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Using Visuals to Enhance Student Learning

By Karin Mika

It is no secret that we are a visual society. That’s not to say that we have become a visual society. We have always been one. That’s why movies have always been popular, why television easily replaced radio as the entertainment medium of choice, and why we prefer to attend the symphony as opposed to merely listening to a recording. Despite the fact that we are so visually focused, almost every legal textbook in existence has no pictures in it, and, to the extent that there are pictures, those pictures might be of a judge, a party, or a line drawing of how an accident might have taken place. I can’t think of any pictures I have ever seen in a doctrinal coursebook that weren’t in black and white.

Many Legal Research texts have been better about including pictures, but these pictures are just informational and typically depict no more than a screen shot of a particular source—appropriate and effective given the task to be learned, but not very interesting reading.

I think that most law professors have been told that they need to incorporate more visuals and multimedia in their presentations for purposes of engaging their students, but, for many, that goal means they put notes on a document camera, or write on a smart board, or put key points into a PowerPoint presentation. These efforts may help to keep the attention of the students better than a lecture with chalkboard accompaniment, but they really add little to the depth of learning that is possible.

One of the things that we tend to take for granted as law professors is that students have a base of universal knowledge similar to our own. It is the unavoidable generation gap that becomes greater the longer we teach and the younger our students get. What we may have thought was a relevant and clever allusion at the starts of our careers is archaic in the minds of those we are teaching.

Moreover, to understand basic concepts included in most legal textbooks, students must read cases about, among other historical features, crankshafts, horse drawn buggies, train platforms, and cow catchers. Frankly, the law is often developed through a world that current students do not recognize—a world where women were not entitled to play sports in high school, where trains, rather than airplanes, were the most prevalent form of travel, where we regarded the employer/employee relationship as Master and Servant, and where there was no global economy or internet. Thus, almost all of the cases that are studied in our textbooks are somewhat foreign to our students, and many of the cases that students must invariably find in research involve mystical references to concepts that no longer have any application in our day-to-day lives. Despite this limitation, students are expected to not only understand the concepts, but to understand how the cases apply to modern factual situations.

Thus, to better educate our students, it is not just important to use visuals to engage our students in the classroom experience, but to educate them about relevant context. This mandate is especially critical for many of our non-American students, who are unfamiliar not only with all of American History, but also with various contemporary cultural references and American idioms.

Ralph Brill of Chicago-Kent is a master at incorporating visuals into classroom presentations and exams. As a Torts Professor, Brill provides a visual context for the cases he teaches. Rather than explain what a railroad turntable is, Brill provides a video demonstrating how it is used. He also uses pictures of the places where torts occurred and even uses Google Earth to show the exact layout of the geographic area so that students can better connect to the scenario they are reading about.

His use of visuals is not limited to explaining concepts that are no longer common. He also uses visuals to give context and to enable students to visualize certain situations. This effort is especially important on an exam, and Ralph uses pictures to demonstrate concepts and to bring his hypotheticals to life.

I have also employed visuals for many years in teaching Legal Writing and Legal Research. I attempt to engage the students in the classroom experience by incorporating videos and PowerPoint slides. For supplemental study, I have made great use of video tutorials already available and have filmed a few of my own. But I also incorporate visuals so that the students are able to connect better to the cases. I have also used visuals and other video clips to replace the “canned” fact situation that is typical in setting out hypotheticals. On various occasions, I have used video news clips and have used an episode of House for the basis of an informed consent factual scenario. Last year, I assigned a trademark infringement issue as the basis for a motion and used visuals to demonstrate just what the marks at issue looked like. The students also used visuals in their motions and actually made arguments that incorporated pictures of disputed trademarks.

This year, in an effort to stay away from
Introducing Law Students to Bloom’s Taxonomy

By Carol Tyler Fox

I have recently been engaged with some of my colleagues in an ongoing project using Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives in the Cognitive Domain as an aid to law students who may struggle, especially early in law school, to understand (and therefore to achieve) the objectives of law school courses.

Background
“Bloom’s Taxonomy” was first published in 1956 as the result of an effort (headed by Benjamin Bloom at the University of Chicago) to establish standard terminology through which educators could discuss and clarify teaching objectives; design tests to measure achievement of the target objectives; and assess whether tests did actually measure such achievement. Preliminary investigations in Bloom’s project showed that mid-twentieth-century testing from primary through post-secondary American schools tended to rely heavily on recall of factual material. Since its publication, Bloom’s Taxonomy has fueled efforts among educators and curriculum designers to increase emphasis on more complex objectives, called “higher order thinking skills.”

Basic Concepts
Bloom’s Taxonomy articulates six levels of cognition for teachers’ attention: 1) recall; 2) understanding; 3) application; 4) analysis; 5) synthesis; 6) evaluation. (Later studies have slightly modified the labels.) Law students may mistakenly think that recall [level 1] of facts from assigned cases is the appropriate focus for their study. Or they may infer that if they understand [level 2] rules drawn from assigned cases, they have done their job. Many understand that they must apply [level 3] these rules to new fact patterns in order to succeed. Some may realize, especially in their Legal Writing courses, that they must analyze [level 4] rule elements from cases and synthesize [level 5] more useful rules by combining various case results. Such considerations can help them evaluate [level 6] outcomes of decided cases. Ultimately, policy-focused professors will ask them to create [revised level 6] new views of the subject, perhaps proposing legal reform.

Application
In law school courses, some professors may devote class time to levels 1-3, expecting that the best students will use these as foundations in exam responses that ultimately rise to levels 4-6. Some professors may expect students to glean levels 1 and 2 (at least) from class preparation, and begin class discussion at level 3 or even 4-6. Students unaware of the Taxonomy may find this variation in starting points confusing. Students alerted to the six levels can adjust to varying class approaches and also realize that the best exam presentations will deal coherently with all six levels.

Our Project
I have incorporated the discussion of Bloom’s Taxonomy into Academic Support Workshop presentations open to all students, as well as into one-on-one tutoring with students who seek my assistance or are referred to Academic and Writing Support by the Associate Deans. In addition, at the invitation of doctrinal professors (after a faculty workshop presentation of the material) I have presented the Taxonomy briefly in class sessions devoted to early exam preparation. The professors then supplied practice questions (with sample answers for comparative analysis) and invited students to discuss the sample answers and compare them to the students’ own first-draft exam answers. Students were also able to discuss the material further and in more detail in one-on-one appointments with the professors.

Student responses to the class presentations (and the individual Academic Support discussions of this material) indicate that, at the least, students feel less confused about what is expected of them both in course study and in exam answers after they learn the basic concepts of Bloom’s Taxonomy.

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