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What Keeps Me Going? A Great Job at Home and Abroad

Emily Zimmerman, Villanova University School of Law

What keeps me going as a legal writing professor? The immediate answer to that question is the love of teaching legal writing and my wonderful legal writing colleagues. What has challenged me to become a better, more thoughtful legal writing professor? The immediate answer to that question is designing and teaching a new Legal Writing and Drafting course at the School of Law of the City University of Hong Kong. Although I had worked in Hong Kong for a month as a summer associate, was interested in working abroad, and am an incurable travel-addict, I never expected that teaching legal writing would lead me overseas. However, in May 2002, as I was routinely checking my e-mail, I opened a message on the Legal Writing Institute Listserv from Richard Neumann, via Jan Levine, seeking applications for a position teaching a new Legal Writing course at City University. Less than three months later, I found myself on a plane for the long flight to Hong Kong, where I would spend the next five months building on the foundation laid by Richard to design the Legal Writing and Drafting course and teach the course for the first time to over 100 law students in the Postgraduate Certificate in Laws (PCLL) Programme.¹

Having to design and implement a legal writing program in a different country with a different system of legal education forced me to consider the goals of a legal writing program and the means by which to accomplish those goals more actively and deliberately than I ever had before. Although I certainly brought to bear my previous legal writing teaching experience, I could not take anything for granted in designing the new program for City University because there were very few preconceived notions or entrenched practices regarding how the Legal Writing and Drafting course should be designed and taught. Fortunately, I had supportive,

engaged, and creative colleagues with whom to work during this process.²

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to non-native English speakers, in another law school, energized and challenged me while I was in Hong Kong and has informed my role as a legal writing professor now that I am back in the United States.

From the standpoint of my day-to-day teaching, for example, I believe that I am more careful to address fundamentals with my students and not to assume that my students will understand general principles or abstract ideas without concrete examples. When I was in Hong Kong, I was very concerned that all of my students, regardless of their level of English proficiency (which, generally, was very good), would be able to understand what was being taught in class. As a result, I relied heavily on overheads, not only to supplement but also to communicate in writing what I was saying in class. I realized that this approach works regardless of whether Cantonese or English is my students' first language. As a result, I use overheads even more now than I did before I went to Hong Kong.

On a more general level, designing the new legal writing course expanded my ideas about the form of legal writing courses and the relationship that can exist between legal writing and other courses in the curriculum. One of the advantages and disadvantages of teaching in most legal writing programs in the United States is that the programs are established and, as such, have more-or-less defined formats. With a start-up legal writing program, there is no established format, or at least not as much of one, within which to fit. As a

result, Myrette Fok and I, along with other instructors, were able to debate all aspects of the structure that we wanted to adopt for the Legal Writing and

Drafting course at City University. For example, Myrette and I considered whether to divide the PCLL students into several, smaller sections or whether to have fewer, larger sections. Ultimately, we decided to have three large sections but to spend the two-hour class time meeting first in one large section, then breaking up into smaller groups (of approximately ten students each, each group facilitated by an instructor) for active learning exercises.

We also decided to coordinate the Legal Writing and Drafting course with some of the students' other courses. The students' first assignment was to write an advice letter to a client who was contemplating the purchase of an apartment. The students were introduced to the underlying facts for the assignment in a role play in their Conveyancing class in which their Conveyancing professor (Myrette Fok) played the lawyer and I played the client. The students reviewed these facts and the relevant doctrinal law in their Conveyancing tutorial (small group meeting) and learned about drafting advice letters and advising clients in their Legal Writing and Drafting class. Myrette attended portions of the Legal Writing and Drafting classes pertaining to advice letters, acting as our conveyancing "subject expert" and as one of the small group instructors.

The fact that Myrette and I were able to integrate the material from our courses speaks to another important issue besides curriculum design: the status of legal writing within the law school curriculum. The legal professions in Hong

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Kong (solicitors and barristers) had a strong and expressed interest in the development of skills training, and, within the PCLL Programme, legal writing teaching was highly valued and respected. The recognition of the importance of skills training and the respect given to legal writing and advocacy skills teachers was not only empowering to me individually but also encouraged the cooperative, creative, thoughtful development of the PCLL curriculum.

Is any law school or legal writing program perfect? Of course not. However, different schools and legal writing programs have different strengths that are well worth experiencing. Undertaking new challenges in a different environment is sometimes exhausting, but always exciting. Having this unexpected opportunity is one of the experiences that “keeps me going.”³ ♦

¹ The PCLL Programme is one year of courses that students take after receiving their undergraduate degrees in order to practice law in Hong Kong. In May 2002, Richard worked closely with Myrette Fok, the head of the program, and Elsa Kelly, the Civil Procedure Course Leader for the program, to construct the initial framework and goals of the Legal Writing and Drafting course. I thank Richard for the opportunity to continue the work that he started.

² At any given time, there were three instructors for the Legal Writing and Drafting course, in addition to me, the Course Leader. Helen Stockhill and Claire Hall were permanent instructors for the course. Myrette Fok, Judith Waldron, and David Chan were our “subject experts” and, as such, were instructors for specific segments of the course. These instructors were invaluable to the Legal Writing and Drafting course, and it was my privilege and pleasure to work with them all. It was also my great fortune to work closely with Elsa Kelly, the Civil Procedure Course Leader, and Sandra Johnson, the Advocacy, Interviewing, and Negotiation Course Leader.

³ Many thanks to Assistant Dean Diane Edelman for her feedback on this piece.

And Now For Something Completely Different...

Terry Jean Seligmann, University of Arkansas-Fayetteville

Today, I love my job teaching legal research and writing. Even the administrative duties of being a director— hiring, scheduling, meetings, etc.— seem manageable and productive. Eighteen months ago, though, I was miserable. Tight budgets and large classes, seemingly intractable personnel issues, and the grind of classes, conferences and grading had me pining for escape and sure that I could not continue indefinitely in this field. Part of the problem was psychological. I didn’t know that there was something called post-tenure depression until I chatted with some of my colleagues. I had worked toward a major goal, met it, but then what would keep me going faced with “more of the same”? I’m someone who had never stayed in the same job for more than five years, and here I was, past my internal deadline for moving on to something new and different.

Several things changed. First we acquired a new Dean; then, a difficult personality left to take another job. But two other changes refreshed my outlook. The first refresher was teaching “casebook” courses for the first time. In the fall, I taught a course in Education Law. What a pleasure to dig into cases and argue policy. What a relief not to have to constantly create exercises and assignments to convey the content of the course. Although constructing an exam was challenging, grading it quickly instead of laboring over the framing of constructive comments was a breeze. In the spring term, I taught a small seminar in Special Education Law, the area in which I have been writing some of my scholarship. I supplemented the course text with a detailed syllabus and additional materials. Then each student took a leadership role for the discussion of two course topics. The students who took the class were there because they really wanted to be there, not because

the class was required. They worked hard and wrote interesting research papers. One of the papers was so good that the student has since placed it for publication.

The second refresher was teaching a Comparative Education Law course in our five-week summer study abroad program in Cambridge, England. I collected news clippings on UK education law topics all year. I spent several weeks in the late spring researching UK and European Community education law in texts and in articles from on-line databases. I serendipitously located two British education law professors who not only referred me to material, but agreed to give guest lectures to my class. They turned out to be excellent lecturers and interesting colleagues.

On the personal side, I left Fayetteville, Arkansas for a wonderful English college town teeming with students and bicycles. It was full of new restaurants to try, Shakespeare and opera performed in ancient courtyards and chapels, and a film festival. The weekends allowed for trips further afield to London museums and theatre, plus train destinations to Bath, Paris, and Edinburgh. Given that I had not been abroad since before our first child (now 20) was born, it was an invigorating and welcome chance to travel again.

Back home, we still have larger classes, a tight budget, lots of conferences, and grading. I have no non-LRW courses on my schedule for the next two years. My biking and walking apparently was a coup de grace leaving permanent damage to my knee. But I am far happier and satisfied to be in this position than I would have thought possible just a short time ago. Knowing that I can look forward to doing something completely different every so often, I am able to bring renewed energy and enthusiasm to my work and my chosen career. I’m already plotting my next adventure. ♦