Why I Teach

SPRING 2010 provides an unusual vantage point for writing about “why I teach.” Thanks to the John S. Lehmann Research Professorship, which afforded me a leave last fall to focus on scholarship, I am just now returning to the classroom after an eight-month hiatus. I feel exhilarated by the prospect of resuming an active partnership in learning with a new semester’s complement of students.

I teach for many reasons; on reflection, the list seems embarrassingly self-indulgent. I teach because I love to explore ideas with students who share this passion. I love to join students in classroom efforts to look behind unarticulated assumptions, to discern connections in apparently unrelated legal developments, and to think hard about possible law reforms—both realistic improvements and implausible reinventions. I also love witnessing moments of discovery in which students, sometimes with a nudge, see something for the first time, as when they experience a shift of perspective, finding a new way to look at what they thought they thoroughly understood. I love the give-and-take when genuine differences of opinions produce thoughtful disagreements that allow a deeper appreciation of an unfamiliar side in a familiar debate (even though on more than one occasion such difficult discussions have left me wishing for a “do over” opportunity). And, of course, I love all the ways in which my teaching and my scholarship are mutually reinforcing.

THOUGH STARKLY DIFFERENT in many ways, two of the courses that I have regularly taught over the years afford ample opportunity to experience the classroom encounters that excite me. Conflict of Laws might well be dry, abstract, and passionless on one level. Yet, this course always entails an intellectual journey, especially as students find their territorial intuitions challenged by the contributions of “modern” choice of law theorists who shifted the focus from geography to the policies and purposes...
underlying the legal rules supposedly at odds. Students in Conflict of Laws, who understand up front that the course will emphasize theory and new terminology, really do come to think differently about law as the semester progresses.

Family Law and related courses invite a different sort of transformation. Students arrive feeling like experts in the field based on their own lives, stories in the media, the familiar vocabulary, and sometimes their work in one of our live-client clinics. Here, the thrill often lies in unsettling what seems “natural”—by helping students discover and appreciate how their understandings are shaped by law, gender scripts, and other cultural forces, including race, class, and social norms.

Not surprisingly, my style and goals in the classroom have evolved over the past 35 years. Early on, especially when teaching a first-year course, I saw my principal objective as facilitating students’ analysis of legal doctrines—examining their current applications, their historical roots, and their likely evolution. “Thinking like a lawyer” seemed to demand that one leave behind a good deal of other thinking.

Today, analysis remains the centerpiece of my efforts in the classroom, but with a more expansive focus. I have become increasingly certain that a deep understanding of law requires more, not less, reference to personal experience, appreciation of life’s messy realities, and willingness to challenge both law’s purported objectivity and its reliance on categorization.

Now, to move beyond the abbreviated stories and cardboard characters found in cases concerning, say, a child custody dispute or statutes governing intercountry adoption, I have begun to incorporate a carefully selected novel or film that provides a richer context and brings the legal issues to life. Thus, instead of accepting the tendency of law school to distance students from other experiences and sources of knowledge, I now go out of my way to highlight their relevance, not only in the classroom, but also in my own scholarship. Indeed, these insights have inspired me to experiment this semester with an explicitly interdisciplinary seminar, Regulating Sex, which includes both law students and students from other parts of the University and which I’m co-teaching with a colleague in the program in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS). The evolution of “how I teach” has enhanced my understanding of “why I teach.”

The partnership in learning that occurs in the most fulfilling classes blurs the line between teacher and student. The value of such experiences has prompted me to look for other ways to challenge this would-be divide. I have found two. First, a couple years ago, I decided to become a student myself, strengthening my background knowledge for Family Law by taking a course in Contemporary Female Sexualities offered in the WGSS program. Along with my undergraduate classmates, I completed all the readings, submitted all the required papers, and participated in the full range of group projects and exercises. I’m convinced that I became a better teacher not just because of the substance that I absorbed, but also because of the reminder of what it means to be a student.

Second, for more than 10 years, I have served as one of a small group of law faculty who rotate the responsibility of supervising a team of three or four law students teaching an undergraduate course in Women & the Law. Among the many rewards of this arrangement, I especially enjoy the law students’ discovery of what it means to prepare for and teach a class during the course of a semester. Many have found their teaching experience transformative, affording new reasons to appreciate their own education at this law school.

Each time I step into the classroom, my preoccupation with the narrow objective for the particular assignment of the day seems to crowd out thoughts about loftier goals. So, imagine how enormously lucky I feel when former students recognize that something more took place in the classroom—and they report precisely what I would have included on my “wish list” had I reflected on such matters myself. For example, last year, this magazine quoted Laura Dooley, JD ’86, an outstanding member of the faculty at Valparaiso University School of Law, who said that I taught her the importance of being a role model, that I made her feel her ideas mattered, and that I challenged her to reach as high as she could. Wow! I would find a more worthwhile agenda difficult to imagine, and I can think of no more compelling reasons for “why I teach.”

Susan Frelich Appleton is the John S. Lehmann Research Professor for 2009–2010 and Lemma Barkeloo & Phoebe Couzins Professor of Law.