

THE ROOKIE

Lessons I've learned as a first-year law professor.

BY MICHAEL P. MASLANKA

On July 1, 2015, my life changed. Thirty-four years a lawyer, now a rookie law professor. Here are five lessons learned in transition, not just about law school education but also about life.

Lesson No. 1: Be Humble

Good teachers remain good students. And my first month as a law professor is Exhibit A. An educational, yet humbling experience: learning to navigate Canvas (the law school's course management system), grading on ExamSoft (*What? No bluebooks?*), pushing the right podium buttons to get the audio-visual system to work (*Am I teaching or launching an intercontinental ballistic missile?*). A timely reminder to be empathetic to my 1L contract law students whose heads will also be swimming with new concepts: consideration, illusory promises, revocation.

Lesson No. 2: Be Kind

The Socratic method works. The Carnegie Report, otherwise critical of legal education, lauds its ability in the 1L year as an introduction to thinking like a lawyer. But as with a scalpel, the Socratic method can heal or it can harm. Rigor and kindness are complementary, not mutually exclusive. Research demonstrates that a single harsh comment is only wiped out by four encouraging ones. So, in the Socratic dialogue, I take a minute to say, "Good job, let's see if we can tease out your comment." Here is Al Pacino as Lt. Col. Frank Slade: "There is nothing like the sight of an amputated spirit. There's no prosthetic for that." A lesson for law professors as well as senior partners.

Lesson No. 3: Be Collaborative

And speaking of senior partners—"the times they are a-changin'." Clients now require collaboration among their service providers. And the mindset starts in law school. My first-year contracts class is divided into three teams named after judges who contributed to the development of contract

law. Class participation is graded as a team. Students are encouraged to reach out with a "lifeline" to other team members if they are having a bumpy dialogue with me. And, as in practice, being called upon is not random, only required when the student's team is "up" that day. (Reference Lesson No. 2.)

Lesson No. 4: Be Adaptive

Here is Darwin: The most adaptable survive, not the fittest. As with life, so too with law school. Experiential education—not just the teaching through lectures but the doing through simulations—is ascendant. Recently, New York became the 15th state (over strong objections) to require 15 hours of experiential education in J.D. programs in order to sit for the bar. As George Bernard Shaw remarked: "Every truth started out as heresy." And the adaptability mindset percolates down to the classroom. A student was testing out the best way to study. We met, we talked, we eschewed tradition. The student is a police detective and we agreed that she should study as if she were investigating a crime. It worked.

Lesson No. 5: Seek Transcendence

It is our duty to invest our lives with meaning. That's a lesson from Viktor E. Frankl and his great work, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Permit me a story. I am meeting with a student. She spies a coffee mug on my desk, adorned with the logo of a school I helped sponsor that teaches children of Spanish-speaking immigrants to speak English. She quietly says, "That is where I learned to speak English, and now I am a law student." Spoken not with arrogance, but with humbleness. A wonderful reminder of why we do what we do. **TBJ**



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