The Birth of a New Teaching Idea

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By Jalae A. Ulicki

As we know, 65% of the population is visually dominated, and therefore I presume that this statistic applies to most of my class as well. The visual “magnet” to which my students are attracted in the classroom is my screen. So, what could I do with that “magnet” that would hold their attention, be collaborative, and build upon their ability to retain what they saw in the “magnet” and use that retained information to enhance their performance in law school and in their future practice?

It all started with an e-mail from my colleague, Professor Gerst, who had decided to share his morning newspaper “read” with those of his colleagues who were interested:

On the 14th of June, Steve sent along his morning “read” in a word document from the Arizona Republic for reflection:
Deciding to have some fun I took Steve's news and created in PowerPoint a more “visually enhanced” edition of the news from that day which I shared with Steve:
That started me thinking about PowerPoint in general and whether I could create something useful for my class that was new, innovative, collaborative, retentive and useful for my students. So I started delving into research on visual retention of information.

A lot of research has been done by social psychologists regarding neurological and cognitive aspects of reading. Some researchers focused on how the passage length of text may influence comprehension of material (Suber, 1992); while others examined how distractions in texts influenced readability and comprehension (Connelly, Hasher, & Zacks, 1991). Others yet examined whether material and font size influenced memory recall of the material (Tinker, 1963). And then there are those who examined the physical characteristics of the text itself within an applied setting using two common characteristics of font type (Gasser & Boeke, 2005).

I became interested in fonts and decided to research that as well. I started thinking about fonts and wondered just how many of them existed. I couldn’t find a reliable answer, but the estimates range in the tens of thousands with news styles of type being created on a daily basis. We’ve come a long way since that first type for printing that was invented in China in 1040 A.D. using wood blocks!

What I did find however were hundreds of websites and blogs about fonts. By the way, I also learned from FontShop’s website that “font” is different that “typeface”: “The former refers to a complete character set of a particular typeface in one size, while the latter is a single set of characters that share stylistic unity comprised of alphabet letters, numbers, punctuation and diacritical marks. When type made the leap to the digital realm, a font became an electronic file that rendered the typeface in all sizes.”

http://www.fontshop.com/

Fascinated with the volume of fonts I decided to check and see what kind of fonts were being created by these designers. The following is a sampling:
With these thoughts in mind, armed with my “newspaper” and my “fonts”, I decided to create an exercise in which my students could “showcase” their talents, collaborate in the learning process, and share information that would increase their retention of topic material. Thus, was born the “newspaper”—an exercise feature which would be produced by them:

The feeling of being genuinely appreciated lifts people up. In the business world, research tells us that the highest driver of engagement is whether or not workers feel their managers are genuinely interested in their well-being. Well, in the classroom, we as law professors are genuinely interested in our students’ well-being. Students especially want to receive positive reinforcement, to feel encouraged to build, to learn about self-improvement and to make meaningful contributions to their learning environment. Having them become the “actors” rather than the “audience” is just one way to keep them actively engaged and taking a part in their learning process.

I gave the assignment for the first time to my evening class in Trusts & Estates this summer as part of an in-class activity. Following completion of the assignment, each group showcased their presentation to the rest of the class. The response from the students was overwhelming positive. We had a rather robust discussion regarding the assignment. One of the outcomes of the assignment they decided was that they really had to have a good grasp of the law topic in order to be able to explain and condense the
information so that it could be disseminated to a “non-legal” audience. That then led to a discussion of meeting with clients who would come in with similar issues and just how they would have to weigh, assess, and explain to the client whether in fact had a potential cause of action.

Here are some examples of their responses:
For our purposes as law professors, however, we are interested in student engagement and outcome performance. We know intuitively what the research suggests, our students retain more information when material is presented both orally and visually more so than if they are presented with just lecture material or just visual information.

1http://www.fontshop.com/

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