Developing Your Own Teaching Style is like Finding the Perfect Chocolate Chip Cookie Recipe

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Finding the perfect chocolate chip cookie recipe takes time, a trust-worthly source, the right attitude, and a well-functioning oven. This can also be said for developing your own teaching style.

**Time:** When I was a kid I expected each baking recipe I tried to turn out on the first attempt. How hard could it be, I thought, you just follow what’s written. I didn’t realize that there were many variables that went into baking that affected the outcome, such as using: baking soda versus baking powder; flour past its “use by” date; and medium eggs instead of large eggs. It took me a number of years and many failed attempts before I finally discovered and accepted the necessary ingredients for making a winning batch of chocolate chip cookies.

When I first became a professor I naively thought that my style as a practicing senior associate was a good recipe for my legal writing courses. Oh how wrong I was. Within my first week I realized that I needed to develop a new style that fit the needs of my students and allowed me to connect better with them during classes and conferences. I thought that one or two semesters would be sufficient time for me to form my new style; I did not realize that I needed to do more than just prepare for and teach classes to do so. I needed to actively learn about myself and others to complete the development. Now, a few years later, I feel that I have found the red ribbon recipe, and it was well worth the time invested in its discovery.

**Trust-Worthy Source:** Not all recipes come from trust-worthly sources. I once had a beautiful, gigantic cookbook that I received from a friend for Christmas. Its impressive size delighted and intrigued me. It made me want to cook, bake, and then cook some more just to get a glimpse of the secrets it held. Sadly, most of the recipes turned out to be rather lacking in one respect or another – flavor, moisture, ease. After a few years of giving it chance after chance to prove itself worthy, I finally closed the battered cover, resolving to never open it again.

This is similar to developing your own teaching style in that you must find trust-worthly sources to educate you about teaching methods and ideas. Without educating yourself in this fashion you will be teaching in a vacuum, not knowing what your true potential could be. (This is similar to trying to bake cookies without a recipe and never having baked cookies before.) By using non-trust-worthly sources, you may improperly educate yourself and will consequently spoil the recipe by adding bad quality ingredients.

I’ve found that books that discuss the hows and whys of teaching are very trust-worthly, beneficial sources. Some books I’ve found to be especially useful are: Techniques for Teaching Law;\(^1\) Best Practices for Legal Education;\(^2\) Teaching the Law School Curriculum;\(^3\) and The Law Professor's Handbook: A Practical Guide to Teaching Law.\(^4\)

\(^{1}\) GERALD F. HESS & STEVEN FRIEDLAND, TECHNIQUES FOR TEACHING LAW (1999).
\(^{2}\) ROY STUCKEY AND OTHERS, BEST PRACTICES FOR LEGAL EDUCATION (2007).
Other professors are another trust-worthy source. I learned this from observing professors in my position as an Academic Success Director. My purpose in arranging class observations was to learn about their teaching styles so I could better counsel their students; however, in addition to this benefit, I also learned new techniques, had some of my own techniques affirmed, but most importantly, I realized that how one teaches is an art unto itself, just like developing a distinct baking or cooking style. I did not need to use a tried and true recipe, and, in fact, the students would appreciate it if I used a slightly different recipe than the other professors to add variety to their days.

_The Right Attitude:_ It is easy to get down on oneself when a recipe flops. Once when I was in middle school I wanted to help my mom bake Christmas cookies. I selected one of my favorite recipes – Bon Bons. They are made of flavored dough that is wrapped around a yummy filling such as chocolate chips, a cherry, or nuts. My younger sister acted as my assistant chef. We spent more than two hours making the cookies, even adding a beautiful glaze on each! Before they were fully cooled we decided to taste our masterpieces. We both picked a prized cookie and took a bite – making sour expressions, we spit it out. What had happened, I thought frantically. Scanning the ingredients on the counter I saw a bottle of lemon extract. Lemon? Oh no! I had accidentally used that instead of almond. Feeling guilty for wasting my mom’s baking supplies and devastated over my poor baking abilities, I acted like it was no big deal, like the cookies really weren’t that bad. I forced my ever-obedient sister to eat two of the cookies as I followed suit to prove that I hadn’t really messed-up; that I was still the perfect daughter.

There have been many times in my academic career that I have created a lesson plan, assignment or workshop that I thought was going to be incredibly beneficial for my students. I imagined them coming up to me after class and thanking me profusely for the time and effort I put into their education. In reality, my brilliant creation turned out to be sour, needing tweaking, gutting, or to be thrown out. These can be devastating, humbling experiences because they bash the dream of being a “perfect professor.” I used to struggle through these times, feeling that I was failing as a professor and had a ton left to learn before I would be competent.

Thankfully, at some point I realized that beating myself up over these hiccups was not allowing me to grow into my own style or even improve my general teaching capabilities. Rather, it was sucking the life, motivation, and creativity out of me. I began to force myself to face these situations head-on by using them as learning experiences. What did I learn about myself? What did I learn about my students’ needs? What did I learn about how to present ideas to the students? Once I started applying forward this knowledge the hiccups became fewer and of shorter duration and my teaching style began to emerge.

_Well-Functioning Oven:_ Baked goods do not turn out well in ovens that bake improperly. The original, brown 1960s oven in my parents’ second home was rather finicky. It baked about twenty-five degrees warm and was hotter on one side of the oven than the other. You can imagine the number of failed baking attempts it took before my mom figured this out; however,

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3 _Teaching the Law School Curriculum_ (Steven Friedland & Gerald F. Hess eds., 2004)
despite her knowledge of these shortcomings and trying to compensate for them, she still could not bake to her true ability. It wasn’t until my parents remodeled the kitchen, including installing a new black oven, that my mom’s baking talents were revealed.

This part of the recipe for developing a teaching style was not readily apparent to me. I thought that the first school at which I taught was a well-functioning oven. It was only after I changed to a new school that I realized I had been baking with an overly hot, lopsided oven for years. The overly hot part was a lot of negativity and lack of community. I never felt that I was a part of the faculty or that most of them respected my position. I also couldn’t find a faculty member to mentor or encourage me in my areas of specialty. The lopsided part was the large number of tenured faculty and the similarly large number of faculty with five years or less of experience. This was not a healthy balance because it did not provide an even playing ground.

Now that I am working with positive, fun, energetic, and helpful faculty at a two-year-old law school, I feel like my teaching style has appeared in Better Homes and Gardens as the feature recipe. My confidence and creativity have shot through the roof and I finally feel comfortable with my style. It’s amazing what a well-functioning oven can do for a person!