

BENEFITS OF INTEGRATED PROGRAMS OVER NON-INTEGRATED PROGRAMS

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This semester, I moved from teaching a purely skills-driven academic support class to a hybrid doctrinal-skills academic support class.¹ I wanted to move to a hybrid class because of both research and anecdotal reports from other ASP professionals that this method is more pedagogically sound and effective at teaching students skills for law school success. I chose to teach Remedies because it both reviews concepts of Torts and Contracts that students may have missed their 1L year, and introduces them to material they will need for the bar exam in most states. After years of teaching non-integrated academic support course for at-risk students, I was looking forward to the challenge of new material and the increased flexibility of testing only the material I taught in class, in contrast to working with material taught by other

teachers. I was also interested in the student response to the course; I was curious to see if their skills would travel across subject matter, or if hybrid teaching meant that the skills lessons would remain isolated in Remedies materials. At the close of the semester, I don't have a definitive answer to my students ability to transfer skills across doctrinal classes, but I do know that the hybrid teaching model is one I will keep for future years.

Methods

We started the semester with a broad overview of Remedies, and moved to a discussion of why Remedies is the ideal material for an exam skills course, and wrote a closed-universe diagnostic exam that is designed to measure their exam skills, test-anxiety, and grasp of first-year material. They were then given the opportunity to re-write the exam to improve their grade after we reviewed the elements of a "good" and a "great" exam answer. Each class started with a discussion of the

cases they read, but unlike some purely doctrinal classes, I made my skills lessons explicit. I told them why we read these three (or four or five) cases in this order, whether they should be looking for patterns or deviations from the law, and how policy might have played a role in the decision. I also make explicit how they would use these skills in their other classes, where their teachers probably won't make the goals of the lesson explicit. By telling them why I asked those questions and chose those cases, I helped them to recognize the reasons law is taught with the case method, pushed them to learn how to use their class notes to build a course summary, and guided them through ways to use the course summary to prepare for exams. I also worked to connect them to the practice of law and remind them of why they are in law school.

Results

There are a number of reasons I am sticking with the hybrid-teaching model in

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the future. I am the first to say this is not for the faint of heart; I would not suggest this model for a new ASPer without experience teaching just skills to students. Embedding skills instruction into doctrinal material requires mastery of two subjects; the doctrinal material, and the skills instruction. Skills instruction is its own subject area, and it takes a few years to obtain a comfort level with teaching skills such as exam preparation, outlining/course summaries, case reading, and time management that need to be broken down and taught across learning and processing styles in diverse populations.

For a well-prepared professor, however, the advantages to a hybrid model are significant. As a hybrid instructor, I was no longer battling with professors to get syllabi in time for me to prepare my own class materials. This freed me up to work on my own syllabus and really struggle with how skills are imbedded into doctrinal material. Because I was not hearing about what was being

taught in class second-hand, through students’ perception of what the professors had said in class, I had a much better grasp of what needed to be tested. When students asked me questions about the material, I did not have to defer to someone outside the classroom; I was right there to explain the concept. Frequently, student questions led me to insights about their specific challenges. I discovered M was extremely bright, but struggled in law school because her processing style does not match law school instruction methods. I would not have realized this was the source of her struggles if I did not listen to her ask question after question about the Remedies material. In a traditional ASP class, I would not have known whether her professor was simply difficult to understand or she had a processing issue.

An additional benefit of this method is that it tests the professor’s ability to convey information to students. When a lesson failed, I needed to reassess

my teaching methods; there was no one else who could have been the source of the problem. And as this was the first time I had taught a hybrid class, I did have my failures. Like I tell my students, failures are a great opportunity to figure out what works and why it is working—or why not.

I do see hybrid teaching as the ASP model of the future. It is not a method that will be adopted by all schools, and it will certainly take time, and analysis, to refine the model to fit the student and school culture. Success is always a work in progress, but can only be achieved once you step from your comfort zone and try a new method.

¹ I owe most of my choice to Michael Hunter Schwartz of Washburn Law School, who pioneered an approach to Remedies as a bar preparation course, and will be publishing a Remedies text in the next year.

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“Incorporating doctrinal materials into a boot camp course prior to 1L Fall semester has provided my students with the tools to adapt to graduate-level doctrinal course expectations while introducing them to Academic Success concepts.”

Heather Zuber