FROM PRACTITIONER TO ACADEMIC

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Although the majority of faculty enter their teaching careers from traditional academic paths, many pursue careers in their disciplines before returning to teaching. What challenges face faculty who enter into teaching full-time after practicing in their fields for several years? What lessons can we learn from such “teacher-practioners?” In this issue, two Belmont faculty share their thoughts and reflections as they enter “into teaching from practice.”

My entrée to academia via the practice of law has yielded a number of insights, challenges, and rewards along the way thus far. As a practitioner, I provided instruction to both traditional and non-traditional students and audiences outside the undergraduate setting, specifically, law students, attorneys, and entertainment industry participants. As I make the transition, it is natural (at least for me) to draw some comparisons between those experiences and students and the undergraduate students I am now teaching at Belmont. I offer these insights, particularly to other instructors at Belmont who traverse academia by a similar route.

Overall, there are similarities, as well as differences inherent in comparing teaching experiences. The primary differences include: (1) academic setting; (2) students taught; (3) learning objectives; and, (4) methodology/approach. A brief examination of each follows.

ACADEMIC SETTING. As a practitioner I taught a number of continuing legal education courses and programs (i.e., a series of courses). These programs were designed to foster professionalism by keeping participants current in a given practice area. Accordingly, I provided instruction in my practice areas: entertainment and intellectual property (copyrights, trademarks, rights of publicity) law. Other settings include community college, where I taught entertainment industry participants, and as an adjunct professor for my law school alma mater teaching law practice management skills to law students.

In contrast to an entire university semester, each of these settings is designed to impart information in a relatively short timeframe, e.g., a workshop, seminar, or even a seminar series will range from a single session of several hours (full day courses) to a few weeks, to deliver information in timeframes that are convenient for the audience. The university setting creates the opportunity to develop relationships with students that span the life of the semester. This creates its own dynamic -- with the potential to be either positive or negative -- as a backdrop for imparting knowledge.

STUDENTS TAUGHT & LEARNING OBJECTIVES. The settings described above cater to the schedules of professionals and professionals-in-the making (e.g., law school students), who have either acquired an undergraduate degree and seek specialized knowledge to further their careers and expand expertise, or non-degreed industry professionals seeking specialized knowledge for the same type of career/business enhancement. Accordingly, in my experience, these students are different from the traditional university student in foreseeable respects, e.g., age and professional job experience. However, I have observed additional differences that impact the teaching experience:

• Independence – The non-traditional student seeks solid texts/reference materials and class discussion that will focus on specific real-life situations likely to be encountered. Since the information obtained is likely to be applied without delay (as opposed to after graduation), non-traditional students are prepared to dig deeper outside the classroom, and to take a more proactive approach to learning. In contrast, the university student’s expectations reveal less independence. For example, the university student expects (not merely desires) an exam study guide, rather than developing one independently; or expects a direct answer to a question instead of acquiring and applying the analytical skills needed to dissect and learn to answer the question independently.

• Focus on grades – The very act of issuing grades that will impact graduate school and ultimately impact professional opportunities will create a degree of concern about grades that is both natural and expected. However, the adjustment (for me) has been in the paradoxes such a focus creates, i.e., the expectation of a good grade is not always proportionate to the level of effort the student exerts, and the focus on grades is not always balanced with a focus on learning.

• Self motivation/Enthusiasm – The reason a student enrolls in a class may range from a genuine interest in the topic, to satisfying a parental or university mandate. The latter,
For the most part, this journey has been very positive. During spring break, I had the opportunity to reminisce about the last nine months since being appointed to a faculty position at Belmont. We are living by the philosophy that you need to be a blessing and helping to develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills. I live by the philosophy that you need to be a blessing and helping to develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills. I live by the philosophy that you need to be a blessing and helping to develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills. I live by the philosophy that you need to be a blessing and helping to develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills.
Every three years, we have a time of transition in the Teaching Center. When Dr. Mike Awalt and a group of faculty first organized the Teaching Center, they felt that a rotating position of director would be healthy for the Belmont community. Faculty leaders can shape the conversation and the programming for the Teaching Center, and Belmont faculty can reap the benefit of an array of ideas and perspectives over the course of a teaching career at Belmont. Dr. Kim Boggs, the fifth director of the Teaching Center, has helped us deepen our understanding of problem-based and inquiry-based learning; has developed a format to help us exchange ideas as an intellectual community in the January Symposium; has brought speakers to campus on topics ranging from humor to managing the paper load; has offered one-on-one consultations and course reviews to many faculty; has linked faculty to programs focused on social justice and equality; has modeled effective service-learning and problem-based learning classes; has continued the TC traditions of luncheon discussions, grant programs, and orientation of new faculty. In addition to this long list of accomplishments on behalf of the faculty, she has also coordinated the nomination of two Tennessee CASE Professors of the Year and worked with a team to craft the successful Mentoring for Mission grant proposal. She accepted the leadership role for Belmont’s hosting of the 2008 Summer Institute for our partner universities in our ANAC consortium, and received accolades for that work from the participants in the highly competitive, I-bet-our-summer-institute-can-top-yours ANAC group! What is most singular about Kim’s contributions to our ongoing campus-wide exploration of the art of teaching is their imagination. She was willing to put new ideas out to the faculty, to think about New Faculty Orientation in different ways, and to propose new forums for us to have time together as a faculty community. Kim has indeed planted a garden during her tenure as Teaching Center director from which all of us will continue to gather ideas for years to come.

Beginning June 1, Dr. Merrie King will become the sixth Teaching Center Director. Merrie brings extensive experience with Parker Palmer’s Courage to Teach project, along with her own involvement with the Teaching Center and campus discussions of teaching over the years. Dr. Amy Hodges-Hamilton will serve as Assistant Director.

Thank you also to Dr. Andy Miller, Dr. Sybril Bennett, and Dr. Merrie King, all of whom have served as Assistant Directors during Kim’s tenure, and to Nanci Alsup, who continues to provide a welcoming voice and strong administrative assistance to the programming of the Teaching Center.