Dynamic Pedagogy in the Family and Juvenile Law Classroom: Experiential and In-Class Exercises

In my two-credit juvenile Law course, a survey course on juvenile delinquency and dependency, I incorporate experiential components to encourage key competencies in effective lawyering and case strategy development. To effectively utilize practical course components, practical lawyering exercises are intertwined within core concepts of the course. This process begins with the foundation of course design, outlining the major concepts to be covered in the course. After identifying each major concept and articulating the corresponding learning objectives, I develop an assignment or exercise to reinforce each major concept, deepening students’ understanding of the abstract nature of theoretical legal ideas, principles and black letter law.

Specifically, I use experiential learning exercises to cultivate legal skills in three ways: (1) foster collaborative legal practice, (2) critically examine our court system, specifically juvenile court procedure, and (3) propose policy changes, focused on the juvenile court system.

My General Approach

a. Outline Major Concepts for the Course
b. Determine Learning Objectives for Each Major Concept
c. Develop a Practical Exercise that Aligns with Each Major Concept and Learning Objective
   i. Casebook Practice Problems and other Hypos
   ii. Class Debates
   iii. Statutory Research, Identification and Application
   iv. Fact Analysis and Law Firm Collaboration for Strategy Development
   v. Comparison to Current Events or Required Court Observations
d. Conclude with Big Picture, Policy Analysis: Final Paper Requiring Students to Critically Examine the Current System

Benefits

a. Practical application of law, allowing students to draw the connection between the theoretical concepts and actual practice of law.
b. Students have the opportunity to work collaboratively which enhances skills critical for lawyering in a collaborative setting, as well as networking and relationship building with peers.
c. Problem solving development as they have to navigate teamwork, complexity of legal issues, etc.
d. Objective Assessment of Courts and Policy related to Juvenile Law

Challenges

a. Decreases course time available for content. The exercises, if executed well, take a good chunk of class time. My course is only once a week, one hour and forty minutes.
b. Age-old downfall of group work: Sometimes stellar students get stuck with students who are not vested in the course. But, that mimics real life, which is the point of the assignment.
c. Can leave students somewhat cynical of the effectiveness of our court systems.
d. Sometimes students get lost in the wrong details. Keeping students focused on the major issues can be difficult.