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Using a Wiki to Increase Student Engagement in Administrative Law

By David Thomson, University of Denver

Administrative law is one of the courses students love to hate. This is particularly true in schools where Admin is a required course, since many students in the class would not take it otherwise, and gripe about being forced to. The problem with Admin law – for both the teacher and the student – is that it is such a vast topic that teaching it in a manner students can comprehend is difficult.

When I was asked to teach Admin law last year, I looked at this as a challenge, rather than a burden. Because I am fairly comfortable using technology in my teaching, I decided to use a Wiki to involve the students in the course more than they would be if I spent all our class time lecturing.

Wiki software is designed to support collaborative writing. The best known wiki, of course, is Wikipedia, a collaboratively written encyclopedia. While Wikipedia has engendered some controversy, it remains a regularly updated encyclopedia of over 10 million articles that has been written in less than six years.

Opportunities for collaborative writing abound in most law school courses. I am a supporter of collaborative learning in law school, at least generally so – like everything else, the devil is in the details. But as I approached teaching Admin law, I thought of ways that I might use a wiki environment to increase engagement in my class. I came up with two. First, I set up a wiki for the students to write the outline for the course collaboratively. Second, I set up small group wikis for research projects on particular agencies.

The wiki course outline was the toughest sell. I have always been concerned about the influence that the varied availability of outlines might have on student grades. Some students get good outlines and others do not, and it seems obvious that this might have an affect on the grade they ultimately receive for the course. So I had the students in this course prepare the outline together and they all had access to the same product (the collaborative outline) for the final exam.

I found that several students welcomed this approach, several resisted it vehemently, and the rest were willing to go along with the experiment. I had a few students drop the course when I announced the wiki requirements. Most of the students in the course were 3Ls, and some were graduating at the end of the semester. I think the students

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resisting it were mostly students who felt they had their own process of getting "As" figured out, and they didn't want anyone else to either 1) share it, or 2) interfere with it. I think the students who welcomed it (I received several encouraging E-mails) were students who typically struggle to prepare or receive outlines for courses, and often have to turn to commercial outlines (which can be particularly problematic for Admin law, since it is such a vast topic, and teachers teach it in substantially different ways).

Participation in the preparation of the outline amounted to 10% of each student's grade in the class, and nearly all students participated. A week before the final exam, at the final review class, I gave them printed copies of their work product. They were allowed to take this outline and the textbook (only) into the final exam. The final product was

an excellent outline for the course, and exceeded 165 pages. It even included several tables and charts – some of which I had given the class as handouts, and others that were prepared from scratch by students.

The other use of wikis in the course was for group projects. One of the problems of teaching Admin law is that it often seems disconnected from the agencies that are involved in the cases. You can teach the principle from the case, but simultaneously teaching students how the relevant agency operates can be difficult. In addition, one of the critical skills of attorneys who practice administrative law is the ability to navigate and evaluate the operative aspects of the bureaucracy in which their client is entangled. So research skills also become important.

I assigned groups of 4 students to one of 11 Federal agencies. These were agencies that were involved in some of the seminal Admin law cases, and agencies that I thought would interest the students, such as EPA, the FCC, and OSHA. Students in each group used a group wiki to prepare a site of information about their agency. In the last 20 minutes of the second class per week, the group presented their wiki to the class. All the wikis were available for other students to access, but the small group members were the only ones who could build the site for their assigned agency. The group wikis – and the matching presentations – amounted to 20% of the grade for the course.

Students really seemed to enjoy the wiki projects. Most of the groups went above and beyond and created fantastic sites about their agency, with pictures, cartoons, logos and the like adorning them. Of course, they often included numerous links to sources outside the wiki – both within the agency, and sources that criticized or commented on the operation of the agency. At the end of the course, I gave the students "a gift you made yourselves" in the form of a

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CD-ROM of all the agency presentations. The CD included 88 MB of information.

Setting up the wikis was simple, since the facility to do so was built into the University of Denver's courseware system of choice: Blackboard. Our Blackboard sites include a wiki capability, and also allow for group wikis to be configured. That process is simply 1) creating a new group wiki, 2) giving it a name, and 3) assigning the group members access to write to it.

Although not technically difficult, experimenting with a new technology and using it in two different ways, was challenging. Most particularly, it was challenging for the students, because I was asking them to try something new to support their learning. By third year, students often have, as I like to say: "one foot out the door and the other on a banana peel." When you combine that reality with trying something new – in a course that is required and generally has a bad reputation – you are bound to get resistance. But I am glad I pushed through that resistance. At the end of the year, my student evaluations seemed to also indicate that the students were glad they hung in there with the course. Further, I was heartened by the fact that attendance in this class was very high (particularly for Admin law, with mostly 3L students). There were no students who missed more than four classes, and most students attended nearly all of the classes. I would recommend the use of wikis in other courses, particularly where the professor wants to encourage students to be more involved in their learning, and believes that a collaborative writing approach might help to achieve that goal.

David Thomson teaches at the University of Denver. His book, Law School 2.0, will be published by LexisNexis in January 2009; portions of this article appear in the book. David can be reached at dthomson@law. du.edu. For information about using this and other technologies in teaching, visit David's website: http://www.law.du.edu/thomson.

A Model Faculty Mentoring Protocol

By Thomas E. Baker, Florida International University College of Law

Law professors should make themselves reasonably available to colleagues for purposes of discussing teaching methods, content of courses, possible topics of scholarship, scholarly work in progress, and related matters.

— AALS Statement of Good Practices by Law Professors in the Discharge of their Ethical and Professional Responsibilities (May 2003).

Consistent with this Statement of Good Practices, every member of the faculty should be made to feel comfortable seeking out the professional advice of any more experienced member of the faculty who, in turn, should be expected to respond in a helping, affirming manner. The purpose of this faculty mentoring protocol is to facilitate faculty development through formative assessment rather than to evaluate through summative assessment, the latter being the primary purpose of the promotion and tenure process. The mentoring relationship envisioned here contemplates individualized confidential consultation, supportive advising, and personal encouragement one-on-one. This protocol is intended to provide some general guidance to both mentors and protégés on how to develop and nurture this relationship to achieve its fullest potential.

Mentoring and retaining junior faculty are important ways to improve the faculty and to achieve greater faculty diversity. An effective mentoring program also seeks to involve and reinvigorate senior faculty.

Rather than attempting a comprehensive, detailed description of mentoring activities, this protocol is intended as a working document, i.e., a checklist of some of the typical intramural activities that a mentor and protégé might expect from each other. Some activities in this protocol may not suit some mentors and protégés; some activities not in this protocol may occur to some mentors and protégés. The explicit expectation is that mentors and protégés will be challenged and encouraged to be creative and proactive in mutually-supportive ways. The protocol is organized into four categories: Teaching, Scholarship, Service, and Academia.

Teaching

Mentors and protégés should seek to develop a professional rapport that allows the protégé to seek the mentor's advice on any teaching and course issues, including advising about selection of teaching materials, course syllabi, course design and requirements, assignments, teaching methods, use of technology, classroom management, examinations, course packages, and new course offerings.

Mentors and protégés should visit each other's classes and meet afterwards to discuss their observations.

Mentors and protégés should exchange and discuss useful articles about teaching.

Mentors and protégés together should review the course evaluations of the protégé (a useful complementary exercise would be to review the course evaluations of the mentor).

Mentors and protégés should attend faculty colloquia on teaching and learning and follow up together on