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FROM THE COURTROOM TO THE CLASSROOM:
REFLECTING ON THE TRANSITION FROM PRACTICE TO PROFESSOR

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FROM THE COURTROOM TO THE CLASSROOM: REFLECTING ON THE TRANSITION FROM PRACTICE TO PROFESSOR

DANIELLE J. LEWIS¹

As an eager law student, I never imagined myself standing at the front of the classroom in my professors' shoes. Frankly, that career path never occurred to me. I came to law school to be a litigator—and litigate I did, for more than a decade.

In early 2020, I learned about an opportunity to teach an introductory class for 1Ls at my alma mater. By this point, I had realized that mentoring students and young lawyers was something that “filled my cup.” Unfortunately, the demands of an active litigation practice while raising two young children left little time for the professional networking and volunteer service opportunities I enjoyed in my early days as an attorney. Teaching law students seemed like a great way to get back to that, and I jumped at the chance.

After one year as an adjunct professor, I had the opportunity to transition to a visiting assistant professor role, teaching legal writing. I am happy to say that after nearly two years of teaching, I love the work even more than I thought I would. Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic threw us all—practitioners, law students, law professors—for a loop. However, I found that my experience as a practicing litigator proved extremely helpful as I transitioned to my new role of law professor in the midst of a global pandemic. As I reflect on the experience, I can identify several transferrable skills

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that supported my transition, and a couple of key lessons that I've learned on the job that will inform my teaching moving forward.

Drawing on Practice Experience in the Classroom

First, being a litigator teaches you to be flexible and to adapt. In the courtroom, I was usually adapting to new facts or new arguments from the other side. In the classroom, I remained flexible in the face of changing circumstances and adapted as new needs arose. I found that my willingness to alter my teaching methods to students' different learning needs and styles helped students better understand the material. And my practice-honed adaptability skills also helped when COVID-related issues arose. (To anyone who had to homeschool or care for young children while also working or going to school themselves, *I see you.*) Thanks to my experience as a nimble litigator, I could navigate those issues and adjust to teaching remotely in a way that did not inhibit students' overall success.

Second, being a litigator gave me ample real-world examples to share with my classes and the confidence to connect abstract ideas with concrete situations. Explaining to my students *why* they should think about a problem or legal issue in a certain way (or usually, in many different ways) was so much easier when I could give them real-world examples. In a time when law schools are increasingly focused on training students for practice (as opposed to simply teaching legal theories), having experienced practitioners like me in the classroom to connect ideas to their practical applications may be more important than ever.

Another skill I took from the courtroom to the classroom is consistency in demeanor and tone. As a litigator, I had to "on" during trial or a big hearing, no matter what else was happening in the background. Being able to apply this skill was even more important for class sessions that were held virtually. We all have bad days, or low energy days, or days when we just don't think we can take on one more task. I think for most of us, this has never been

truer than during the pandemic. I quickly realized that my time with students was relatively brief (one class session a week). Whatever else was happening, I needed to be “on”—engaging, pleasant, and enthusiastic—during that time so that students knew I cared about the class and their success. I wanted to encourage students to approach me with questions or concerns at any time, and I realized that being engaging and approachable during our class sessions was a fundamental way I could reinforce that goal.

Some Things I Learned on the Job

Of course, teaching also taught me what I didn’t know (and what I didn’t know I didn’t know!). I learned very quickly that clarity and consistency are key. Being consistent in your expectations of students and communicating those expectations from the outset are vitally important (but see the above discussion on being able to adapt). Transparency about how the course will be structured and graded, even before the class begins (i.e., in the syllabus), is extremely important to setting the students and professor up for success. Students need to know what the professor expects from the beginning so that they can achieve and demonstrate understanding of the course principles and concepts in a way that meets the professor’s expectations.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention what I’ve learned about the importance, as a new law professor, of finding and cultivating relationships with experienced and trusted mentors. I still have so much to learn about teaching and legal academia in general. Seeking out information, opinions, and resources from more experienced legal professors is crucial, and I have been lucky to have wonderful mentors helping me on that path.