PROCEEDINGS

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# THE RIGHT TIME TO LEARN

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In the fall of 2019, I went to a St. John's basketball game, right down the hill from my office in the law school. For me, the "Red Storm" is a charming part of working at St. John's, and I was excited to see Mike Anderson, St. John's new basketball coach. As the game started, I found it hard to look away from Iron Mike. He has charisma. And he was so engaged, so in the moment. In my memory, during the timeouts, he had this little whiteboard that looked like a basketball court and was describing plays in detail with a marker. But I may have added that from watching a lot of sports movies. Either way, there was shouting and pointing and pats on the back. The players were rapt—completely focused on what he was saying.

This moved me. It might have been because I had come to the game from class or because I was on the appointments committee and had spent a lot of time that week talking with potential law professors about pedagogy. But I couldn't get over it. They were in the game! Hours and hours of practice must have preceded this moment. And these players had probably been playing basketball for much of their young lives, mastering new skills, and learning more challenging plays. And yet, the Coach was teaching and the players were learning. In the game!

That night, I decided on a teaching motto: It is never too late to learn. I started repeating this to myself like a mantra when I might otherwise feel exasperated. When a student sheepishly asks a

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question in class twelve about something we covered in class one? It is never too late to learn. When a student apologetically emails me incredibly specific questions in the hour before an assignment is due? It is never too late to learn.

This motto shook up how I thought about teaching legal writing. My class was built on a progression, and since I keep the same students all year, each assignment would build on the one before. And the tasks would get increasingly complex and sophisticated as we moved from early fall to late spring. I would expect the students to build their skills in the way I had planned, learning each part step-by-step.

But that doesn't really work when "it is never too late to learn" is your motto. So I started to be open to students jumping ahead on some things and lagging behind on others. And I began to doubt whether it was even possible for my students to learn the same things in the same order at the same time. They were all so different. Why not let them learn differently? Why not let them learn at different times?

I have long been proud that I default to teaching as a "guide on the side," rather than a "sage on the stage." But letting go of certain ideas I had about when students should be learning revealed that I was maybe acting like a "my way or the highway" kind of guide. I was like a sheepdog, trying to herd my students together so they moved as one, rather than letting them find their own way in their own time. It required a fair amount of faith to believe that the learning would happen, even if I didn't control the timing the way I was used to doing.

As we shifted to online teaching in March 2020, and have continued to teach online since, this question of when students should be learning has been constantly on my mind. Online teaching is all about time and progress. Synchronous and asynchronous—"time" words that I had never really thought about before—have come to dominate my class planning. And online teaching has

required me to accept that when exactly students are going to learn something I have tried to teach them is largely out of my control.

Teaching legal writing fully online this past year really tested whether I can accept that it is never too late to learn. Online teaching, even when done synchronously with everyone's cameras turned on, deprived me of seeing my students' "lightbulb" moments. I would peer into their tiny squares, but I could never really tell what was going on in there. And when I put them in breakout rooms and then popped in with my microphone and camera off to observe, I always felt like they were performing for me, rather than engaging with the exercise and each other. I tried to use low-stakes formative assessments throughout the year to identify students who were struggling or falling behind, but it was always hard to discern whether some students were actually confused or just not spending much time on low-stakes assignments.

Missing the lightbulb moments has been hard. It made me realize how much I liked seeing the students learn, how much it meant to me to be the person who facilitated and sparked that learning. I want to be the basketball coach with the whiteboard and the marker. I want all the eyes on me. I want to pat my students on the back and encourage them. I want to wave my arms around and do a lot of pointing. It just doesn't feel the same for me that these moments happen when my students are in their apartments, watching my asynchronous videos at 2:00 a.m. or when I am in my apartment as my kids are doing kindergarten and third grade on their iPads in the next room and the cat is scratching at the door.

Living and teaching during this pandemic has disabused me of any ideas I had about how time should work or when things should happen. But I can absolutely say that since I saw that basketball game (St. John's won by 30 points), I have learned to think about time in a new way. I guess it wasn't too late to learn.