have the potential of showing students the “big picture” that law is not an experience isolated within each class, while also demonstrating to doctrinal colleagues that our educational goals are intimately related and build upon each other.³

Throughout my years of teaching, I have incorporated different collaborations within my classroom. These range from the most basic level, to more involved collaborations. In all instances, even my most basic collaborations have not only given students the opportunity to expand their networks, but I also have the opportunity to “show off” my own teaching and the abilities of my students to both attorneys and doctrinal colleagues. Moreover, these collaborations have been able to, in many instances, provide a level of expertise to my students that I do not have.

On the most basic level, I have (as many others have done) had colleagues and alumni judge oral arguments, or have had practitioners come to the classroom for panel presentations on practice-ready topics. For my upper-level classes, I have used practitioners to teach individual practice-oriented skills, such as deposition strategy and negotiating an employment agreement. I have also invited colleagues to my upper-level Scholarly Writing class to share their experiences and answer questions about their own thought processes and organizational techniques when they embark on their own scholarly works.

However, the most beneficial and rewarding collaborations have involved engaging with doctrinal colleagues. My doctrinal collaborations have involved “mirroring” the subject matter of a doctrinal course in one of my legal writing projects (e.g. “crossover” collaboration) and inviting colleagues to lecture on the subject matter of a particular project I have assigned in Legal Writing that presents a new area of law for them.

With respect to crossover collaboration, I am a firm believer in maintaining the autonomy of the curriculum in my classroom, but I have not been averse to incorporating assignments that might enhance my students' learning in one of their doctrinal classes. With the right "partner" in the enterprise, crossover exercises are beneficial all around. There is not much effort or coordination necessary. All that is needed is an awareness of what the other person is teaching and references within the classroom to what is being taught in the other classroom. This can be accomplished through sharing syllabi at the beginning of the semester, or even asking students what is being covered in their other classes. With repeated references and explanations as to how everything fits in the "big picture," students begin to make connections across the curriculum divide as they recognize the distinctions between conceptual/ theoretical learning (which ordinarily neither focuses on jurisdiction or year of decision) and how the concepts fit into actual practice. In a good collaboration of this type, students begin to understand that the theoretical concepts do have their place in realistic jurisdictional-based research and writing.

Approaching doctrinal collaboration as a fluid concept from year to year allows you to adapt to many different situations depending upon the nature of your relationships with doctrinal colleagues and the desired outcome.

One recent crossover collaboration of mine was with a Criminal Law professor. When she taught her unit on "transferred intent," she gave the students a short assignment based on a fact situation in her textbook. After approaching my colleague about how I might be able to help my students better prepare for her class, I used the same fact situation as the basis for my final Motion project, a Motion to Dismiss. Because of the double assignments and the additional, extensive research on the topic being studied in Criminal Law, the students became more well-versed on the topic

than they otherwise might have been. After the exam, I asked the Criminal Law professor how the students had done on anything involving transferred intent, and she said they did much better than in previous years in terms of understanding this particular legal concept. The crossover collaboration had the added benefit of impressing the Criminal Law professor who, up until that point, did not fully understand the integrated nature between her course and Legal Writing.

The second, and more extensive, type of doctrinal collaboration I have engaged in involved Constitutional Law professors teaching substantive subject matter for one of my Motion projects. These individuals, who are long-term colleagues of mine, will come into my classroom and lecture about the pertinent area of the law the students are writing on. At my law school, Constitutional Law is not a first-year subject, so there is no opportunity for crossover in their classes. However, I am lucky to have a large contingency of Constitutional Law professors who have backgrounds as appellate attorneys and clinicians. At least two of these professors not only teach Constitutional Law, but are often assigned to teach other first-year courses. These professors are two of the most popular professors in the school, and I have enjoyed the good fortune of having at least one of these professors teaching a course to which my own students have been assigned. The students tend to be thrilled to see these professors in their Legal Writing classroom and also enjoy the camaraderie I have with my doctrinal colleagues. These colleagues have also helped strategize with students about writing their briefs and, in a sort of friendly competition, have often taken opposite sides of the issue to "argue" in a way that both sides are presented to the students.

Although I would not ordinarily feel I had the expertise to be assigning relatively complicated Constitutional law issues to my students, collaborating with my doctrinal colleagues has enhanced my confidence to assign some contemporary issues I might not otherwise have assigned. These mostly include school speech cases that have made the news in the last few years. By having doctrinal colleagues with expert knowledge talk about the intricacies of the substantive law and recent developments, I have been better able to focus on the writing aspect of the projects. Learning from these experts has also enhanced my own level of expertise such that I am better able to answer students' questions about the substantive areas of law

analyzed in their writing. Finally, the integration of these contemporary issues has kept the students more engaged than they might otherwise have been with a less interesting fact situation.

Admittedly, this type of collaboration is not always possible depending on the mindset of the particular doctrinal professors involved and these relationships are not always so easy to build. To this day, there are some doctrinal colleagues who do not see the relationship between the learning in a Legal Writing class and the learning in a traditional podium class.⁴ This mindset often comes from a lack of interactions with Legal Writing professors, and those having that mindset may actively discourage any crossover assignments. Overcoming this mindset requires reaching out and getting to know one's doctrinal colleagues, often through committee work, participating in programming that the doctrinal colleague might be organizing, or merely being social and friendly in any kind of faculty gathering. Other doctrinal colleagues simply may not have the time for any crossover collaboration. However, in many instances where a Legal Writing professor proposes a collaborative plan, most doctrinal colleagues will respond positively to the connection. The plan itself need not be significantly involved; it can involve as little as one guest lecture on a particular legal topic,

or as much as concurrent coverage of the same subject matter for several classes. Approaching doctrinal collaboration as a fluid concept from year to year allows you to adapt to many different situations depending upon the nature of your relationship(s) with doctrinal colleagues and the desired outcome.

Collaborations, on any level, provide a great opportunity for both students and professors. They not only increase the pool of knowledge available to students, but broaden the students' view of the "big picture" of the law. They also provide the opportunity for those of us teaching Legal Writing to demonstrate just how similar all our missions are and how we can benefit one another in educating our students.

NOTES

1. See generally Joellen Killion, *High-quality Collaborations Benefit Teachers and Students*, 36 J. STAFF DEV. 62 (Oct. 2015), <https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/jsd-october-2015/high-quality-collaboration-benefits-teachers-and-students.pdf>.
2. Susan M. Chelser & Judith M. Stinson, *Team up for Collaborative Teaching*, 23 NO. 2 PERSP: TEACHING LEGAL RES. & WRITING 169, 170 (Summer 2015).
3. Lisa Eichorn, *The Role of Legal Writing Faculty in an Integrated Curriculum*, 1 J. ALWD 85, 87 (2002).
4. Jan M. Levine, *Leveling the Hill of Sisyphus: Becoming a Professor of Legal Writing*, 26 FLA. ST. U. L. REV. 1067, 1073 (1999) ("Many [law professors and deans] believe that writing courses and professors are not worthy of full membership in the academy.").