Richard E. Coulson: The Teacher

Vicki Lawrence MacDougall, Oklahoma City University School of Law
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Richard E. Coulson and I did not begin our rather long relationship as friends. In its inception, our relationship was that of teacher/student. As a law student, I was in awe of many of my professors, including Professor Coulson. Professor Coulson brought to the classroom a command of the substantive material and a command of the Socratic method. Current students probably remember Professor Coulson for his expertise in such courses as Contracts, Bankruptcy, and Legal History. However, the courses that I remember are Antitrust and Conflicts. He has a unique ability to make his point by asking a series of questions which lead students down a slippery slope until the answer dawns. His classes were conducted at such a high level of intellectual challenge that students had to be prepared to simply follow the discussion, not just for fear of being called upon to recite. He gives away no answer easily—it is the student's job to figure out the answers. He simply provides masterful questions. At times, his class was frustrating because a student could not simply copy down “the law.” You had to sit back and reflect upon the discussion and hopefully realize along the way the precise delineation Professor Coulson was drawing. Professor Coulson’s teaching style is very unique and could never be precisely duplicated. However, I did manage to steal bits and pieces of his techniques when I later joined the law faculty. Professor Coulson did not just teach me substantive law; he also taught me how to teach the law.

Professor Coulson has taught thousands of law students through the years and has influenced many lives along the way. I am one example. One of Professor Coulson’s many contributions to the development of

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1. Many students remember with clarity cases that they were called upon to recite during law school. I still remember when Professor Coulson called on me to explain “renvoi” in Conflicts. That could have foretold the future, as I am sure Professor Coulson would agree, that at times faculty meetings are infamous for “going in circles.”
the school of law was the establishment of the Oklahoma City University Law Review while he served as Dean. Later, Professor Coulson served as faculty advisor to the Review\(^2\) while I was Managing Editor and provided guidance and insight on many issues we confronted in the early years of the Review. Before I graduated, Professor Coulson approached me and asked me if I wanted to write judicial opinions for Judge Dwain D. Box of the Oklahoma Court of Appeals. I said “sure.” After I served as the Judicial Clerk for Judge Box, Professor Coulson asked me if I would be interested in applying for a position on the law faculty. I said “sure.” For better or worse, I am still here many years later. I would have to credit one person for shaping my career path and that would be, of course, Richard E. Coulson.\(^3\)

Before I taught my first law class, I asked Richard’s opinion for the ingredients of a good law teacher. What he told me has remained with me all these many years. Some of his remarks were to be anticipated. You have to prepare diligently, organize the material in a cohesive manner, know the main points you want to draw from the material, know how to get from point A to point B with questions or hypotheticals, and take charge of the classroom. He also told me not to be afraid to say “I don’t know” in response to a student question—a difficult thing to admit as a new law teacher. The last four things he said I will always remember. First, he said that a great deal of theatrics was required to be an excellent teacher. Anyone who witnessed Professor Coulson in the classroom would appreciate the “show,” and he would probably confess to occasionally engaging in a little theatrics in the classroom. Second, you must want your students to learn and must enjoy the teaching experience. There is no doubt that Richard and I share a love of teaching. Third, you must have a great deal of intellectual curiosity and

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2. Once again following in Professor Coulson’s footsteps, I now hold the position of Faculty Advisor to the Review.

3. When I joined the faculty, Professor Coulson informed me that I should call him “Richard” because we had become colleagues. This was a difficult task for me to accomplish. It almost seemed disrespectful for me to call “Professor Coulson,” “Richard.” By this time, we had already worked together and moved into more of a collegial relationship because he had written judicial opinions for Judge Richard E. Romang while I was writing for Judge Box. However, everyone at the Court of Appeals, including all the judges, referred to him as “The Professor.” When I had to address Professor Coulson, “Richard” just would not come out of my mouth during the first year I was on the law faculty. I solved this rather awkward dilemma by not using any salutation when talking with him.
enjoy the quest for knowledge.\textsuperscript{4} I believe this is the primary reason why Richard has taught so many varied courses through the years—he has immense intellectual curiosity and loves to learn, the consummate student of the law.\textsuperscript{5} Last but by no means least, you have to have the ability to learn the law. This last point has become the cornerstone of my teaching first-year students; I try to teach students how to teach themselves the law. In spring 2008, Richard and I, the teacher and his student whom he taught to teach, both received teaching excellence awards from the Merit Scholars Organization. If I have had success as a classroom teacher of the law, I would owe that success to the many role models whose teaching styles I tried to mimic. For me, it was very symbolic for Richard and I to share the stage in spring 2008.

Others will describe the many contributions that Richard has made to the school of law\textsuperscript{6} and will appropriately give him credit for our survival and success as an institution.\textsuperscript{7} He was a leader among the faculty (it is

\begin{flushright}
For Richard, on his Retirement
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\begin{quote}
Let's all raise a glass to our friend
whose OCU days cannot end.
He thinks to retire is his greatest desire –
an idea that I can't comprehend
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{4} "Still pleased to teach, and yet not proud to know." \textsc{Alexander Pope}, \emph{An Essay on Criticism} (pt. 3), in \textsc{The Complete Poetical Works of Alexander Pope} 76 (Cambridge ed. 1903) (1711), as reprinted in \textsc{The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations} 383 (2d ed. 1966).

\textsuperscript{5} "And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche." \textsc{Geoffrey Chaucer}, \textsc{The Canterbury Tales} 8 (New York Heritage Press 1946) (1388-1400), as reprinted in \textsc{The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations} 137 (2d ed. 1966). Richard is also an avid student of history.

\textsuperscript{6} In the early 1970's, Professor Coulson was instrumental as Dean and on the Appointments Committee in hiring five women as full-time faculty. At this point in time, the hiring of five women was incredible compared to the national statistics for women on law faculties. Professor Emeritus Marjorie Downing was the first woman to join the tenured-track faculty. According to Professor Downing, it was custom to serve tea and cookies at faculty meetings at that time. At her first faculty meeting, Professor Downing was expected to serve the delectable treats. Recognizing the rather odd appearance this created, Dean Richard E. Coulson decided that he, the Dean, would thereafter serve the tea and cookies at the faculty meetings. Way to go, Richard!

\textsuperscript{7} Professor Paula Dailey wrote the following limerick to honor Professor Coulson on May 1, 2008. It was read at Professor Coulson's retirement dinner and is reproduced with Professor Dailey's permission.
no easy task to lead a law faculty anywhere) and has unquestionable loyalty to OCU as an institution. Certainly, his scholarship and activities have added to the development of the law. He has been a valued friend and colleague to all on the faculty, including myself. However, I believe his most lasting contribution is not a tangible one. He has been and will be an excellent teacher to countless law students. When Richard announced his retirement, it is not surprising that he wanted to continue to teach one course a semester. Richard undoubtedly will not miss faculty or committee meetings; however, he simply could not give up what he loved to do, teach. After all, what would retirement be without time to do what one enjoys? Many professors would probably prefer the title "legal scholar." But, I think in many ways Richard fundamentally prefers to be thought of as a teacher. It is with great pleasure that the Review dedicates the Spring 2009 Issue, Number 1 of Volume 34, to the OCU Law graduate, former OCU Law Dean, and OCU Professor of Law, Richard E. Coulson, The Teacher.

He has taught many courses, I know,
Even Civ Pro in days long ago.
But I think he has missed a few on the list
so he's clearly not ready to go.

We know that we would not be here
if he hadn't decided to steer
an old-fashioned school to the "national" pool -
The result is abundantly clear.

No, Richard is going to stay,
no matter what he may say,
'cause it's more than the sticks, and the mortar and bricks --
he himself's our foundation today.