During the final three years of my 16-year career in law school administration, I was spending about 90 percent of my time on administration, and I was teaching just one seminar per year as my entire teaching load. Now that I am back teaching a full load again, I can appreciate better than ever the joys of the classroom that I was missing. Having come full circle—from teaching a lot at the start of my career, to teaching a little during my administrative career, to teaching a lot again—I have the benefit of a more well-informed perspective on the question of why I teach. There are at least six good reasons I can articulate:

I teach because it’s in my genes.

I come from a family of teachers. Both of my parents are retired teachers, and two of my three brothers are currently teachers. My father taught for more than 20 years in the Chicago public schools and then spent the last 20 years of his career as a principal. My mother was also a teacher in the Chicago public schools for 20 years. My older brother Kevin is a tenured math professor at the University of Florida, and my younger brother Mike teaches math at a junior college near Chicago. Even my third brother, Tom, taught for a time as a PhD and postdoc biology student until he received his law degree from Washington University School of Law.

When I took my first job out of law school in the fall of 1986 as an in-house bankruptcy attorney for the First National Bank of Chicago, I enjoyed the practice of law well enough. Yet it was not too long before I realized that the parts of the job that I liked the most—making presentations, mentoring summer associates, and explaining the law to my clients—were all forms of teaching. After just two years in practice, I began my career as a law teacher at age 26 at Washington University School of Law, the school that I knew from the beginning was the place where I wanted to spend my career.

I teach in order to connect.

The job of a full-time law professor can be at times a very solitary one. Particularly in the summer when most faculty use that quiet time to write scholarship, it is not unusual for me to spend hours alone in the office with no personal contact. Teaching is the antidote to that summer isolation. Teaching is my opportunity to connect with and get to know interesting (and increasingly younger, it seems!) people in a “win-win” setting. One unfortunate feature of many law practices is that interactions with other people can often be adversarial by the very nature of the enterprise. Teaching, by contrast, is a way to interact with other people that is truly collaborative. We are all in this together, teacher and students, striving for the same goal.

For teaching to be about connections, it cannot be impersonal. I don’t want to teach to a nameless, faceless group of individuals. So my first order of business, whether my class has 20 members or 120, is to learn their names and faces. Each semester my wife, Jane, and I make it a point of inviting each of my classes to have dinner at our house, just so that my students can see me in a different setting than up at the podium.

One secret that I learned early in my teaching career is to keep my focus on the students and whether they are learning the material. The first class I ever taught was a basic Bankruptcy class of 120 students. I was so anxious about the “performance” aspects of that task that I literally had shortness of breath sometimes when I taught. My problem was that I was too focused on myself and how I was being perceived by the students. Once I stopped caring about what they thought of me and started caring only about whether they were learning, there was no longer any reason for me to be nervous.

I teach because it’s productive.

I believe that each of us has within us an innate desire to be productive and to create. Teaching satisfies that desire within me. There were many days during my years as an administrator when I would end the day wondering if I had really accomplished anything worthwhile. When I finish teaching a class well, I know that I have done something useful and productive. I know that my students have benefited, even if only in an incremental way.

One way that I differ from some of my colleagues is that I love teaching large classes. If I am going to work hard to prepare a particular class, I would prefer to have 120 students get the benefit of my efforts than to have only 20 students benefit. Even in large classes, I don’t want my students to be passive.
I teach code-based courses like UCC and Bankruptcy, and my classes consist of the students solving problems by applying code provisions to particular fact situations. When students are able to solve these difficult problems in front of their peers (sometimes with a little help from me), they feel good about what they have accomplished. That, in turn, makes me feel productive!

Considering productivity from a larger perspective, I feel that by teaching commercial law courses I help my students to understand many of the business and bankruptcy-related news stories they read. I also believe in the value of education as a tool for advancement in our society. Finally, I enjoy doing my small part to promote the rule of law in this country. I don't need to look far in the realm of current world events to be reminded that the alternatives to a society founded on the rule of law are usually grim indeed!

I teach to learn.

There is no better way to learn something than to have to teach it. For example, Congress passed a major set of Bankruptcy Code amendments in 2005, and I had never really taken the time to learn them. So this term I volunteered to teach the basic Bankruptcy class as an overload because I knew that this would force me to learn these amendments really well. I believe that my teaching performance may be the strongest when the material is new to me because I am facing the same struggles as the students in learning the material. The more times I have taught something, the further removed I become from where the students are in learning that material.

Teaching is also a great way for me to formulate article ideas. When you teach a subject for a number of years, you start to see connections among issues in the area that were not obvious at first. Occasionally one of these connections will be novel in the particular field and, with the help of additional research, will prove worth exploring in an essay or law review article.

I teach because it’s our law school’s heritage.

Washington University is a great teaching law school. When I came here in 1988, I was welcomed by many of the school’s all-time teaching legends, of whom there were too many for me to try to list here. When I was an untenured faculty member, I was mentored by David Becker and I came to appreciate the rich teaching culture and history of the institution through my weekly lunches with Frank Miller, often accompanied by Bill Jones or Kathy Brickey.

Yet the most exciting thing for me about the teaching culture at Washington University School of Law is not its history, but its future. Case in point: In 1993, when I was still an untenured faculty member, I read an article on tips for the new law teacher that was far and away the best article that I had ever read of its kind. In fact, I was so inspired by this article that I felt moved to write a gushing letter (we had no e-mail then) to its author, a young professor at the University of Michigan whom I had never met. The professor’s name? Kent Syverud.

I teach because it’s fun.

In my first stint as interim dean, I decided that I would not teach any courses that year due to the obvious demands of my new assignment. When spring semester came around, however, I simply could not help myself. One week into the semester, I decided that I would rejoin my Chapter 11 Reorganization co-teachers, Judge Barry Schermer and attorney Lloyd Palans, to teach that seminar again. After being interim dean for six months, I desperately needed some fun! While teaching is always fun for me, it is never more fun than when I get to do it in tandem with two good friends who also happen to be experts in the field. These two adjuncts have been co-teaching that seminar for over 20 years with me, and they do it for free.

At that point, more than ever, I could fully appreciate why they were doing this for nothing. It was for them, as it remains for me, a true labor of love.

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“Why I Teach” is a regular column in the Washington University Law Magazine highlighting various faculty members’ unique and heartfelt reflections on what makes teaching law rewarding. Previous columns have been written by Dean Kent Syverud and Professors Susan Appleton, David Becker, John Drobak, and Michael Greenfield. To view these columns, visit: law.wustl.edu/WhyITeach.