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## Sometimes you have to be the Guide on the Side

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## Sometimes you have to be the Guide on the Side

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make it to the in-office stage, in part because he hadn't misspelled the partner's name! Another student paid homage to Sheila Simon's terrific IRAC teaching technique with an oft-repeated phrase: "stay out of the blender!"

I don't typically ask students for feedback on a class-by-class basis, but because this was a new experiment for me, I solicited a few opinions. In summary, the students found that this was a great "wrap-up" class because it: 1) gave them a chance to get over oral argument jitters, 2) reminded them of how much they had learned in the course and would bring to their summer jobs, and 3) provided an enjoyable activity to close out a long and hard year. As their teacher, I walked away with a smile, knowing that something had sunk in and that my students were prepared for the tasks that awaited them this summer. ♦

## Sometimes You Have to Be the "Guide on the Side"

David I. C. Thomson, University of Denver College of Law

For my Best Class, I did nothing. I did nothing to prepare for it, unless you count selecting the book I took to read. I did virtually nothing in the class, except read that book with my feet up on the desk. We work so hard to prepare for class, and in class, it seems utterly incongruous that this was my best class last semester. But I do think it was, and this is why.

Increasingly, I have been using collaborative learning methods in my classes. There are a lot of reasons favoring the use of collaborative learning in law school, among them reduced stress and better results. Virtually all law school classes could benefit from these teaching methods, but LRW is particularly well suited. Since the mission of our course is to teach forms of thinking and expression, much of what we do as teachers is guide our students in a process of self-learning. You can't teach someone to write well solely through lecture. Similarly, you can't teach

someone to synthesize the holdings of several cases solely through lecture. These concepts can be illustrated in a lecture format in part. But to be fully understood and deeply learned, an approach based on multiple teaching techniques is required. One of these techniques must be some form of cooperative learning. When students start to teach each other how to express themselves better, and challenge each other's conceptualization of a legal problem, their learning will improve.

Perhaps more importantly, I believe that increasing the use of cooperative learning in law school more effectively prepares law students for the practice they will enter. So much of the current legal education process is experienced by the student as a solitary affair. Law students primarily work alone. They take their finals alone, they ask questions in class alone, and most of the out-of-class assignments (such as final papers in seminars) are completed alone.

Yet collaborative skills are very important in the practice of law. Lawyers often work in firms, try cases in teams, and work with other attorneys to achieve mutual goals. If legal knowledge is primarily communicated through dialog and constructed through consensus, increasing the amount of collaborative learning in the law school curriculum surely must help produce lawyers who are better at participating in what is fundamentally a group-based process.

So back to my best class. I teach two sections of LRW, one in the day division and one in the evening division at the University of Denver's Sturm College of Law. Because of the various holidays in the fall semester, I had one extra evening class this year on my syllabus. At this point in the semester, I had the students working on a collaborative writing project in teams of two. While cooperative learning has all of the advantages

described above, it does require more student coordination—of schedules, meetings, draft reviews, etc. For the evening students—who often work full-time jobs during the day—accomplishing an appropriate amount of coordination to complete the assignment is often quite difficult.

The solution to my "extra" class for the evening students was quite simple: I gave it to them. That is, we met at the regular time in the regular class room, and I gave them the class period to work with their partners on their project.

Here is what made it my best class: I sat there with my feet up on the desk and I got to sit there and listen to all the *learning* going on in the room. If they had a question, they would come to ask me. But mostly they worked on their own, and I read my book. They worked hard through-

*You can't teach someone to write well solely through lecture.*

out the class period—talking, debating, reviewing the examples I had given them. It was just amazing to sit there and listen.

A saying in the literature of collaborative learning scolds us teachers for being too fond of the sound of our own voices: "You need to be less of the 'Sage on the Stage' and more of the 'Guide on the Side.'"<sup>1</sup> The night of my "best class" this saying really hit home to me. I was the Guide on the Side, and the students took over the teaching—and the learning. ♦

<sup>1</sup> Alison King, *From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side*, 41 *College Teaching* 30 (Winter 1993).