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Finding Your Voice: Professional Development Tips for New ASPers

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Letter from the Editors

As the start of a new academic year is upon us again, I write at my law school office just a day before fall student orientation will begin. Nearby, the sound of colleagues arriving back from the summer is not hard to miss. By no means would I consider myself a law teaching veteran, but after six years of back-to-school fall seasons (2016 will make seven!), the physicality of fall semesters—the return to the classroom podium, the reappearance of students who had been missed all summer, the appearance of new names and faces to learn, the sudden amplified pace of it all—the potentials of a new year. Whether it was my days in academic success under Paula Manning, in bar support for Michael Hunter Schwartz at Washburn Law, or now in doctrinal teaching at UMass, I always look forward to fall.

This past summer I had the pleasure to attend two law teaching conferences—first, the annual Association of Academic Support Educators Conference at CUNY and then the Institute for Law Teaching & Learning Conference (ILTL) at Washburn. What was different about these conferences this year was that both really seemed to offer something for everyone in law teaching—from first-timers in ASP to those who have, otherwise, “seen it all.” With a cue from both conferences, this edition of TLC, unlike previous ones, is deliberately a non-themed issue. Instead, we hope that this “General Issue” will have something for everyone—new and seasoned ASP and bar support folks, law teachers, friends, and the like.

We hear from a prior TLC editor, Courtney Lee (McGeorge) on her advice to newcomers to ASP while Deborah Borman (Northwestern) is already looking out for us with holistic advice on dealing with stressors on the job. For those tuned into the recent ABA mandates on learning outcomes and assessments, Christina Chong (USF) offers some strategies for formative assessments. Lisa M. Blasser (Western State) is already tuned into the like.

Lastly, two new TLC editors are joining us: DeShun Harris from TAMU, and Christina Chong from USF. DeShun will serve as the new Assistant Editor while Christina will be our Technology Editor, a newly-created position that will focus on the intersection between technology, and law teaching and learning. Welcome back to school!

Jeremiah A. Ho.
On behalf of the Editors
Finding Your Voice: Professional Development Tips for New ASPers

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It’s not always easy to determine where we belong in the legal academy as ASPers. When entering a new profession, often it helps to look at others in the same field to identify a template, but ASP is different. Some of us are fully tenured professors; some are contract faculty; some have adjunct professor titles; some are considered purely administrators with no instructor titles; and others are a hybrid of multiple positions. So if you are new to this field, how can you find your professional voice and increase your visibility if you don’t even know where you fit?

A first step is to consider your audience. ASPers fill different roles for different people, such as professors and counselors for students, data gatherers and advisers for administrators, and consultants and pedagogical gurus for professors. One way to discover and enhance the effectiveness of your voice for all of these various audiences is through professional development.

Professional development is both internal – building your own knowledge base and expertise – and external – sharing that wisdom with others. To expand your own proficiency, start by trying to read as much as possible. There is a multitude of resources created by and for ASPers, including books, law review articles, short collections (such as The Learning Curve), blogs, and websites. If you do not already have an account on SSRN (the Social Science Research Network), create one for free and just browse. (Whenever I encounter an SSRN article written by an ASPer, I make sure I’m signed in and I download it, even if I don’t plan to read it right away. Not only does it help me in my own professional development to create a library of ASPish articles, but it also increases the author’s download count, which can positively impact respect both for the author and for the field in general. I think of each download as a virtual fist-bump for my ASP family.)

In addition to reading, you can nurture your internal professional development by attending some of the terrific ASP conferences offered throughout the year, from major national gatherings like AASE and AALS to regional groups like those in the Northeast, Southwest, and West Coast. Make sure you are signed up to receive messages from the Academic Support listserv so you can get timely details about these gatherings, plus lots of other terrific information. Learn from your colleagues’ presentations at these meetings, but also volunteer to become a member of committees to learn more, share ideas, and grow your network of professional connections. An added bonus: such connections in ASP tend to evolve quickly into friendships.

To cultivate your external professional development, of course you should share what you learn from reading and attending conferences with your students and coworkers, but you also might consider presenting at one of those conferences yourself. You may feel intimidated, especially if you are new to the profession, but just about everyone has something worthwhile to share. What makes you excited about your job? Did you try a new program or teaching technique that worked well for your students? Your ASP colleagues would like to learn about it. In fact, other faculty probably would like to learn about it too, so do not feel limited to ASP-focused conferences or be afraid to submit your presentation proposal to other groups that might benefit from your experiences – and do not forget the faculty at your own institution. Such presentations lend themselves well to lunch-and-learn sessions, especially when they apply directly to your school. Sharing your knowledge with your institutional colleagues can do wonders to boost their respect for what you do, not to mention your own confidence.
Another way to amplify your voice is through scholarship. Don’t panic; this does not have to mean a sixty-page law review article with 300 footnotes. You can produce scholarship through blog posts and social media, or through shorter informational pieces in publications such as The Learning Curve or others. If you have a little more to say, but still not enough to fill a full law review piece, you might consider publishing in an online law journal. Several schools publish such electronic journals as companions to their traditional law reviews, and they typically accept, and prefer, shorter submissions on timely topics.

If you find that you have a lot more to say, publishing a traditional law review article is a great way to boost your professional development, and doing so can lead to other opportunities, such as invitations to present for other schools’ faculties and at conferences, further publications, and collaborations with other interested colleagues. Regardless of whether you write a lengthier piece or a brief newsletter article, use your new SSRN account to post it and share your voice online. The process is fairly intuitive, but your law librarians should be able to help if you run into any difficulties.

Often an initial stumbling block to producing scholarship of any length is just choosing a topic. If you find yourself in that predicament, ask yourself questions like those mentioned earlier about what excites you. If there is something you are passionate about, tell others about it. What about something that upset you? If you think something needs to change, propose it. Alternatively, is there something you wish you understood better? If you learn about it, share it, because chances are others are confused by it, too.

Another obstacle that looms especially large in the world of ASP is time, or rather the lack thereof. Few things are more depressing than watching doctrinal colleagues gleefully submitting their final spring grades so they can rush home to pack for a ten-week trip to Asia or the Greek Isles, while your big summer plans include grading bar essays and maybe hitting up Chipotle later. Most ASPers are twelve-month employees with few, if any, breaks to spend pondering scholarship or anything else, so when on earth can we expect to write anything?

First of all, be gentle with yourself and recognize that slow progress still is progress. In fact, writing in small bursts each day is widely regarded as more effective, and produces better work product, than “binge writing.” Determine what time of day contains the fewest distractions for you, and set an ongoing, nonnegotiable date with yourself to write during that time, even if it’s only for twenty minutes. For some, that time is later in the evening after the kids are in bed. For others, like me, it’s very early in the morning; it’s not easy to set the alarm an hour or two earlier, but I find that I am massively productive when I sit down at my desk and it’s still dark outside, and no one is emailing, calling, or knocking on my door.

Writing at an “off” time like this not only helps guarantee focus and productivity, but it allows us to tend to our professional development without neglecting our other obligations. Few ASPers’ contracts contain a compulsion to publish, and some of us may even experience admonitions from our administrations not to write, because doing so suggests that we are not giving our all to our other duties. Unfortunately this does not change the fact that scholarship appears to be “the coin of the realm” in legal academia, and publishing...
looks great not only for us personally, but for our institutions as well. Pursuing scholarship in situations like ours takes tremendous commitment, but if it is a goal for you, regularly spending small portions of your personal time at your computer is the best way to reach it.

Accountability helps as well, so if you know someone else who is trying to write – even if it’s in a completely different field – ask that person if she’d like to be your “writing buddy.” Just as I am more likely to lace up my sneakers at 6:00 a.m. if I know someone is waiting to walk with me, I am more likely to write if I know someone is waiting for my email update. If you can’t find a writing buddy, at least keep a log for yourself briefly noting what you did that day and how you feel about it (e.g., how many words you wrote, or what you researched – which is an essential part of scholarship and counts as productivity). I do this with a simple sticky note on my laptop, and it is very motivating to look back and see how far I’ve come, especially on a slow day when it’s a struggle just to get anything on the page.

A word about research: I find it incredibly helpful to set a timeline once I settle on a topic. Like I advise my students, I start with the date I’d like to be completely finished and work backwards. Part of that process is setting an end date for my research phase, or at least a date when I will stop researching exclusively and start writing. If I don’t set that limit, I think I could research indefinitely, tumbling down rabbit hole after rabbit hole and never actually writing anything of my own. 7

Finally, if you are still unsure about where to start, follow your own ASPish advice to your students and seek out support. Personally, I found tremendous sources of encouragement and assistance from my Associate Dean for Faculty Scholarship, and from our law school Dean himself. Tenured colleagues also can be very helpful – it doesn’t hurt that they usually love discussing scholarship! – and your ASP colleagues are likely to understand both your topic and your unique productivity challenges unlike anyone else.

Academic support is a truly fantastic profession. The entire foundation is based on helping others, whether that means students, colleagues within the same institution, or those across the country and around the world. While finding your voice in this field can be challenging at first, using it once you find it will help advance your career, and in the process it will raise the tide and lift all of our boats.

3 See Resources, supra note 1 (noting instructions for joining the listserv).
7 Commercial resources also exist to foster accountability and productivity in scholarly writing. See, e.g., Kiss Your Writing Worries Goodbye, ACAD. WRITING CLUB, academicwritingclub.com (last visited May 30, 2016); About the Faculty Success Program, NAT’L CENTER FAC. DEV. & DIVERSITY, www.facultydiversity.org/?FSProgramDescription (last visited May 30, 2016).