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Class Notes in "Skills" Courses

This post is from Wes Porter of Golden Gate University School of Law

Generally, a student's individual notes are near useless in a skills course. Students do "take notes" in our classes. During lectures, demonstrations, performances by their peers and instructor's critiques, they write down something. But, what do these notes look like? How useful are they *after* the specific exercise and *after* the course? Do students retain the notes? Turns out, these notes are not very useful at all.

I (informally) surveyed advocacy students and most do not retain any notes following the skills instruction.

Of course, there are some simple explanations. Students retain their notes from doctrinal courses for use later in law school, the bar exam and beyond. Most students hang on to their advocacy textbook (maybe because, unlike in substantive courses, our skills textbooks, like Charlie's, are easy to read and more comprehensive than student notes – and most advocacy courses). Another reason is, the notes themselves are scattered, selective and inconsistent.

Each advocacy course and every skills instructor is unique. I want the students to not only have a great "learning experience" during a semester - but also to maintain the foundational lessons thereafter. I sought a way to better memorialize the specific advocacy instruction in a course so that students may refer to it in advanced skills offerings, mock trial competition and (maybe even) later on in practice. To that end, I am currently experimenting with forums on TWEN, a very easy to use blog-like function you can set up for any class.

We use regular (weekly) forum posting through TWEN to create "class notes" in certain skills courses. The process looks like this. First, like most of you, I assign reading, handouts and other materials on a specific advocacy topic (ie. modes of impeachment) and then I lecture and demonstrate the skill during class. Second, each student performs within the topic the next class meeting while his or her peers evaluate the performance against specific assessment criteria. Third, I distribute and post on TWEN the peer evaluations immediately following the class meeting. Fourth, and central to this post, each student following their performances, my critiques and their review of the peer evaluations must post a "take away" on the topic on forums.

Following class, I create a TWEN forums topic for the topic of instruction, such as "Modes of impeachment." The students must post a reflective paragraph or two about what they learned about the topic (maybe from their "notes," peer evaluations or further reflection). Under the modes of impeachment topic, for example, one advocacy student wrote: *The more comfortable you get with impeachment, the easier the decision gets. You can develop a "long version" and a "short version" of impeachment - if someone strays on some minor detail, then I still let the witness know they strayed from their "safety net" [the witness' prior statement] and I KNOW it.* I require the forums posting as part of their grade. This generation of law students read the posts, comment on the posts from their classmates, and sometimes even debate advocacy lessons (this is when I weigh in).

Lastly, I aggregate the quality posts and comments into a single document organized by the advocacy lessons (ie. Modes of impeachment) and then sub-categories (ie. Modes of impeachment - bias). I then distribute them to the class at the end as our "CLASS NOTES" (and also post the class notes to TWEN). The class notes represent a particularized collection of *our* skills course, my language from lectures and critique and the students' language in the take aways. My hope is that students will retain these notes and the big picture lessons will assist them in our program and maybe even in practice. These class notes may also benefit subsequent advocacy students, as well as further unify some of our programmatic messages.

We are always searching for ways for advocacy students to internalize the lessons that we preach and repeat constantly. With this TWEN forums experiment, students reflect on an advocacy lesson, write a paragraph on the lesson, share their individual notes, read each other's notes, comment and discuss the lesson, and, hopefully, receive something worthwhile at the end of the semester in the form of their "class notes." I am interested if other skills instructors have similar approaches or thoughts. I am happy to share some additional examples of the forums topics, student posts or the "class notes" from past skills courses.

--Wes Porter