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The Joy of Collaboration: Reflections on Teaching with Others

By Richard Strong, Elizabeth A. Shaver and Sarah Morath

Our collaborative course was conceived over appetizers and drinks in May 2011. We had gathered at a trendy eatery in downtown Akron (yes, there is a trendy eatery or two in Akron, Ohio) to celebrate the end of the school year. As often happens when a group of professors get together, we started to discuss how we might improve the courses we were scheduled to teach in the next year. When the conversation turned to our legal drafting courses, Sarah described a presentation she had seen at a legal writing conference early that year. Three professors from Duquesne University School of Law had presented on a team-taught upper level writing course in which students were divided into the roles of plaintiff's counsel and defendant's counsel.¹

We began to discuss the possibility that we could do something similar with our legal drafting classes, with an additional class of student-judges. At Akron, legal writing professors traditionally had taught an upper-level "drafting" or writing course designed to enhance the students' legal writing beyond the first-year curriculum. At the time we began to discuss our collaboration, Betsy and Rick previously had taught stand-alone litigation drafting courses, and Sarah was planning to teach a judicial opinion writing course. We hoped that, if we linked our three courses together so that each class assumed a professional role of either plaintiff's counsel, defense counsel, or judge, we could enhance our students' experiences by adding professional identity and practice-ready skills in a simulated litigation context.

Once we agreed that this would make a unique and rewarding course for our students, we quickly moved forward to the development and design stage. We envisioned that our student-

¹ Julia Glencer, Erin Karsman, and Tara Willke, "Writing in A Law Firm Context: Creation, Collaboration, & Course Corrections," The Second Colonial Frontier Legal Writing Conference, Duquesne University Law School (March 2011).

advocates would draft or oppose various pretrial motions that our student-judges would analyze and rule on in written decisions. Because students would assume a particular role, plaintiff's counsel, defense counsel, or judge, they would develop a sense of professional identity as they communicated with opposing counsel and the court. Students would better appreciate their future professional positions as well as the ethical obligations associated with these positions.

Over the next several months in 2011, we worked together to create a litigation hypothetical that would provide the substantive issues and educational opportunities necessary for the courses. We created a comprehensive set of course materials that provided our students with complex legal issues for their writing assignments, exposure to procedures specific to state court civil litigation, and various professional and practice-ready skills.

We taught the courses collaboratively in both 2012 and 2013. We also co-authored an article that describes in detail our pedagogical goals, course designs, experience in implementing the course, and student feedback.² We also presented on our course design at several conferences.

Over the years that we worked together, the collaborative nature of the project was a very satisfying way to approach our work as professors. This essay describes why our experience collaborating with one another worked so well. In particular, we outline the many benefits that we experienced as part of a collaborative process. We also discuss several benefits that our students and our institution experienced. For those interested in collaborating with others, we conclude with some useful tips.

² Sarah Morath, Elizabeth Shaver, & Richard Strong, *Motions in Motion: Teaching Advanced Legal Writing Through Collaboration*, 21 Perspectives: Teaching Legal Res. & Writing 119 (2013).

Personal Benefits

When we reflect back on our experience, we can identify at least three important benefits that accrued to each of us through this collaboration. First, our collaboration helped us to be better teachers. Second, our successful teaching collaboration naturally gave rise to collaboration in the area of scholarship, resulting in our co-authored article. Third, our collaboration strengthened our friendships with each other.

The most obvious benefit of our collaboration was in the classroom. Had we not agreed to collaborate with one another and link our courses together, we almost certainly would not have completely revised our courses to emphasize practice-ready skills and professional identity. Only by working together could we undertake the task in the first place. Collaborating with one another gave us the incentive to innovate.

As we began to work together, we immediately experienced the benefits to our teaching that this collaboration would bring. Through a great deal of back-and-forth discussion, we were able to rigorously assess the quality of our fundamental course design even before we taught the course. Indeed, our litigation hypothetical and course materials worked so well in the first year that we taught the courses that we made very few substantive changes before we taught the courses again.

Even after we agreed on the course design and each began to teach our own courses, collaborating with one another strengthened our classroom experience. During the semester, as our students would raise issues or pose questions, we would meet as a group outside of class to discuss those items, thus fine-tuning our pedagogical approach with the goal of improving the students' experience. We used each other as trusted sounding boards when preparing for class.

When one of us prepared a class exercise or other materials that would be specific just to our set of students, we were able to rely on the other two to give valuable feedback. We also worked together to find solutions to any course-wide problems, as did occur in the first year with regard to an electronic document filing system we used.

Of course this teaching collaboration had practical benefits. The three of us working together were able to create a much more comprehensive set of course materials than any one of us working alone. And, because we each depended on the other two to complete certain tasks, we adhered to a set of deadlines that kept the project on track. Yet collaboration did not mean that we simply divided tasks and each ended up with less work. Because of our interactive course design with three classes of students working with one another in a simulated litigation, we had additional logistic challenges. Those complexities would not have existed had we taught our own courses autonomously. We also had to take the time to meet, discuss, revise, and review in order to get “group” approval for any modifications. The trade-off, however, was overwhelmingly positive.

For us, collaborating on scholarship was a natural extension of our teaching collaboration. We were excited about the success we had achieved in the first year of teaching, and we wanted to share our work with others. We felt that the strong working relationship we had developed when collaborating on our teaching would translate to a successful writing collaboration. As with our approach to teaching, we thoughtfully discussed how to divide the work fairly. We set firm deadlines so that we would stay on task. We were respectful of each other’s opinions and, in our view, successfully married the writing styles of three individuals in a published piece.

Our scholarship collaboration provides benefits far beyond the one article that we co-authored. We now have a level of comfort with each other such that we can support each other in any future scholarship efforts, whether they will be collaborative efforts or not. Each of us knows that the other two will be an important sounding board for new scholarship ideas. Indeed, the ability to discuss even “unformed ideas” with a supportive colleague likely will spur our creative natures. During those discussions, we can act as a valuable resource for each other by sharing articles or other materials that might relate to a topic of interest or suggesting additional individuals to contact on a particular topic. We also know that, as we begin to write, we can ask each other to review any works in progress, and we trust that the feedback that we receive from each other will be thoughtful and valuable advice.

Finally, our collaboration helped us view our employment more positively. Teaching is for the most part a solitary job, and collaborating with a colleague can combat any feelings of isolation that we teachers sometimes feel. As we collaborated with one another, we strengthened our friendship and respect for each other. We learned more about our respective families, our past professional experiences, and some of our personal struggles, both big and small (from cleaning flooded basements to family health issues). We recognized each other’s dedication to the work that we do, a recognition that perhaps is more acute because we three all teach Akron’s first-year legal writing course, a course where certain days and weeks during the semester can be very hectic. As a result of our collaboration, we now value our friendships with each other as an important “perk” of our jobs.

Benefits for Our Students and the Institution

While our experience has yielded wonderful personal dividends, we believe that our students and our law school were also big winners. Our initiative provided our students and our school with some substantial additional benefits.

Our fresh approach to a required upper level writing course provided multiple benefits to our students. Because we crafted an engaging hypothetical that featured human drama and enough ambiguity to accommodate the twists, turns and chaos of a typical case, our students were able to experience the ups and downs of litigation practice. Because we set our hypothetical case in Ohio state court and, in particular, our local trial court, our students learned about matters specific to our state civil procedure rules and the local rules of our county trial court. Indeed, our courses are the only courses at our law school where students use state civil procedure rules.

Our collaboration also modeled for our students how a team approach works. Within each set of the respective roles of plaintiffs' counsel, defense counsel or judges, we asked each set of students to work together to either develop the best argument for the client or fairly analyze the issue to reach the just result. We created in-class group exercises for our students to complete with one another, in part to reinforce the concept that good lawyering most often is the result of collaborative, not isolated, efforts. We also asked the students to help improve each other's work by completing peer evaluation forms for their opposing counsel and judges. Through these various means, we encouraged our students to view their classmates as partners whose input would improve their own work product rather than competitors for a particular grade in the course.

In addition, by informing our students at the outset of our goals, commitment, and hopes for the collaborative project, we made them partners in the success of the courses. We encouraged honest and direct comments and feedback from students about the course design and implementation far beyond the single end-of-semester evaluation form. We then collaborated with one another to make improvements that we felt were necessary in light of the students' comments.

Finally, by collaborating with one another on a project of this scale, we modeled for our students how collaborative partners work with one another. From time to time, students in one class would level a complaint about the other class, much like the complaints that lawyers in private practice might make about opposing counsel or a judge whose ruling was controversial, or complaints that judges might make about lawyers who appear before them. Those complaints provided opportunities for us to model good collaboration. Although we listened to the students' complaints and, when appropriate, sought clarification from each other on a particular point, we also were careful to display the appropriate respect for our colleagues and the students in their classes. On those occasions we would remind our own particular set of students that the other individuals in our interrelated course were working hard and deserved our respect even as we might not always agree with their approach to a particular issue.

Our collaborative effort also benefitted our law school on a number of different levels. First and foremost, we created a course that put our students into the role of lawyers and judges. In addition to the traditional role of the upper level drafting course as further refinement of students' legal writing skills, we added the important elements of professional identity and practice-ready skills. We used our collective experience to replicate much of what we encountered when we worked in the litigation profession and courtroom.

Finally, our collaboration created a stronger connection to work that benefitted our institution. Because we worked so well together on this project, the three of us have collaborated with one another on other projects within the law school. Those collaborations include co-coaching a moot court team and co-creating or sharing materials for other courses that we individually teach. Having successfully worked with each other, we can approach other members of our faculty with a more collaborative outlook for other projects, including committee work, collaborations for distance learning, and advice and feedback on other teaching or scholarship ideas.

Useful Tips for Collaboration

While you may not always be able to choose with whom you live (e.g., your parents or your children), you can choose your partners for a collaborative project. Because everyone has strengths and weaknesses, the right form of collaboration can emphasize strengths while weaknesses become less consequential. Although you must choose carefully those with whom you might collaborate, all collaborative efforts will experience some bumps along the way. The following tips might help make the process somewhat easier.

Determine everyone's strengths and build on those strengths

As already mentioned, one of the great things about collaborating with others is that you no longer have to do it all by yourself. One key to a successful collaboration is to build on the strengths of each of the collaborative partners. For example, in our group, Rick had many years of experience litigating medical malpractice claims. He also has an MFA in Creative Writing. Rick was the natural choice to be the creator of our hypothetical fact pattern, and he delivered in spades. Betsy conducted research to find interesting legal issues of the appropriate complexity

and, being somewhat obsessed with logistics, created a semester-long schedule that would allow three different classes of students to exchange assignments with one another in a seamless way. Among Sarah's many strengths are the ability to create valuable and interesting in-class exercises that focus on practice-ready skills and concepts and extensive knowledge about the scholarship process (she is a wiz at drafting eye-catching titles!). By leveraging each other's strengths, our project moved forward smoothly and successfully.

Value everyone's contribution throughout the life of the project

For collaboration to work, each individual needs to feel like the others are contributing equally to the end result. But it is also important to recognize that everyone's contributions will be different and that each may contribute more or less at different times during the project. For example, one of the collaborative partners might be great with technology, so this person's contributions might be more apparent when preparing to make a presentation. Another person might be great at calling meetings and getting the ball rolling, so this person's contributions might be more apparent at the beginning of a project. Although these contributions occur at different times, both are important to the overall success of the project.

Expect disagreements

When two or more people work together, disagreements are bound to arise. Do not let disagreement derail your project. Concede the little stuff, like a stylistic point. If the point of disagreement is a more major issue, be sure to keep the lines of communication open. Your colleagues are not mind readers. Arrange a face-to-face meeting with the entire group in order to talk over the point of contention. Although perhaps a little more difficult to schedule, face-to-face meetings are often more productive because the individuals will better focus on the issue

and also take the time to listen to a colleague and respond politely. The face-to-face meeting will allow you to regroup and make sure that your goals remain the same.

Collaborate with someone with a similar work style and someone you trust

One reason why our collaborative project worked well is that we all have similar work styles. We communicate well in person and through email. We know that each other has a strong work ethic and that, when work is divided up, the work will get done. We were committed to producing the best end product without regard for whether any one of us got credit for a particular piece of the project. We also trusted each other not to be judgmental about each other's contributions. We freely shared work that was "in progress" because we understood that the feedback we receive would be honest, but constructive. Because we trusted each other and shared a similar work ethic, our collaboration worked tremendously well.

What started as a causal discussion over appetizers and drinks resulted in a successful collaborative course and led to numerous presentations and articles. Collaborative projects are not always easy sailing, but in our experience, the benefits of collaboration outweigh any negatives. Simply put, our collaborative journey has been a joy.

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