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Mentoring Honors Thesis Students: A Lawyer's Perspective

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As a mentor of thesis students in an honors program, I find that students acquire tremendously helpful substantive knowledge through courses they take during college but rarely develop a honed skill set necessary to succeed in graduate or professional education or employment in the real world. These skills range from problem solving to effective communication to analytical thinking. To address these weaknesses, I constructed an approach, borrowed from my law school days, for engaging students in an active, student-centered learning process during the thesis stage of their honors curriculum. My purpose is to provide them the opportunity to cultivate, if not learn, numerous skill-based leadership competencies demanded by today's pragmatic society. My law-school model of pedagogy is experiential, whereby I treat students as though they were colleagues and hold them to professional standards. This model is four-pronged and outcomes-driven. I teach students how to think like a lawyer, build a strong and cogent argument, excel in communication, and act professionally at all times. I also teach them how to have fun journeying through the process.

I practice my approach in an honors program housed in the eighth largest private liberal arts university in the nation. The institution—a multi-campus, diverse, doctoral university—offers more than 600 degree programs and certificates and employs more than 650 full-time faculty members. Total student enrollment currently hovers at 8,500 students. On my campus, the honors program is open to all undergraduate majors, and students may enter any time until their junior year. For the past several years, the honors program has encouraged faculty and students from the health sciences, management, marketing, finance, and diverse majors in what are commonly called the "professional" schools to participate in honors. This multidisciplinary access has opened the entire campus to a program that is tailored to meet a wide variety of student goals. With approximately 500 students in the program, the curriculum emphasizes a liberal balance between traditional and innovative studies with courses divided into those that fulfill core requirements and advanced electives; the program also fulfills the requirement for a mandatory, individually researched tutorial and thesis commitment in the student's major. As in most honors programs,

faculty members teach from their respective departments, and honors teaching is part of our regular departmental workload; no dedicated honors faculty exists. Students who undertake the 6-credit tutorial (research) and thesis are eligible to apply for up to $200 toward reference materials, travel supplies, and other support for thesis work. There is an annual prize of $500 to the student who has submitted the best research.

The honors program is successful because of the dedication of the honors director and faculty, its objective of enrichment rather than acceleration, and its focus on the individual student. Moreover, students and faculty recognize that participation in the program means membership in a unique decision-making community that is both academic and social. A diverse group of students, from all disciplines and many countries, join with faculty to choose honors program curricula, course instructors, and extracurricular activities. I am able to enthusiastically implement my law school approach, especially the first prong—think like a lawyer—with the support of this community.

THINK LIKE A LAWYER

Students learn to "think like a lawyer," however cynical or amused people might be by that idea. This concept involves approaching issues and solving problems in a timely manner by identifying and organizing pertinent issues and knowledge, evaluating information with discernment, and using critical and logical analysis to arrive at judgments or conclusions that are sound. It encompasses the ability to assimilate new information quickly, recognize when more information is needed, and connect the dots between and among pieces of information. Thinking like a lawyer entails appreciating the various positions presented on an issue and mastering how to think on your feet and respond under pressure and scrutiny. It promotes a comfort level in dealing with unforeseen circumstances (Ambrosio, 2006).

The components of thinking like a lawyer demand a highly interactive pedagogy and assignments that challenge students to develop the aforementioned skills (Henderson, 2003). I enlist three methods to achieve these goals. First, I teach students how to outline; surprisingly, some students do not know how to do this. I have them create and maintain two types of working outlines of their research problem: one general outline delineating how the thesis is divided into chapters and chapter outlines delineating the specific points, with supporting literature, to be included and addressed in each chapter. These outlines, especially the latter, typically start out skeletal, and students are rarely enthusiastic about constructing them, much less using them. But as students become more familiar with the topical literature, gain a deeper understanding of the research problem itself, and make choices regarding what information is pertinent to the problem, they appreciate the outlines. In fact, they start to rely on them. They realize that, working within an organized framework, they are quickly able to determine where weak points in their research exist, where issues are not fully addressed and where information is needed. They learn that an academically rigorous task is made much easier through planning, managing, and analyzing.

Second, I require students to draw up annotated bibliographies of their literature reviews that concentrate more on the procedural and less on the substantive. Students summarize the content of their literature, but they note the macro—exactly how the literature relates to their overall research problem—as well as the micro—how it fits into the specific chapters. Students determine whether a journal article, for instance, lends direct or ancillary support to the research hypothesis or addresses a precise issue but offers an unpopular perspective. I have students "rate" the evidentiary weight of each piece of literature by assigning it a number from 1 to 5, 1 being a very applicable and on-point piece and 5 bearing little relation, but a relation nonetheless, to the research problem. Considered in conjunction with their outlines, students determine whether particular additional information would make a difference in their research, and then they proceed to search for such information.

Third, I regularly engage students in a Socratic dialogue in which my questions lead them through a chain of reasoning forward to conclusions and backward to assumptions. I springboard from their outlines and annotated bibliographies by inquiring about the research problem, the research methodology, the literature review, and, when applicable, findings. I probe into substantive information concerning the topic and the research problem as well as procedural information concerning the relation of the supporting information to the problem and its subtopics. I structure my version of an interrogation, which in its friendliness is a far cry from questioning on *Law and Order*, to move from the particular to the general to the abstract in order to instill in students the capacity to evaluate and compare information for relevance and applicability. One way I do this is by changing some of the facts in their gathered literature, such as study results, or by presenting my own scenario of information and then asking how such information would affect the research specifically and the topic globally. I challenge students more intensely as they move further along in the thesis process.

Socratic dialogue seems to stimulate student interest in a topic and motivate students to learn the subject matter better. I find that this type of active engagement encourages students to question the validity of information and develops their capacity to become self-educators. As many of us know, self-education is a given in graduate and professional education. Socratic dialogue also highlights the complexity of issues, allowing me to determine whether students' skills in analyzing, communicating and problem solving have reached their full potential; if they have not, then I have a benchmark for how much skill-building needs to be done in these areas.

One of my students who had no interest in thinking like a lawyer became the poster child for this strategy. Cris, a very bright and astute young man, chose to conduct a content analysis of the textile industries in Korea and Italy for his thesis. He amassed a large amount of literature on the topic and thought that, if he just read all the material and highlighted important points, he could begin writing and that his paper consisting of well-written chapters would be

completed before he knew it. I tried to warn Cris that a planned and logical approach was needed, but he insisted that he always worked this way. Four weeks and a mere fifty words later, Cris finally admitted that he was confused and disorganized and didn't know where to begin. He agreed to follow whatever plan I set for him.

Over a pizza and Snapple, Cris and I sat down as two peers would sit down to work on a project, and he began to lay out the research problem and its issues while I observed. With some initial prodding from me, he started developing the two outlines mentioned above. This went well since he immediately saw the utility of the exercise and was pleased that thinking methodically came rather easily to him. That same day we selected two of his journal articles and he read them aloud, stopping after each paragraph to discuss whether the preceding information was pertinent or irrelevant to the research problem. Cris evaluated the information and drew conclusions from the articles with momentum. He discerned how the information from the articles was related and how it differed. We had quite a few laughs invoking my article-rating system because Cris rated the articles in dramatic fashion, holding up a piece of paper with a number on it as a judge in a competition would. By the end of the hour, Cris knew what was expected of him and was on the road to delivering it. His entire outlook toward his thesis changed from dread to enthusiasm.

At first I was going to skip the Socratizing because I did not want Cris to feel uncomfortable or discouraged. He was born and raised in Verona, Italy, and his command of the English language, while strong, was not stellar. I decided not to omit this teaching tool, however, since he needed practice in thinking on his feet and communicating. After Cris was well into developing comprehensive outlines and annotated bibliographies, I started presenting him with scenarios of information and asked him how they related to his research problem. Initially he was slow to respond, not wanting to say anything foolish. But as I included humorous yet applicable scenarios to lighten the mood, he began to think and analyze before responding and was able to demonstrate his knowledge of his research problem. His logical thought process carried over from the outlines and bibliographies. Cris experienced several "Eureka" moments, and I, of course, was tickled. Cris produced an excellent thesis that we are now attempting to get published; his chances look very good.

BUILD AN ARGUMENT

Students learn the art of building and sustaining a strong argument. They ascertain how to recognize all sides of an issue, approach issues objectively, and engage in evidence-based reasoning and decision-making. They figure out how to cut through verbiage, weigh the pros and cons of issues, and manage multiple perspectives while distilling abundant information (Rosen, 2002). Students learn to recognize the roles of advocacy, of assumptions, and of a supported and suitable conclusion. They realize that the ability to argue well, both in form and substance, is directly linked to strong persuasion skills, which come

in handy with a boyfriend, girlfriend, spouse, parent, boss, family member, or friend. To motivate students, I plant the seed that someday they may be inclined to challenge a professor for a higher grade in a course and will be unsuccessful unless they can present a solid argument.

I teach students how to construct a cogent argument by providing them with a framework and requiring that they "argue" issues, in writing and orally, using this framework. I use the CIRAC framework, which was introduced to many lawyers, myself included, when studying for the state bar examination. CIRAC is a mnemonic that stands for conclusion, issue, rule of law, application, and conclusion. (It is interesting to note that when I first advise students that they are going to learn a method to argue and will, indeed, argue with me, most get nervous because they conjure visions of engaging in a contentious debate with me and failing the course. Once I mollify their concerns and explain that an argument is simply a line of reasoning, they are much more willing to undertake the task.)

I amended CIRAC so that students present their arguments in three easy steps. Step 1 involves identifying the issue(s) at hand. I advise students to separate a multifaceted problem into separate, individual issues and identify each issue independently. Students should use straightforward language in their statement of each issue and include no superfluous wording. Step 2 involves identifying the information that relates to and addresses each issue. Step 3 involves stating a conclusion to each issue in a definitive and succinct manner based on evidentiary information presented in Step 2. When faced with a problem or situation, students can visualize this framework and use it to organize details. It is particularly helpful in teaching students the difference between relevant and irrelevant information and, thus, between a strong and weak argument.

I address the importance of objectivity by engaging students in discussions about controversial topics and demonstrating how personal bias affects one's thinking and analysis. These discussions may or may not bear any relation to a student's research problem and may or may not be planned. They do, however, touch a nerve with the students. I typically will engage students in such a discussion when we first sit down and begin a mentoring session. Unfortunately, sometimes our discussions take up a significant amount of session time and leave little room for discussing the thesis, but this is all right since the benefits of these discussions are enormous.

Tamara, a social work major with a 3.97 G.P.A., was able to use this strategy effectively. She was writing her thesis on the effects of Internet usage on family values and, from the onset, inadvertently focused only on the downside of this research problem. Her outlines focused on the negative cause-and-effect relationship between the Internet and values, and they were wholly one-sided. Her annotated bibliographies included research articles addressing family problems caused by the Internet. All of her initial discussions with me led to the demise of value systems because of the Internet, and Tamara saw the current moral landscape of today's youth who frequent the Internet as macabre. Tamara

included a point or two in a few chapters about the positive impact of the Internet on the family unit, but they were points lacking substance and support. Once I pointed out that her argument lacked credibility because, among other factors, it failed to examine other viewpoints, Tamara applied the modified CIRAC. Tamara immediately recognized that identifying and acknowledging the various sides of her research problem and addressing them objectively elevated her position on the topic. She also saw that, when she permitted her research studies to serve as evidence to support her assumptions and conclusions, she was on solid footing.

Tamara really got it. She experienced first-hand how her argument moved from fairly weak to persuasive. Her completed thesis was superb. She appreciated my law school approach so much that she sits for the LSAT examination next month and plans to apply to law schools in spring 2008. While this world does not necessarily need one more legal eagle (as I myself moved from public service lawyer to hospital administrator to full-time faculty member), Tamara will undoubtedly be an asset to the profession.

COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

Students learn communication capacity, which is the ability to get a message across effectively to a variety of audiences for a variety of purposes. I emphasize speaking and writing persuasively, in a clear and concise manner, with directed thought and focused attention; this leads to understanding the effects of one's personality and behavioral style and realizing how one is perceived by others. In the process, students learn the importance of flexibility and patience (Henderson, 2003). Communication capacity, taken a step further, includes respecting diversity and promoting equity by appreciating who one's listeners are and delivering information to them in a respectful manner that they can understand and process; it takes into account, with sensitivity and tolerance, the values, mores, and norms of others; and it requires actively and effectively hearing others, truly listening to what they say.

I develop communication capacity in several ways. The most obvious and common way involves one-on-one coaching. When I meet with my students during our regularly scheduled thesis mentoring sessions, I direct them on voice volume, speaking speed, eye contact, body language, and gesturing. I ensure that they avoid ambiguous language and use proper words properly pronounced. We discuss how not to send mixed messages and how not to stray from a topic. When students submit something in writing to me, whether by email or in hard copy, I provide extensive feedback about the clarity and organization of the writing.

I also engage students in two particular exercises that are designed to enhance their communication abilities. The first (the recap) builds listening skills and primes students on addressing different audiences; the second (the interview) teaches them how to ask questions while conveying their own thoughts.

I cannot take credit for creating the recap, only for using it effectively. After students have submitted a draft of several pages or a chapter of their thesis, I provide them with extensive feedback, first orally in person then in writing. Upon giving my oral critique of their work during a mentoring session, and not warning the students to listen carefully or jot down my comments, I have the students, in their own words and on the spot, recapitulate my comments. It is during the recap (actually within the first forty-five seconds) that I am able to determine to what extent students are good listeners. Often I engage a colleague, administrative staff member, or classmate to stand in my shoes as listener in this process. Students need to adjust the delivery of their recap of my comments to their audience. This exercise helps students become competent at packaging the same information to different audiences. It also makes them hear when they listen. At first, the recap usually yields some inconsistent information, but as students become better listeners the recap eventually incorporates my comments.

The other exercise is a formal interview with an expert in the student's field of research. Students, on their own but usually with my assistance, identify and contact their interviewee and, ultimately, meet and carry out the interview. Before the interview, the students draw up a list of open and closed-ended questions, and I review them for pertinence. Then I engage the students in a role-play where we practice interview techniques, thus heightening their understanding of the interview process and helping them overcome nervousness. The interview works best when I identify an appropriate person to interview and am able to speak with the person ahead of time. The ideal situation occurs when the interviewee is a colleague of mine; when this occurs, I ask the interviewee to assist me with building the student's communication skills by evaluating the student during the interview and providing feedback immediately thereafter. If the colleague agrees, the interview is recorded so that the student and I can later observe and critique the communication that occurred.

The interview serves as an avenue for acquiring information but also as a training ground for interpersonal development and confidence building. It highlights the importance of the verbal and non-verbal components of communication and emphasizes the importance of being a culturally competent communicator. Synthesizing the information obtained during the interview gives students additional practice in sorting through information for relevance. Further, many students have never met or spoken with an expert in their field of study, and the exercise fills this void.

One of my students, Vonetta, was a strong writer but a poor speaker. She often became extremely nervous, unable to listen or think clearly, and stumbled over her words when speaking in front of me or a group of people. While one-on-one coaching and the recap did improve her delivery, presentation, and listening skills, it was the interview that enhanced her ability to engage in a productive exchange of information with clarity and confidence. Vonetta's thesis

research problem centered on crises in hospital psychiatric emergency departments, and from the outset I knew that Vonetta could benefit from interviewing my former colleague, Lew, the chairman of an emergency department in a large, urban teaching hospital. He was the perfect person to provide her with additional mentoring that could break down some of her barriers to good communication. I suggested that she conduct an interview with Lew as part of her thesis experience, and she was excited to do so. Prior to the interview, Vonetta drew up a list of questions to ask, and she and I engaged in a role-play exercise. I also spoke at length with Lew. He was aware of Vonetta's communication pitfalls and agreed to help me help her overcome some of them.

Their interview lasted three hours and, according to Vonetta, was one of the best experiences she had ever had. Apparently Lew was warm and funny, and his expression of kindness put her at ease immediately, enabling her to shed her habit of being intimidated and to speak with him more comfortably. She obtained a wealth of information and data from Lew as well as some of his communication pearls. It was obvious that she also gained a level of confidence that I could not provide. When Vonetta and I viewed the videotape together, the learning process multiplied a hundredfold for both of us.

ACT PROFESSIONALLY

Finally, students learn the significance of acting professionally. For college honors students, acting professionally is practicing basic etiquette and demonstrating emotional intelligence. The latter, simply stated, is recognizing emotions, managing them so that they appropriately guide actions, and engaging in self-reflection.

Students learn basic etiquette through rigor. I am adamant with my students that, as responsible adults, they arrive for our mentoring meetings five minutes prior to our scheduled time, notify me in reasonable time if they will be late or cannot attend an appointment, and always submit work to me when it is due. I agree on timelines with students early in the thesis process so that there are no surprises vis-à-vis deadline expectations. I place tremendous weight on time management because my experience has taught me that the current generation of typical college students—my son included—has false conceptions about the importance of time. Students are also expected to dress appropriately for our sessions or for meetings with others and to act respectfully at all times.

I foster emotional intelligence by focusing on the spiritual nature of the thesis process and promoting the notion that students must submit good work for their own sake. At the beginning of the thesis process, I have students begin writing a reflective journal where they document their emotional responses to the process. I ask them to explore the intrinsic reasons that drive them to perform and persevere and to examine how they handle stressful or charged situations. As I remind students that they have a social responsibility as contributing members of society to achieve their goals and complete a solid thesis, I focus on the caveat that getting profound personal satisfaction in a job well

done is part of the education process (Pang, 2005) and fosters a healthy and productive individual. Achievement leads to satisfaction in life, and there is no greater goal to accomplish. Of course, students are not thrilled to produce another piece of written work. They do come on board, though, when I share with them my reflective journals from college, law school, and my days as a young lawyer.

The student who underwent the greatest transformation from selfish student to suitable peer was Cris, whom I discussed earlier. When we first began working together, Cris had little respect for time and lacked maturity. He would arrive late to our appointments and fail to respond to emails. He would forget to submit work when it was due. He would also constantly complain about the stress he was under and frequently display anger, lashing out because he was "tired of doing schoolwork." Cris finally started seeing the light after one mentoring session to which he arrived forty minutes late; I made him wait for me until I was again available, two hours later, and reminded him that he lived in an apartment five minutes from campus, paid for by his parents, and did not have to hold down a job during the semester. He began to comprehend the meaning of acting professionally. His use of the reflective journal enhanced this process. Cris's journal entries demonstrated his progression from spoiled son to an adult with an admirable sense of self and motivation toward achievement.

CONCLUSION

Mentoring an honors thesis student is a challenging assignment and rightfully so. This is, perhaps, the one time in a student's college career when the student has the opportunity to work closely with a professor and the professor has the opportunity to ensure that the student is adequately armed with the skill set needed by college graduates. Mentoring is teaching at its best, and the meaningful relationships that develop between professor and student are priceless.

This law-school mentoring approach has several positive and a few negative features. Students appreciate the individualized attention they receive and thrive on the interest shown for their work and progress. Their skills invariably improve through the continuous interaction with and monitoring by the mentor. Students in all majors can benefit from these strategies, and mentors in all disciplines can use them. Most importantly, a mentor need not attend law school to use and master this approach. On the other hand, the approach requires a tremendous amount of work from both the mentor and student. Some students may not want to invest the time and energy necessary to benefit from it. Many may dislike the extensive contact. The strategies are time-consuming and the processes emotionally draining. At the same time, some very important skills are not addressed; these include team building and working collaboratively. Overall, however, this legal approach can be highly effective in improving students' readiness for graduate school and the world of work.

The approach works well for two seemingly opposite reasons: formality and personal engagement. When students first ask me to take on the role of

mentor, I warn them that the thesis process is a rigorous one. I lay out my methodology in detail and make sure they understand what is involved. I have students sign a formal contract that states they agree to follow my instructional strategies and will stay committed 100% until the thesis is completed. Having established rules and expectations, I am able to commit myself to a personal engagement in their work that comes from my desire to help them achieve success. Sometimes it may seem as if I overwhelm them with support and encouragement, but my experience with honors students has been that, from clearly established parameters, deep mentoring follows in a spirit that I find analogous to a good lawyer-client relationship.

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