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TEACHING A PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY COURSE: LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CLINIC

Antoinette Sedillo Lopez*

Law students need concrete ethical training. They need to know why pro bono work is so important. They need to understand their duties as "officers of the court." They need to learn that cases and statutes are normative texts, appropriately interpreted from a public-regarding point of view, and not mere missiles to be hurled at opposing counsel. They need to have great ethical teachers, and to have every teacher address ethical problems where such problems arise.1

I. INTRODUCTION

A good part of my professional life2 involves teaching and learning about professional responsibility.3 The University of New Mexico School

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* Professor of Law and Director, Clinical Law Programs, University of New Mexico, J.D., UCLA. I would like to thank my colleague, Professor Scott Taylor, for his thoughts on this topic. Scott's vision of how our clinical legal education program assists in the teaching of ethics throughout our curriculum informs these remarks. I would also like to thank the following: Professor Steven Hobbs for inviting me to present these ideas at the 2002 Association of American Law Schools Annual Meeting, Section on Professional Responsibility; Dean Desiderio and Associate Dean Alfred Mathewson; and Professors Jose Martinez and April Land for their comments and suggestions.


2. I teach and learn about professional responsibility in a three-credit hour classroom course called "Professional Responsibility." I teach professional responsibility in the clinical law program when I teach a six-hour live client "Community Lawyering" course. I teach and learn about professional responsibility as director of the University of New Mexico Clinical Law Program when faculty and students come to my office to chat about a case and when we consult with our Ethics Committee. I teach professional responsibility in a three-credit hour Family Law course. I teach professional responsibility in my office when students come to chat about the profession that they are seeking to join. Contrary to many law teachers' views, I love teaching professional responsibility. See, e.g., William H. Simon, The Trouble with Legal Ethics, 41 J. Legal Educ. 65 (1991) ("At most law schools, students find the course in legal ethics or professional responsibility boring and insubstantial, and faculty dread having to teach it.").

3. In August 1974, the American Bar Association promulgated a rule requiring that all member schools require that all student candidates for a professional degree receive instruction in the duties and responsibilities of the legal profession. Such required instruction shall cover "the history, goals, structure, duties, values, and responsibilities of the legal profession and its members,
of Law is unique in that we require our students to participate in a real-client, in-house clinical law course prior to graduation. The course is taught by regular full-time faculty members, who rotate their teaching responsibilities from teaching in the classroom to teaching in the clinic. In order to enhance continuity, we try to provide professors with the opportunity to teach in the clinic for two consecutive semesters. About half of the members of the faculty regularly rotate into the clinic. In addition, students are encouraged to take ethics during the time they are enrolled in the clinic. This model affords us the ability to teach professional responsibility throughout the curriculum. Because so many of us teach in the real-client clinic, we experience, with our students, the awe-


5. We also attempt to ameliorate continuity problems by creating “working groups” of faculty who agree to continue representation on previous cases accepted by the working group and to work with the community organizations associated with the working group.

6. We count the summer as a semester, since we run a year round clinic. If a professor teaches summer/fall or spring/summer, that will satisfy their academic year teaching responsibilities.

7. If students cannot take it the same semester that they are enrolled in the clinic, they must take it before enrolling in clinic. The faculty feels that at the minimum, students should be familiar with the rules of professional responsibility as they enroll in the clinic. We also assume that the student will be more engaged in their professional responsibility class if they are enrolled in clinic. For a description of ethical issues in clinical teaching, see James E. Moliterno, In-House Live-Client Clinical Programs: Some Ethical Issues, 67 FORDHAM L. REV. 2377 (1999).

some responsibility of representing a client. This experience colors how we teach in the classroom. I will describe how clinical experiences have influenced my educational goals in teaching a professional responsibility classroom course.

A professional responsibility course is unique in a law school curriculum. It offers the possibility of incorporating educational objectives that can go beyond familiarity with an area of law or analytical skills. When I teach a first-year course, my primary educational objective is to teach students how to engage in legal reasoning and analysis. When I teach an upper-division course, my educational objectives center around helping students to understand areas of the law and to apply their legal reasoning skills to navigate those areas of the law. That is, I want to teach students the law of the course, whether it is Family Law, Children’s Law, Election Law, or any other upper-division course. My clinical teaching has inspired me to teach these areas in a way that includes a client-centered lawyer’s perspective.

Professor Lisa Lerman, the reporter for the 1997 W.M. Keck Foundation Forum on the Teaching of Legal Ethics, described a continuum of teaching goals for legal ethics. At one end of the continuum are professors who believe that their responsibility is to teach students about the law of legal ethics. At the other end are professors who aspire to teach moral perception or moral judgment. Lerman describes how teachers at the middle of the continuum teach all of the law that governs lawyers including ethical rules, malpractice law, criminal law, court rules, and other bodies of law governing lawyers. While the panel that Lerman describes explored this continuum, the 2002 AALS Annual Meeting

10. For a discussion predicting the integration of ethics and skills training into the law school curriculum, see James E. Moliterno, On the Future of Integration Between Skills and Ethics Teaching: Clinical Legal Education in the Year 2010, 46 J. LEGAL EDUC. 67 (1996). I part ways with his prediction because he sees the future of clinical legal education as focusing on simulations and externships. I believe that in-house clinics are also likely to grow. You can see the trend in the new clinics begun recently at several law schools including Texas Tech and UNLV. For a perspective on how clinical legal education contributes to the teaching of professionalism, see Lester Brickman, Contributions of Clinical Programs to Training for Professionalism, 4 CONN. L. REV. 437 (1972).
11. My colleagues who are clinical teachers and have authored clinical scholarship have inspired me to go beyond skills training in my clinical teaching. See, e.g., Jane H. Aiken, Provo-cateurs for Justice, 7 CLINICAL L. REV. 287 (2001).
13. Id. at 469.
14. Id. at 470.
15. Id. at 463.
Section on Professional Responsibility panel expands on the possibilities for developing course objectives in a legal ethics course.

In teaching Ethics or Professional Responsibility, I want to do more than teach students the law of the course. While it is important that students become familiar with and able to navigate the rules of professional responsibility, my clinical teaching has helped me develop additional educational objectives that I believe will affect their lives as future lawyers.

I categorize my objectives in a three-credit classroom professional responsibility course as three-fold: 1) teaching the law of lawyering; 2) exploring professionalism issues; and 3) critically examining the profession. I will discuss a few of my experiences teaching in the clinic and how they have taught me why a three-credit course on Professional Responsibility should expand its teaching goals beyond the law of the course.

II. RULES AND LAW OF LAWYERING

A primary objective of any professional responsibility course is to familiarize students with the rules of professional responsibility and the "law of lawyering," and to help them understand policy reasons for the rules. This objective is the least controversial. Some professional responsibility teachers have argued that this should be the only educational objective. The only debate is whether to include malpractice and other law practices as business regulatory issues. Most of the textbooks do include at least a small dose of such material and I usually include one as well.

III. PROFESSIONALISM ISSUES

A growing body of legal literature has decried what is perceived as


18. I think because law students are trained to argue "both sides" of so many issues, students sometimes conclude that values are subjective. This perspective causes them to argue both sides of rules of professional responsibility and to believe that no one has a right to impose his/her moral values on anyone else. Of course, this notion undercuts a professor's ability to teach professional values.

19. For a good discussion of educational objectives in a professional responsibility course, see Susan Burns, Teaching Legal Ethics, 4 LEGAL EDUC. REV. 141 (1993).

20. I think professionalism teaching attempts to enhance students' moral perception and judgment. See Lisa Lerman, supra note 12.

21. See Lisa Lerman, supra note 12, at 460, citing Susan P. Koniak presentation. For a critique of this argument see Maria Tzannes, Legal Ethics Teaching and Practice: Are there Missing Elements?, 1 T.M. COOLEY J. PRAC. & CLINICAL L. 59 (1997).
the decline of professionalism within the bar. Professionalism has been defined to cover everything from incivility, to illegal conduct, to giving the profession a black eye. Various causes for the decline in professionalism are theorized, with many of them pointing to legal training. I believe that the legal ethics course is a natural place in the curriculum to contribute to a life long consideration of what it means to be a lawyer. Although there is no consensus on what "professionalism" is, I believe that a course should discuss professional norms, moral issues, the role of the attorney, professional boundaries, and other issues not specifically addressed by the "law of lawyering." I began to see this as an important objective for my legal ethics course because of an unusual incident in my clinical teaching.

I supervised a student who suffered from a particular disability. He asked me if he could seek out potential clients with the same disability to assist them with their legal problems. He provided me with literature about the disability and the struggle which sufferers of this disability face. Admiring his passion, I agreed to allow him to do so. The student provided a well-researched intake memo and within a week the faculty had voted to accept the case for the purpose of negotiation with state authorities to accommodate her disability. I let the student know about our decision. However, I received no more information about the case from him. It was on my list of issues to discuss at our regularly scheduled file review meeting. Coincidentally, on the morning of the meeting, the director of the clinic received a call from the client complaining of inappropriate conduct on the part of the student. She had called the police and alleged that the student had physically assaulted her. As a subsequent investigation revealed, the student had communicated with her through phone and e-mail and had developed an increasingly personal relationship. When I confronted the student, his view was that he had


26. The students and clients described in this essay are not named and some details have been slightly altered or left out to protect their identity.

27. E-mail has changed communication. The nature of the medium makes the sender and the
gone to her aid because he was afraid that she was suicidal. He had physically restrained her to prevent her from hurting herself. His explanation for not contacting me about this problem was that I would not have viewed the issue as urgently as he did since I was not familiar with her unique physical and mental circumstances. He thought that I would minimize her communications with him and only he could understand her circumstances.

The director of the clinic notified the dean of the client’s allegations. The dean suspended the student from the law clinic pending an investigation into the client’s allegations. I will never forget the student’s perspective on the events that had transpired. The student said that he could not find anything within the rules of professional responsibility that was relevant to his situation. He said that some fuzzy notions of professionalism would not change his view that he was trying to help her. He understood that he should have communicated with me about the relationship he had developed and his perception of the events, but he was not sure what I would have said or done. He also said that he knew I was offended because, as I had pointed out to him, he was working under my license. He was sorry that he had offended me, but he really believed that I would not have understood the mental state of the client. The passion I had admired in him had induced him to believe that he, and only he, could evaluate the true situation.

In part, I have to agree with him. There is nothing in the rules of professional responsibility that would inform him about professional distance and communicating with your supervisor. The rules do not say that a lawyer should not allow his over-identification with a client to cloud his judgment. Yet, I think most lawyers would agree that his conduct overstepped some professional norms and attorney-client boundaries. This is why I believe that a professional responsibility class should address boundary issues as well as issues of integrity, morals, professional norms, and other issues facing practitioners that are not specifically addressed by the law of lawyering.28

28. A description of the rest of this story is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the student and I both grew and learned from the experience. One advantage of a clinical legal education is that students can explore professionalism issues in a context where they can reflect and consult with supervisors. Hopefully, this will affect their future behavior as lawyers. A recent article that addresses this type of issue is Margaret Graham Tebo, Too Close for Comfort, 88 A.B.A. J. 46 (Apr. 2002).

IV. CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE PROFESSION

A growing body of literature has described attorney burnout and dissatisfaction.30 I give students articles about this trend and lead discussions about possible causes. The primary reasons students identify are being overworked and neglecting one's personal life for the professional.31 We also discuss problems within the profession in regard to alcohol or drug abuse.32 Again, clinical experience taught me how important it is to reinforce clinical teaching with classroom discussion.

Early in my teaching career, I had a student who performed spotty work in the clinic. Sometimes his work was of a high quality, and other times it was not timely or thorough. He was frustrating to me, and several conversations with him failed to produce more consistency. I resigned myself, believing he was a “C” or perhaps a “D” student that I had failed to “save.” Late in the semester, I received a phone call from a person who was concerned about her upcoming hearing. She had not heard anything from the student since her intake meeting. The student had not returned her calls, so she had asked for his supervising attorney. I could not find any record of this client—no intake memo, no entry on our client list, nothing. I called the student into my office. He told me that he had met her on an intake meeting, but that her case (involving her son’s involvement in the juvenile system) scared him. He had destroyed her file and never wrote an intake memo. I told him that even if he had been a stellar student to that point, I would fail him for his gross deviation from any professional standard.

About two months later, the receptionist called to tell me that this same student was waiting to see me and would wait until I was available. I dreaded the meeting. I assumed he had come to berate me or to request that I change his grade. To my astonishment, he came into my office, sat down and apologized to me and thanked me. He told me that he was an alcoholic and that my meeting helped him understand that he had hit rock bottom. He had driven away from the meeting with me to go to a bar. He said he began praying on the way to the bar—asking God to send him a sign not to go to the bar. He got into a fender bender on the way to the bar and never made it. The next morning he got up and went to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He had not had a drink since. I was just glad that he could address his problem in a relatively safe environment. His

failure in the clinic had not permanently harmed any client, because the client had me as a back-up. He learned that he was going to have to slay this demon before becoming an attorney, and he was motivated to do so. I think an Ethics or Professional Responsibility course is an important place to begin the discussion of the stresses and rigors of the profession and the danger of self-medicating for stress.

Through my clinical teaching, I see students representing clients who are members of minority groups. As they struggle in assisting their clients, I have come to see the need for diversity and cross-cultural competence among members of the profession. Again, I have a story to tell about the need for cross-cultural competence.

The clinic represented a Mexican-American woman who had attended a beauty school. She came to us because she was getting letters requesting payment on her student loans. She did not know that she had obtained student loans. She thought that she had received grants for her beauty school education. The financial aid counselors had used the Spanish term *beca*, which is defined as a scholarship or grant, and not the term *prestamo*, which means loan. We thought we had a straightforward mistake of fact defense to the claim for payment.

Two students were paired on the case. The Mexican-American, Spanish-speaking student working on the case had a sophisticated understanding of what probably happened and established an easy rapport with the client. The non-Spanish speaking student struggled a bit with the need for a translator. Prior to trial, we had a mediation session with a former Supreme Court justice. In reviewing the risks of trial separately with the mediator, the client's husband spoke to me in Spanish. He wanted to know what effect a judgment would have on his immigration status. Our client had recently become a U.S. citizen and she was petitioning for legal permanent residency status for her husband. He wanted to know whether a judgment would reflect on his moral character or indicate that he might be a financial burden on the state. This conversation took place in the presence of the mediator, but the mediator did not know what was said since he did not speak Spanish. Since New Mexico is a community property state, the debt incurred during the marriage was a community debt and he would possibly be liable for any judgment.

After the mediation, we consulted with our immigration law expert, and she said that while a judgment would not likely bar his petition, it might raise questions with the Immigration and Naturalization Service ("INS") and delay the application. She said most attorneys ask their clients to avoid such problems, if possible. As we counseled the clients about the possibility of losing the lawsuit, it became clear that a potential loss and subsequent judgment would be of more concern to them than simply owing the money. Any negative impact or delay of their immigra-
tion case was of major concern. They opted to settle the lawsuit. In the course of representation, it became very clear that in order to represent them competently, we (as an institution) needed to have language competency in Spanish and English. We also needed to have some ability to counsel them on immigration matters, and it was helpful to have some sensitivity to the fears of undocumented individuals. Navigating these differences was challenging, and it was helpful to have Spanish-speaking faculty, students, and staff to assist us with the language and cultural issues. I do not know whether we could have adequately represented her competently without the language and cultural abilities of our faculty, students, and staff.

As our world becomes increasingly smaller, all of our students need to think about the globalization of the profession and multi-cultural issues. Certainly, in New Mexico, with its mix of Latino cultures, Native American cultures, Anglo cultures, African-American cultures and Asian cultures, cross-cultural competence is very important to a successful practitioner. Also, some of our students are practicing in Latin America or overseas. Thus, cross-cultural competence will help them become better at serving their clients. The need for diversity in the profession is also a professional issue, in terms of diversifying society to open the doors of opportunity to all ethnic and racial groups.

In any event, I normally give the students current data about the gender, race, and ethnic composition of the profession. We then have a discussion about the data. We discuss barriers to the profession such as the Law School Admissions Test and admissions policies of many schools including our own. We discuss ways of changing the barriers. More recently we have broadened this discussion to include affirmative action. The gender material and the perception of a glass ceiling for women in the profession usually engage students more than the race


35. See, e.g., DEAR SISTERS, DEAR DAUGHTERS: WORDS OF WISDOM FROM MULTICULTURAL WOMEN ATTORNEYS WHO’VE BEEN THERE AND DONE THAT (Karen Clanton ed. 2000).

36. LANI GUINIER ET AL., BECOMING GENTLEMEN: WOMEN, LAW SCHOOL, AND
and ethnic data. This is likely due to the fact that I usually have more 
women in the class than persons of color. We talk about day care, mater-
nity leave, and other issues that they have already begun to face. My 
objective is simply to cause them to reflect on these issues. My hope is 
that as professionals, they will take action to address some of the issues 
raised.

As for multi-cultural competence, I usually give students a case 
involving a gross error in translation or in cultural knowledge. This 
raises issues of competencies lawyers should demonstrate. I usually talk 
about these as skills going beyond the MacCrate skills and values.

V. CONCLUSION

My teaching in the clinic has enhanced my classroom teaching and 
my classroom teaching has enhanced my clinical teaching. The stories I 
have told of my clinical experiences have taught me the importance of 
attempting to go beyond the law of lawyering to address issues of profes-
sionalism and to take a critical view of the profession. By doing so, I 
hope to help students embark on a life-long path of reflecting on the 
rules, considering a broad array of professional issues, and viewing 
themselves as professionals with the power to change the profession.
