

When Professors Get in Their Own Way: Law Teaching and Academic Perfectionism

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I. Introduction

The law is a demanding discipline. It requires meticulousness and precision. So it's no surprise that many who are attracted to it (and perhaps especially those who teach it) can be ambitious, high strung, and even quite critical—of themselves and of others.¹ Yet those emblematic personality traits of legal academics can also be extremely counterproductive. This is an article about how diagnosing and addressing their own perfectionist tendencies can lead

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1 See, Kaci Bishop, *Framing Failure in the Legal Classroom: Techniques for Encouraging Growth & Resilience*, 70 ARK. L. REV. 959, 969, 979 (2018).

law professors to be more effective in the classroom, and possibly even to rediscover, or find for the first time, the joy of teaching.

While the article mentions a few specific teaching techniques that I have found useful, technique is not its focus. Rather, my goal here is to connect certain teaching challenges with those personality traits associated with academic perfectionism.² By “perfectionism,” I do *not* mean the desire to excel in life or at work; I’m not talking about high aspirations.³ Rather, perfectionism involves the self-defeating tendency to have *unrealistic* goals and expectations of oneself, which in turn can cause anxiety, depression, and debilitating procrastination, among other challenges.⁴ As is discussed further herein, perfectionism plagues many academics (as well as their students),⁵ causing unnecessary anxiety and stress. In some cases, perfectionism-related personality traits— traits that are rarely discussed in articles on pedagogy—can prevent teachers from recognizing and addressing dysfunctional dynamics in their classrooms.

While contextualizing the discussion against the backdrop of perfectionism literature, this account is fundamentally a personal story, describing my own challenges over more than 30 years of teaching large, required first-year courses.⁶ I hope the ideas presented here will save some inexperienced professors from beginner mistakes, as well as provide useful insights for experienced professors. I also expect that, for some (perhaps especially readers from my (baby boomer) generation), this paper might present some helpful insights on adjusting to the learning styles and needs of 21st century students. Finally, it is my hope that this discussion will help readers to become more relaxed about teaching—and to have more fun doing it.

I begin, in Part II, by recounting the challenges I faced in the classroom over the years and the factors that eventually prompted me to action. Part III surveys the scholarship on perfectionism, in both law and academia, and

2 The terms “academic perfectionism” and “perfectionism” as used in this article are to be distinguished, of course, from the jurisprudential concept of “legal perfectionism.” JOHN RAWLS, *A THEORY OF JUSTICE* 285-92 (1971).

3 *Accord*, Kerry Ann Rockquemore, *The Costs of Perfectionism*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Nov. 7, 2012), <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/11/07/start-series-essays-about-dealing-academic-perfectionism> [hereinafter Rockquemore, *Costs of Perfectionism*]. *Cf.* Paula Davis-Laack, *Are You a Perfectionist? Seven Negative Traits*, 89 WIS. LAW. 51, 51-52 (2016) (describing a desire to excel as “perfectionism striving,” and contrasting it with “perfectionistic concerns”).

4 Rockquemore, *Costs of Perfectionism*, *supra* note 3; *see infra* section III(B); *see also* Davis-Laack, *supra* note 3 (describing the high-aspirations sort of perfectionism as “much less likely to drive burnout” than the unrealistic-expectations form).

5 *See infra* section III(B) and text accompanying notes 88-94.

6 Most of my upper-class courses have been seminars or small classes of 30 students or less; I have never taught an upper-class course with more than 50 students. Nevertheless, I have found that the alternative approach to first-year teaching that I now use has had salutary effects in smaller class settings as well.

provides a checklist with which readers can assess their own tendencies toward perfectionist personalities. Part IV describes what I learned in confronting my own perfectionist personality traits, taking a close look at how a professor can become her own worst enemy, allowing the habits and emotions associated with academic perfectionism to create barriers to effective teaching. That Part also notes important pedagogical changes that were made possible by doing the emotional work of understanding my own perfectionism, including the benefits of viewing teaching as a performance. Part V offers some brief concluding thoughts.

II. The Bottom Falls Out

My teaching career perfectly illustrates the adage that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Like most newly hired law professors, I knew little about pedagogy⁷ when I began teaching law in 1984⁸—and not that much about myself either. The result was years of competent but not particularly fulfilling classroom experiences—especially in large first-year courses. My students learned a good deal about criminal law and torts, and some of them even enjoyed themselves along the way. But I felt little genuine human connection with many, if not most, and saw little evidence that they felt any with me.⁹ Moreover, I realize now, teaching was always stressful for me. I never felt that I was in my element; it was never seamless. And over time, it sometimes even felt like a chore.¹⁰

In addition, I was nagged by occasional but recurring themes in my large-course student evaluations—by comments that disappointed and made no sense to me. I was disorganized, said a number of students, and allowed

7 See generally MICHAEL H. SCHWARTZ, GERALD F. HESS & SOPHIE M. SPARROW, *WHAT THE BEST LAW TEACHERS DO* (2013) (analyzing techniques successful law professors use in the classroom—including being prepared, specific, transparent, and structured).

8 I co-directed the Legal Research and Writing program at the University of Virginia from 1984 to 1988, teaching six sections of the course each semester (with six different sets of research and writing assignments for each one). I also taught, as an overload and for no money, a seminar on Feminist Legal Theory. (Some readers might already see a theme developing here. For those who don't, see *infra* note 65 and accompanying text (discussing professorial overcommitting)). In 1989 I began a tenure-track position at the University of Denver, where this pattern continued. At one point, I co-directed (with the law school's fulltime legal clinic director) a two-year clinical course on battered women's clemency. The students in that clinic ultimately obtained sentence commutations for four of the clinic's seven clients. I neither sought nor received any course relief or monetary compensation for this work.

9 Compare BELL HOOKS, *TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS* 10 (1994) (“[T]he pleasure of teaching is an act of resistance countering the overwhelming boredom, uninterest, and apathy that so often characterize the way professors and students feel about teaching and learning, about the classroom experience.”).

10 Thus, I am not one of those who *lost* the joy of being a teacher; rather, I never had it to begin with. Although I often enjoyed the time I spent in the classroom, the stress and lack of connection described herein prevented anything approaching joy.

irrelevant student questions to take up too much time.¹¹ A few even said I was sarcastic or insensitive, or that I refused to entertain opinions different from my own. The students' perceptions were sometimes quite the opposite of what I intended to be doing—and often (especially as to organization, control of students, and tone¹²) quite different from what I *thought* I was doing. I felt that I was capable of teaching more effectively, and I aspired to do so, but didn't really know how to accomplish that. And I struggled with whether I thought the students' perceptions were necessarily correct.¹³

The challenges that eventually forced me to take a hard look at my teaching came rather late in my career. Slowly, over decades, my enthusiasm for the entire project of teaching law evaporated. My effectiveness and rapport with students had deteriorated to the point where the problem was difficult to ignore. I hated being in the classroom, where I often felt stressed and defeated. When a student asked a question that had just been asked and answered, or couldn't state a simple fact from the assigned reading (such as what the four elements of negligence are), or hadn't looked up an unfamiliar word in a case where it mattered (even after I had emphasized the importance of always doing so),¹⁴ I often found it quite irritating. From the feedback my students were then giving, a number of them were as unhappy as I was. I felt angry and hurt by their comments on the evaluations,¹⁵ which seemed to me to indicate

11 Although it was sometimes hard not to do so, I knew better than to take the comments on course evaluations at face value. However, such critiques recurred frequently enough, and didn't obviously relate to gender stereotypes of women, so I wasn't willing to dismiss them out of hand either. For further discussion of bias in evaluations, see *infra* note 19.

12 For example, what I saw as sardonic comments or teasing quips often struck the students as surly, or just plain mean. Only later did I remember how, in law school, I had often been surprised by my fellow students' lack of what seemed to me then to be simply the "thick skin" necessary to get through a legal education. Looking back now, I'm surprised by how unempathetic I was as a student, even to myself. Today, I realize that for many years I just did to students what had been done to me, still failing to appreciate how the teaching tone I was mimicking could strike others - and perhaps how unhelpful it had originally been to me and my classmates.

13 On the impact that gender and race bias can have on student reactions to professors, see *infra* note 20.

14 See, e.g., *Jenkins v. State*, 942 So. 2d 910, 913 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 2006) (validity of self-defense claim turns on whether defendant was in the "curtilage" of his property).

15 It was hard to read students' assumptions that I didn't care about my teaching (e.g., "Unorganized, unclear, and seemed to have our class at the bottom of her priority list"), as well as exaggerated descriptions of my behavior that were wildly inaccurate ("[I]t is clear that she does not want to be teaching our class. She shows up late nearly every day, doesn't really know the [sic] many of the students' names, doesn't know a lot about the cases, only offers one office hour a week for outside help and overall just seems very disinterested in our class."). (The reader will just have to trust me on that last one.) The criticisms *did*, of course, sometimes clearly raise the specter of gender bias (e.g., "In class it is clear Professor Ehrenreich has an extreme bias considering her area of study." And, "The text is clearly feminist and fails to give an objective viewpoint on criminal law."). See *infra* note 19 for further discussion of bias in evaluations. But some comments hit a nerve. Although I wasn't fully

oversensitivity,¹⁶ a lack of intellectual curiosity, and perhaps even a desire to be “spoon-fed.”¹⁷ And the students themselves seemed edgy, competitive, resistant, and unengaged.

It was sometimes hard for me to believe they were even trying. When a quick review of material that seemed simple and straightforward to me devolved into confusion and misunderstandings, I found it hard not to think the students hadn’t read carefully or weren’t paying attention. And when I tried to make up the time lost, my rushing only made the students more confused, me more resentful of them (for having put me in this mess—as it seemed at the time), and all of us more stressed. Inside, I seethed with unseemly anger—anger that I tried to hide by modulating it down, with great effort, to mere coolness. Nobody was happy.¹⁸

I was aware, of course, that at least some of the unfriendly atmosphere, as well as some of my negative evaluations, could have to do with gender bias. The students could have been reacting (in class and in the evaluations) much more strongly to my sometimes-tough tone than they would have to a similar teaching style from a male professor.¹⁹ Or they could have simply

aware of it yet, a part of me sometimes winced at the tone of my own voice in the classroom, and at the anger or frustration lurking behind it.

16 See *supra* note 13.

17 Spoon-feeding, of course, was considered the cardinal sin of the law professor in the mid-’70s (when I was in law school) and into the ’80s (when I began teaching). I didn’t necessarily disdain spoon-feeding at this point in my career; I believed professors should be transparent and not try to “hide the ball.” But I *was* beginning to perceive many of the students as anti-intellectual and perhaps lazy, perhaps leading me to feel a bit grudging about providing additional help.

18 At the time, I wouldn’t have been able to describe this dynamic as I just did. I only knew that the evaluations were spattered with harsh and angry comments that were sometimes very painful to read, that I was exhausted from years of tedious and time-consuming class preparation, and that the atmosphere in the classroom often felt tense and unfriendly (on both sides of the podium).

19 After all, the literature on student evaluations, and on gender bias in general, is rife with evidence that female professors walk a fine line between the Scylla of seeming weak and ineffectual and the Charybdis of being seen as competent (if you’re lucky) but cruel. See, e.g., Ann C. McGinley, *Reproducing Gender on Law School Faculties*, 2009 BYU L. REV. 99, 115 (2009); Lani Guinier et al., *Becoming Gentlemen: Women’s Experiences at One Ivy League Law School*, 143 U. PA. L. REV. 1, 57 n.142 (1994). My gray hair and the 40-year age gap between the students and me might have also, I knew, elicited biased evaluations.

been responding negatively to me as a female authority figure.^{20,21} But neither of these explanations seemed sufficient to account for my own increasing sense of dissatisfaction, or for the growing number of critical comments in the evaluations.²² I couldn't escape the nagging feeling that something else was going on as well.

As someone strongly committed to self-criticality, I ultimately came to the conclusion that the classroom dynamic in my 1L courses simply couldn't be all the students' fault, as much as I emotionally might have wanted to think it was. Not only did I know that I was sometimes curt in the classroom (as described above²³), but I also suspected that my teaching was becoming outdated— that pedagogical strategies honed in the 1980s and '90s just might not be effective with the students of today. Finally, I also felt that some student comments in class too easily upset me, and I wanted to modulate my reactions to them. Certain criminal law topics (rape, intimate partner violence, provocation, self-defense, vagueness, etc.) invariably elicited student statements that I found

- 20 I've rarely encountered a large 1L course without at least a couple of young white men (and occasionally a young white woman) whose arrogant or insistent questions strongly suggest an attempt (whether conscious or unconscious) to resist my authority by revealing my lack of knowledge. Such treatment of women law professors is not uncommon. See Christine Haight Farley, *Confronting Expectations: Women in the Legal Academy*, 8 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 333, 341 (1996). I don't know whether white male professors ever experience this type of behavior, but, even if they do, I suspect that such efforts to trip them up during class are much less common than those directed at white women—or people of color.
- 21 I also considered whether some students could be unconsciously affected by my visible anti-racist work and politics—in the law school (as a founding member of DU's Rocky Mountain Collective on Race, Place, and Law (<https://www.law.du.edu/rocky-mountain-collective-on-race-place>)), in the broader community (for many years, as national co-chair and/or board member of Latino/Latina Critical Legal Theory, Inc. (<http://latcrit.org/index/>)), and in my scholarship (see, e.g., Nancy Ehrenreich, *The Colonization of the Womb*, 43 DUKE L. J. 492 (1993) (critiquing imposition of court-ordered Cesarean sections primarily on low-income women of color). I knew it was possible that my efforts as a white woman to combat white supremacy could be read as traitorous to my race. See John Preston & Charlotte Chadderton, *Rediscovering 'Race Traitor': Toward a Critical Race Theory Informed Public Pedagogy*, 15 RACE ETHNICITY & EDUC. 85, 86 (2012) (discussing political origins of the term "race traitor" and noting that it was initially used by white Americans in the Southern United States to refer to whites who supported black demands for civil rights (citing V. Kannan, *Identity Treason: Race, Disability, Queerness, & the Ethics of (Post)identity Practices*, 49 IDENTITY & THEORY 149 (2008))). Cf. Jane Haggis, *Beyond Race & Whiteness? Reflections on the New Abolitionists & an Australian Critical Whiteness Studies*, 3 BORDERLANDS J. 1 (2004) (examining international movement known as the "New Abolitionism," whose members aim to undermine white supremacy by embracing "race traitor" epithet as accurately depicting their abnegation of their own racial privilege). However, it seemed unlikely that most 1L students would be that familiar with my political affiliations.
- 22 As for the students who openly challenged my authority, over the years I had developed strategies for handling them; it had been quite a while since they had been able to throw me off my game. And as to the harsh tone of the evaluations, I could tell that I was tense and sometimes irritable in class; it was simply too easy to attribute the student reactions to bias alone.
- 23 See *supra* note 18 and accompanying text.

hard to hear. In such moments, I could often feel my body tense and my tone harden—and I was pretty sure the effect was counterproductive.²⁴ I wanted to be a more patient and less emotional teacher.

Finally, regardless of what the exact problem was, I was determined not to become one of those professors whom we all know—the ones who give up, becoming bitter and defeated. Who virtually laminate their class notes and dismiss their students as lazy, needy, and demanding.²⁵ I didn't want to head down that road.

So, it was time to reboot.²⁶

First, I met with other professors, both those known to be popular with students and those I respected regardless of what their evaluations might say. I observed other professors' classes and discussed with several colleagues their approaches to teaching. I invited a couple of trusted fellow faculty to watch my classes and debrief with me about them afterward. I grilled my daughter, a medical student at the time, about what it felt like to be in large, professional-education classes with competitive and bright fellow students. I chatted informally with faculty friends—and I found a therapist.

Prompted by some of these consultations, I began to interrogate my own assumptions and emotions about teaching, forcing myself to think less about *what* to teach and much more about *how* to teach it. Over the ensuing several years, I learned many things about how I could improve my effectiveness in the classroom, and just as many things about myself. Most importantly, I diagnosed my own academic perfectionism, and, once I began to get it under control, I was able to calmly and constructively devise and implement pedagogical changes that would improve both my students' learning experience and my own engagement with them. Eventually, I came to enjoy myself in the classroom more than I ever had before, and my course evaluations in recent years have suggested that many of my students now enjoy themselves as well.²⁷ The less perfectionist I became, the more successful I was in the classroom.

III. Academic Perfectionism

Most of the work I did and insights I gained over the last several years have been due to the input and support of some extraordinarily wise and insightful friends, family, and advisors. But it was when I discovered the literature on

24 For further discussion of such “hot” topics, see *infra* note 134.

25 As should become clear as this article proceeds, I have a great deal of sympathy for such individuals, and believe that, but for luck, stubbornness, and some very wise counsel, I might have ended up the same way.

26 For an interesting, influential, and sometimes inspirational account of a similar rebooting undertaken by a former professor of sociology, see PARKER J. PALMER, *THE COURAGE TO TEACH: EXPLORING THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF A TEACHER'S LIFE* (3d ed. 2017).

27 Of course, there are many more things I'd love to learn and accomplish with my teaching. And I'm mindful of the fact that one cannot change one's personality overnight—or perhaps ever. But I'm very happy with the progress I've made thus far.

“academic perfectionism” and diagnosed my own perfectionism that I realized I was not alone, that the problems with which I had been struggling afflicted many others as well. This Part discusses the phenomenon of the perfectionist personality, and how it can affect law professors. First, because my goal is to help others recognize their own perfectionism and address it, we begin with a short quiz. Readers who have come this far might suspect that they are perfectionists. Section A gives readers the chance to self-diagnose—to determine whether they are prone to the sort of anxiety and lack of confidence that, in my case and others,²⁸ has blocked the path to becoming a comfortable and more effective teacher.

Section B then summarizes the scholarly literature on perfectionism—in the legal field, in the academy, and in the world of law teaching. It takes a look not only at how perfectionism manifests among academics and lawyers in particular, but also at the impact a perfectionist personality can have on anxiety level, work performance, and enjoyment of life.

a. Fear and (Self-)Loathing in the Classroom²⁸—Diagnosing Perfectionism in Law Teaching

The perfectionism literature contains a number of traits lists and diagnostic tests designed to identify those with perfectionist tendencies.²⁹ But I designed the questions below by drawing on my own experience, as well as on informal conversations with friends and colleagues. As you read each of the bullet points below, please ask yourself: Does this ever happen to me?

1. You feel badly if a student asks a question you don't know the answer to, and you promise to look up the answer by next class.
2. You find it very uncomfortable when you have to inconvenience the students (change reading assignments, cancel a class, etc.) or when you make mistakes (errors on the syllabus, misstatements in class, typos on the final—or, the worst: grading errors), and you struggle with how to deal with such inevitable contingencies. (For example, perhaps you wonder whether you should acknowledge, or tell the students about, the situation (even if it's small or relatively unimportant) or whether you should apologize, explain why it happened, or invite student input on the best solution.)
3. Your friends/colleagues tell you that you share too much information with your students. Or share too little. (That is, you tend to be either too candid with the students or too guarded. Your e-mails to them

²⁸ With a nod to Hunter S. Thompson, author of the 1960s novel-turned-movie cult classic *FEAR & LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS* (1971).

²⁹ See, e.g., Davis-Laack, *supra* note 3, at 52 (listing the following traits of perfectionism: fear of failure, all-or-nothing thinking, defensiveness, finding fault with self and others, inflexibility, excessive need for control, and lack of trust in others (leading, among practicing lawyers, to micromanaging)). See also Paul L. Hewitt & Gordon L. Flett, *Perfectionism & Depression: A Multidimensional Analysis*, 5 J. SOC. BEHAV. & PERSONALITY 423, 438 (1990) [hereinafter Hewitt et al., *Perfectionism & Depression*] (listing questions used in Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, the most commonly used diagnostic test).

sound either too stiff and dictatorial or too open and accommodating. Or perhaps you tend to bounce back and forth between such extremes.)

4. You're painfully aware of the clock, especially as the semester wanes and you get further and further behind. You worry that the students will think you're incompetent because you can't follow your own syllabus. You rush through things a lot.
5. You tend to feel somewhat stilted in the classroom, not really yourself. It usually feels like work. And the students don't seem relaxed either. They often respond defensively to you, and they don't laugh at your jokes—even the funny ones.
6. You spend a lot of time looking down at your class notes. You don't stray far from the lectern and panic if you do, afraid that you won't know what comes next.
7. You waste valuable time obsessively correcting every typo or spelling error in grocery lists, calendar entries, and yes: class notes—even though nobody but you will ever see them.
8. You spend hours and hours preparing for class, and still feel unprepared.
9. At times, the workload can seem quite overwhelming, and you can feel completely out of control.
10. You occasionally freeze in class. Actually freeze—not just forget for a second what you wanted to say next. This usually happens when you think you've made a big mistake, said something totally wrong. Your mind goes blank and you have no idea what to say. So you babble something, and you're sure the students can see right through you. Time stands still and you suspect that life as you know it is over.
11. Sometimes you feel so stressed (both in class and out, when preparing) that you become grouchy and snarky with everyone – friends, your family, the students.
12. Sometimes you feel very angry at the students during class—anger that you suspect is disproportionate to whatever sin the particular individual (or the entire class) ostensibly committed.
13. You even sometimes feel hurt and resentful toward the students as well. Their seemingly disengaged demeanor in class and/or negative comments on evaluations hurt a lot; so you tell yourself they're just (pick your adjective) spoiled, whiny, demanding, arrogant, lazy, narrow-minded, defensive, etc..

If you have experienced a significant number of these feelings, perhaps you have perfectionist tendencies.³⁰ If so, you're not alone. I've heard many law professors express one or more of the anxious thoughts listed above, and an

³⁰ In addition, because this list doesn't capture all perfectionists, you might be one even if your perfectionism is expressed in ways not included here. For example, if you feel that you need to be exceptionally upbeat, cheerful, positive, and energetic all the time in every class, my guess is you might have perfectionist tendencies as well.

unscientific survey that I conducted of a small group of legal academic friends and colleagues revealed that a number of them also had had such thoughts. Of nine professors who answered the survey, seven responded “yes” to at least 25 percent of the items listed above, and four responded “yes” to half or more.³¹ As is discussed below, an expert who assists law faculty battling anxiety and unhappiness in their jobs reports encountering similar thoughts and feelings among those who come to her for help.³² For that and other reasons, it seems to me that law professors, with our history of performing well in law school and our tendency to have self-critical, driven personalities, might be particularly vulnerable to academic perfectionism. In my own personal experience, that was definitely the case. The next section gives a brief account of what we know about perfectionism, including whom it afflicts and what can be done about it.

b. The Perils of Perfectionism

Perfectionism has been the topic of psychological study for several decades,³³ as researchers have become interested in overachievers with Type A personalities—personalities that lead not only to professional success, as is often the case, but sometimes also (ironically) to stress and low self-esteem as well. This section notes some salient aspects of the literature on perfectionism, with particular attention to perfectionism among lawyers and academics.

Perfectionism has been defined as “the tendency to set and to pursue unrealistically high goals and standards for oneself across many domains.”³⁴ Researchers report that perfectionism plagues many people, across many professions, including in universities. It has been found among children,³⁵

31 Informal Law Professor Perfectionism Survey (originals on file with author). IRB determination also on file with author.

32 See Rockquemore, *Costs of Perfectionism*, *supra* note 3.

33 Research on perfectionism goes back to the mid-1960s. See Marc H. Hollander, *Perfectionism*, 6 *COMPREHENSIVE PSYCHIATRY* 94, 94 (1965). The topic began receiving quite a lot of attention in the 1990s. A simple Google Scholar search on “perfectionism” produces over 1000 published studies from 1990 to 1999.

34 A.J. Onwuegbuzie, *Academic Procrastinators & Perfectionistic Tendencies Among Graduate Students*, 15 *J. SOC. BEHAV. & PERSONALITY* 103, 104 (2000) (citing P.L. Hewitt & G.L. Flett, *Perfectionism in Self & Social Contexts: Conceptualization Assessment & Association with Psychopathology*, 60 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 456-70 (1991) [hereinafter Hewitt & Flett, *Social Contexts*]; see also Rockquemore, *Costs of Perfectionism*, *supra* note 3 (describing perfectionism as “involving self-defeating thoughts and behaviors that are aimed at reaching an unrealistic goal (perfection)”); BRENÉ BROWN, *THE GIFTS OF IMPERFECTION: LET GO OF WHO YOU THINK YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE & EMBRACE WHO YOU ARE* 57 (2010) (“Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: If I look perfect, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame. It is the fear that we are not good enough.”).

35 Paul L. Hewitt et al., *Perfectionism in Children: Associations with Depression, Anxiety, & Anger*, 32 *PERSONALITY INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES* 1049, 1057 (2002) [hereinafter Hewitt et al., *Perfectionism in Children*].

adolescents,³⁶ undergraduate³⁷ and graduate students,³⁸ and non-student adults.³⁹ While commentators have occasionally debated whether perfectionism should be seen as unhealthy and self-defeating or ambitious and beneficial,⁴⁰ and scholars have elaborated various subcategories of the phenomenon,⁴¹ consensus seems to exist that perfectionism has a number of common negative effects. It has been tied to fear of failure⁴² and its correlate, procrastination;⁴³ to stress, depression, and anxiety;⁴⁴ to pessimism;⁴⁵ and to low self-esteem.⁴⁶

One of the earliest analyses of the costs (and causes) of perfectionist personality traits was an influential book by psychoanalyst Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. Miller argued that children who are highly intelligent, as well as very sensitive and emotionally aware, can become anxious and perfectionist adults who lack self-confidence and look to others for validation

- 36 L.E. Damian et al., *Perfectionistic Concerns Predict Increases in Adolescents' Anxiety Symptoms: A Three-wave Longitudinal Study*, 30 ANXIETY, STRESS, & COPING 551, 558 (2016).
- 37 John G. H. Dunn et al., *An Examination of the Domain Specificity of Perfectionism Among Intercollegiate Student-athletes*, 38 PERSONALITY INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES 1439, 1444-45 (2005); Maureen L. Minarik & Anthony H. Ahrens, *Relations of Eating Behavior & Symptoms of Depression & Anxiety to the Dimensions of Perfectionism Among Undergraduate Women*, 20 COGNITIVE THERAPY & RES. 155, 161-62 (1996).
- 38 Onwuegbuzie, *supra* note 35, at 104.
- 39 See generally Martin M. Smith et al., *Are Perfectionism Dimensions Risk Factors for Anxiety Symptoms? A Meta-Analysis of 11 Longitudinal Studies*, 31 ANXIETY, STRESS, & COPING 4 (2018) (examining several studies on perfectionism in adults).
- 40 See Simon B. Sherry et al., *Perfectionism Dimensions & Research Productivity in Psychology Professors: Implications for Understanding the (Mal)adaptiveness of Perfectionism*, 42 J. BEHAV. SCI. 273 (2010) (discussing that debate and concluding that perfectionism can be either adaptive or maladaptive).
- 41 Those categories include (1) self-oriented perfectionism, which entails expecting the self to be perfect; (2) other-oriented perfectionism, which entails demanding and expecting others to be perfect; and (3) socially prescribed perfectionism, which involves perceptions that others require oneself to be perfect. Hewitt et al., *Perfectionism in Children*, *supra* note 35, at 1050.
- 42 See Bishop, *supra* note 1 (discussing how law students with perfectionist traits often fear failure).
- 43 *Academic procrastination* has been tied to other-perfectionism: “[I]t is likely that academic procrastinators are overly concerned about the standards that others hold for them . . . and the extent to which they are expected by others to be perfect.” Onwuegbuzie, *supra* note 34, at 108.
- 44 See Thomas E. Joiner & Norman B. Schmidt, *Dimensions of Perfectionism, Life Stress, & Depressed & Anxious Symptoms: Prospective Support for Diathesis-stress But Not Specific Vulnerability Among Male Undergraduates*, 14 J. SOC. & CLINICAL PSYCHOL. 165 (1995) (examining relationship among perfectionism, stress, anxiety, and depression); see also Smith et al., *supra* note 39 (studying various aspects of perfectionism as risk factors for anxiety).
- 45 Martin E.P. Seligman et al., *Why Lawyers Are Unhappy*, 23 CARDOZO L. REV. 33, 50 (2001).
- 46 See Jessica J. Taylor et al., *The Good, the Bad, & the Interactive: Evaluative Concern Perfectionism Moderates the Effect of Personal Strivings Perfectionism on Self-esteem*, 95 PERSONALITY INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES 1 (2016) (analyzing how perfectionism impacts self-esteem).

of their worth.⁴⁷ Miller's work spawned a virtual cottage industry of studies of high-achieving children⁴⁸ and adults⁴⁹ and influenced treatment methodologies for decades.⁵⁰

Researchers have found a connection between perfectionism and pessimism, both of which are common traits of successful lawyers and can lead to depression and anxiety.⁵¹ Perfectionism and perfectionist tendencies "aren't always consistent with healthy coping skills and the type of emotional elasticity necessary to endure the unrelenting pressure and unexpected disappointments that a career in law can bring."⁵² Thus, 90 percent of lawyers test in the bottom half of the population for resiliency, exhibiting thin skin in the face of criticism, rejection, or setbacks.⁵³

Perfectionism within academic institutions is so common that a separate label—academic perfectionism—has been coined for it; at least one observer has argued that the academy actually "exacerbates perfectionism."⁵⁴ Perfectionism

47 See Marilyn Wedge, *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Gifted Child Loses Something Very Precious*, PSYCH. TODAY (June 27, 2012), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/suffer-the-children/201206/the-drama-the-gifted-child> ("Miller's main point in the book is that the gifted child—the child who is more intelligent, more sensitive and more emotionally aware than other children—can be so attuned to her parents' expectations that she does whatever it takes to fulfill these expectations while ignoring her own feelings and needs According to Miller, . . . [i]n adulthood, the child who has always tried to please his parents is constantly looking to others for approval"); see also *Review: The Drama of the Gifted Child*, CULTURE & YOUTH STUD. (2019), <http://cultureandyouth.org/youth-ministry/books-youth-ministry/the-drama-of-the-gifted-child/> [hereinafter *Review*] ("Sensing a restriction on expressing their true feelings, [such children] can grow up with an underlying sense of worthlessness," eventually becoming "approval junkies."). It appears likely that, as adults, such gifted children could be likely to possess many of the validation-seeking impulses that often characterize perfectionists.

48 Matt Seaton, *Suffer the Little Children*, THE GUARDIAN (Apr. 20, 2005), <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2005/apr/20/childrenservices.book>.

49 See Smith et al., *supra* note 39.

50 Some have criticized her work as well. See Seaton, *supra* note 48 (noting one author's critique that Miller's work "[u]ltimately . . . fed into a much more conservative climate that wanted to place the blame for all society's ills on bad parenting." (quoting Prof. Lynn Segal at Bierbeck College)). For the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to note Miller's focus on perfectionism in high-achieving individuals, such as law professors.

51 See Joiner & Schmidt, *supra* note 44.

52 See Bishop, *supra* note 1 (citing Patrick Krill, *Why Lawyers Are Prone to Suicide*, CNN (Jan. 21, 2014), <https://www.cnn.com/2014/01/20/opinion/krill-lawyers-suicide/index.html>).

53 Larry Richard, *Herding Cats: The Lawyer Personality Revealed*, 29 ALTMAN WEIL REPORT TO LEGAL MANAGEMENT, no. 11, Aug. 2002, at 1, <http://www.managingpartnerforum.org/tasks/sites/mpf/assets/image/MPF%20-%20WEBSITE%20-%20ARTICLE%20-%20Herding%20Cats%20-%20Richardsr.pdf>.

54 Rockquemore elaborates: "[I]f you have perfectionist tendencies, the academy is an awfully difficult place to overcome them because the culture and structure of academic institutions exacerbates perfectionism. Environments where there are no objective and transparent criteria for tenure and promotion, but instead a moving target of ever-escalating

affects both teachers and students alike.⁵⁵ While certain dimensions of it can be adaptive,⁵⁶ other dimensions (e.g., excessive concern over mistakes or living up to others' expectations) are generally regarded as maladaptive.⁵⁷ A 2010 study of graduate program psychology professors, for example, showed that those striving for perfection and holding unrealistic self-expectations are less likely to produce publications, receive citations, and publish in high-impact journals.⁵⁸ These findings suggest perfectionism in academia may have an unfavorable impact on career achievements.⁵⁹

The most useful discussion of academic perfectionism among *law* professors is a series of five essays (as well as various e-mails and other writings) by sociologist Kerry Ann Rockquemore.⁶⁰ Rockquemore distinguishes perfectionism from healthy ambition or goal orientation, noting that the former “involves self-defeating thoughts and behaviors that are aimed at reaching an unrealistic goal (perfection).”⁶¹ She argues that “there’s a unique flavor” to perfectionism in the academic context, where it is exacerbated by the subjective and constantly changing standards by which professors’ performance is judged.⁶² Rockquemore focuses primarily on the impact perfectionism can

expectations (that are subjectively applied), are particularly challenging for perfectionists.” See Rockquemore, *Costs of Perfectionism*, *supra* note 3.

- 55 For a discussion of student perfectionism and the importance, for teachers, of being aware of it, see *infra* text accompanying notes 88–93.
- 56 Some researchers view self-imposed perfectionism as primarily an adaptive characteristic, while others view it as maladaptive with high potential to undermine well-being and impede achievement. Gordon L. Flett & Paul L. Hewitt, *Positive Versus Negative Perfectionism in Psychopathology: A Comment on Slade & Owens’s Dual Process Model*, 30 BEHAV. MODIFICATION 472, 472 (2006) [hereinafter Flett & Hewitt, *Positive Versus Negative Perfectionism*].
- 57 See Randy O. Frost et al., *The Dimensions of Perfectionism*, 14 COGNITIVE THERAPY & RES. 449 (1990) (discussing some perfectionism traits as being seen to be maladaptive); see also Hewitt et al., *Perfectionism in Children*, *supra* note 35 (examining perfectionism traits that rise to clinically assessed maladaptive behavior).
- 58 Sherry et al., *supra* note 40, at 281.
- 59 Cf. Leslie Culver, *The Rise of Self Sidelining*, 39 WISC. RTS. L. REP. 173 (2018) (discussing “imposter syndrome” (feeling as if one will never measure up) as a contributor to women’s self-sidelining).
- 60 Dr. Rockquemore left a tenured sociology professorship to start the National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity. See *About Us*, NATIONAL CENTER FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT & DIVERSITY (2019), <https://www.facultydiversity.org/about-us>. See also Bishop, *supra* note 1 (discussing fear of failure, and related perfectionism, among law students and proposing pedagogical changes to help students learn to avoid, accept, and learn from failures); David A. Rasch & Meehan Rasch, *Overcoming Writer’s Block and Procrastination for Attorneys, Law Students, and Law Professors*, 43 N.M. L. REV. 193, 211 (2013) (describing how perfectionism can cause lawyers, law professors, and law students to procrastinate over writing).
- 61 Rockquemore, *Costs of Perfectionism*, *supra* note 3.
- 62 See *id.* at 52 (“When perfection is the goal and external validation is required to know we’ve met the goal, it leaves us constantly feeling frustrated and disappointed, even when we’re doing an extraordinary amount of high-quality work.”).

have on a law professor's scholarship, describing how expecting themselves to write perfect law review articles can lead law faculty to procrastinate and avoid writing altogether, to hold onto articles long after they're ready for submission, and to eschew seeking input from colleagues.⁶³ Such perfectionist behavior, she notes, can lead to subpar scholarly performance.⁶⁴

As to the impact of perfectionism on teaching, Rockquemore emphasizes what she calls "over-functioning"—basically, taking on too much. For example, perfectionist professors might assign more homework than is necessary (thereby creating more grading for themselves), be overly fastidious in that grading (thereby spending more time on it than others would), and overprepare for classes, including (my personal favorite⁶⁵) preparing far more material than there is time to present.⁶⁶

Rockquemore suggests several strategies for curtailing this type of perfectionism, including reassessing the standards by which you measure yourself, keeping track of exactly what you're spending time on, and experimenting with doing things differently—all of which seem sensible and helpful.⁶⁷ In the next Part, I share some additional thoughts on the subject, stemming from the experience of discovering and addressing my own academic perfectionism. Unlike Rockquemore, I focus on teaching rather than scholarship. I also delve more deeply into the impact that anxiety and unexamined emotions can have on a teacher's effectiveness and comfort while in the classroom.

63 See Kerry Ann Rockquemore, *Writing and Procrastination*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Nov. 21, 2012), <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/11/21/essay-issues-perfectionism-writing-and-procrastination> [hereinafter Rockquemore, *Writing*].

64 Rockquemore, *Costs of Perfectionism*, *supra* note 3 (citing a study that found perfectionism to correlate negatively with productivity and citation of one's work). In one particularly compelling discussion, Rockquemore lists all the roles at which perfectionist law professors often expect themselves to excel, simultaneously. Omitting the brief (but not unimportant) description she gives of each item, here is the list: Super-Teacher, Super-Colleague, Super-Researcher, Super-Public Intellectual, Super-Role Model, Super-Institutional Change Agent, and Super-Community Activist. To this reader, the familiarity of all those self-expectations starkly highlighted the absurd length of the list. Rockquemore's subsequent comment is also enlightening: "The first three expectations can occur among any tenure-track faculty member with a perfectionist streak, but the rest seem to be especially common among under-represented faculty." She attributes such tendencies to the combined effects of "disproportionate requests, expectations, and pressures from others" and "a personal desire to be the professor-you-never-had." E-mail from Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Founder, Nat'l Ctr. for Faculty Dev. & Diversity, forwarded to the author by Sahar Aziz, Professor of Law and Chancellor's Social Justice Scholar, Rutgers Law School (Oct. 15, 2018) (on file with author).

65 See discussion *infra* Section IV(B)(3)(b).

66 Rockquemore, *Writing*, *supra* note 63.

67 *Id.*

IV. How Perfectionist Law Professors Can Get in Their Own Way—and What They Can Do About It

Through a years-long process of critically examining my teaching, as well as my feelings about it, I discovered several perfectionism-related personality traits that had been preventing me from understanding and improving the dynamics in my classrooms—including some of those traits that are rarely discussed in pieces on pedagogy.⁶⁸ Section A discusses the three important traits that I needed to address. As is described in section B, addressing those aspects of my personality enabled me to become more aware of the nature of my student audience, on both intellectual and emotional dimensions, and to learn to meet the students where they are. Section C explains how, once I put my own perfectionism in check and began to understand my audience, I was able to make a variety of additional pedagogical changes that helped improve both student learning and the comfort level of all of us. Finally, section D engages the idea of teaching as performance. In particular, it tackles some of the challenging issues of professional identity and classroom persona that can face law teachers, especially those from one or more outsider groups (such as women and racialized minorities), exploring how overcoming perfectionism can assist them in handling such challenges.

Of course, the strategies I developed are based on my own personal experience; they might not work for everybody. Thus, readers should view each item presented here as merely a suggestion, to take or leave as they see fit.

A. Three Necessary First Steps

Others might have approached this project differently. For me, three steps turned out to be crucial to revamp my teaching: not seeking validation from the students, not taking things they did or said in the classroom personally, and not having unrealistic expectations of both them and myself.

68 Cf. Palmer, *supra* note 26 (discussing his own tendency to “try to gain power by barricading myself behind the podium and my status while wielding the threat of grades”).

1. *First and Foremost: Not Seeking Validation from Students*

Like many perfectionists,⁶⁹ I was for many years an approval junky.⁷⁰ As I explain further below, I wanted the students to like me, to feel gratitude and affection for me—yes, even to laugh at my jokes. But I found that as long as I felt that way about them, many of the changes discussed below were beyond my reach. Seeking student approval, I found, saps one’s confidence, causes hesitation and uncertainty, and distracts from the task at hand—*teaching* them. It’s amazing how much a teacher’s anxiety around classroom performance can be reduced simply by deciding not to care whether students like her personally.⁷¹

I believe that when a professor cares too much about whether the students like him, he can cede far too much power to them, resulting in great anxiety for the professor. Obsessing about every mistake, every communication,⁷² wastes precious time and emotional energy. And while a good laugh from the class is a nice bonus, and a favorable evaluation may be even better (and useful politically with one’s employer), neither can be the *goal*. The goal, I’ve come to believe, must be to *teach* the students, not to please or entertain them. In fact, if you think about it, at least when teaching already-anxious, 1L students, probably the last thing likely to be helpful is to base your sense of self-worth primarily on whether those students seem to like you.

This is complicated, of course. First of all, most of us don’t have the luxury of forgetting all about students’ opinions of us, given that our administrations usually use evaluations, and often over-rely on them, for promotion, tenure, and salary decisions.⁷³ This overreliance is problematic, given the well-established

69 Seeking validation from others is a common trait among perfectionists (*see supra* text accompanying notes 48 and 55), and overinvestment in one’s popularity with students is certainly not an uncommon trait among law professors in particular. Perhaps others have encountered some variation of the wry comment I’ve frequently heard from colleagues and friends in the legal academy: “We were all such nerds in high school that, in our classrooms today, we unconsciously seek the popularity that eluded us before!” Returning for a moment to Alice Miller’s work, *see* Wedge, *supra* note 47, it seems plausible that an adult law professor who fits the profile of the gifted child might tend to invest her sense of self-worth in the approval of not only her colleagues but also her *students*. The approval-seeking in which such individuals engage, according to Miller’s theory, could manifest in their pedagogy as well as in their scholarship and other professional interactions. In any event, whatever the reason why we seek approval from others, what matters for this discussion is the impact that such a tendency can have on pedagogy.

70 I’ve appropriated the term “approval junky” from *Review*, *supra* note 47.

71 It’s worth noting, though, that I draw a distinction between being liked by students and being an effective and supportive teacher.

72 *See, e.g.*, questions 1, 2, 3, and 10 on the perfectionism survey, *supra* Section III(A).

73 Lillian MacNell et al., *What’s in a Name: Exposing Gender Bias in Student Rating of Teaching*, 40 INNOVATIVE HIGHER EDUC. 291, 292 (2015); *see also* B.G. DAVIS, TOOLS FOR TEACHING 534 (2009); Deborah J. Merritt, *Bias, the Brain, and Student Evaluations of Teaching*, 82 ST. JOHN’S L. REV. 235 (2008) (discussing the role of professor race, gender, and political ideology in student evaluations). In my opinion, student assessments of faculty should never be the sole

influence of unconscious bias on student evaluations.⁷⁴ Thus, I'm convinced that it's essential to guard against *believing* the evaluations even if one thinks they might be important to one's success professionally. In other words, even if a professor has strategic or practical reasons to be concerned about negative comments, she ought not to internalize whatever the students might have said about her teaching; she should resist treating their assessments as an accurate depiction of her pedagogical effectiveness.

On the other hand, I've also come to believe that student comments in evaluations can sometimes be useful. In short, while I try to avoid taking them at face value, I also resist simply dismissing them out of hand. I have found that evaluations can provide valuable information—clues about changes that would benefit one's effectiveness in the classroom,⁷⁵ evidence of what's working and what's not. This is not to deny they can also be dangerously mojo-harming. In fact, in recent years I have tended not to read mine, relying instead on a trusted friend or family member to apprise me of their general thrust and any specific changes I might want to consider making in response to them. For me, at least, valuable information on my teaching effectiveness would be lost without knowing (at least the gist of) what the evaluations say.

That said, it is literally impossible to determine whether one's evaluations are at all useful or relevant unless one has independently assessed one's teaching. Doing that is perhaps especially important for faculty who belong to marginalized and stereotyped groups that are vulnerable to biased evaluations. Commitment to self-assessment helped me to realize that my perfectionism had created in me an emotional need to be liked by the students that *preceded* (i.e., existed independently of) any concern I might have about the external impact of evaluations—and could only be exacerbated by overfocusing on student comments. Especially because evaluations can be biased and difficult to read, it was crucial for me not to cede to the students—or administrators or anyone else—the ultimate assessment of my own worth.⁷⁶

Once I stopped seeking validation from students, I was able to focus on what the students *needed*, rather than on what they thought of my classroom performance.⁷⁷ Changing that focus significantly increased my confidence and

means of evaluating teaching performance.

74 MacNell, *supra* note 73, at 301; *see also* Merritt, *supra* note 73.

75 *See, e.g.*, discussion *infra* text accompanying note 119, about how student complaints about “disorganized” classes and “irrelevant” questions from other students ultimately led me to important insights about how I was conducting class discussion.

76 When their professor stops caring about impressing them, students themselves are also likely to benefit. When the professor projects calm confidence, the students will be able to trust him and to have faith that he knows what he's doing. This faith, I believe, can calm their own anxieties about whether they have a reliable guide to that first year.

77 *Compare* PALMER, *supra* note 26 (stating, “[Jane] Thompkins says that her obsession as a teacher had not been with helping students to learn . . . but rather with ‘(a) showing the students how smart I was; (b) showing them how knowledgeable I was; and (c) showing

calmness around teaching, opening the door to several other changes that reduced my stress and increased my effectiveness as a law professor.

2. *Second, Not Taking Things Personally*

For me, almost as important as learning not to seek approval from others was learning not to take things personally in the classroom. We law professors don't usually talk about this, but oversensitivity can sometimes get in our way as teachers. We can bounce back and forth between (on the one hand) trying to please our students, to get them to like us, and (on the other hand) feeling angry, resentful, and rejected when they don't seem to be our fans, sometimes even treating them harshly in response.

It's crucial to realize that it's not all about you. When a student asks the exact same question that was just asked by someone else, that doesn't necessarily indicate inattention or disrespect. Maybe she was busy writing down something important that had come up just *before* that question. Maybe she was thinking about a critique of the case that she wanted to share. Maybe she was stunned by your incredibly articulate and insightful synopsis of the pros and cons of the applicable rule.⁷⁸ The very same oversensitivity that you may sometimes believe you see in law students⁷⁹ may bedevil *you* as well. After all, law professors can *also* sometimes be anxious, competitive people with fragile egos.

It's of course hard to know what makes any of us get curt or feel resentful in the classroom. Certainly, anxiety often plays a role. But I have become convinced that sometimes our own self-perfectionism (self-imposed standards that we expect ourselves to live up to)⁸⁰ can even be projected onto the students, causing us to feel irritation at class members when they fail to perform perfectly.⁸¹ It's worth exploring the aspects of our own personalities and histories that can cause these sorts of things to happen.

them how well prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help the students learn but to act in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me.” (quoting Jane Thompkins, *Pedagogy of the Distressed*, 52 COLL. ENG. 653, 654 (1991)).

78 And, besides, as one of my advisors pointed out, a repeat of the same question offers a teaching opportunity. One can simply say, “I think that’s similar to what X just asked; can anybody answer it for me?”

79 See *supra*, text accompanying note 17.

80 See Hewitt et al., *Perfectionism in Children*, *supra* note 35, at 1050.

81 On the psychological phenomenon of projection, see P. Rohleder, *Projection*, THOMAS TEO (ed.), *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY* (2014) (describing “projection” as a type of defense mechanism in psychoanalytic theory, whereby unacceptable feelings and self-attributes within an individual are disavowed and attributed to someone else). Cf. RENÉ BROWN, *I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST ME* 30, 40 (2007) (describing how shame, defined as “... feeling that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging,” can cause people to judge or blame others).

3. *Having Realistic Expectations of Yourself and Your Students*

In addition to not taking things personally, I also had to learn to be kinder to myself, thereby helping me to be kinder to my students as well.⁸² Through learning to have realistic expectations of all of us, I began to recognize my own control over conditions that created stress. As it turned out, my Type A perfectionist tendencies were often causing me to make things unnecessarily hard for both myself and my students. Expecting yourself never to make mistakes, to cover all the material originally listed on the syllabus and finish each day's material that day, not only to teach the students but to entertain and delight them, is a recipe for disappointment. Especially when applied to coverage, such perfectionism can cause setting (and sticking to) unrealistic goals that guarantee failure.

Everybody falls behind in class sometimes. But, when the students didn't pick up the material as quickly as I thought they would or took great interest in (and class time on) a topic I expected to cover quickly, I struggled with how to react to the time I was losing. Cutting short the class discussion on the spur of the moment often produced a truncated treatment of the material that left the students feeling stressed and confused and made me worry that I'd omitted too much. But the alternative approach of rushing through the material to keep from falling further behind often had similar effects. After struggling with time management for quite a long time, I eventually concluded that the best thing to do when I unexpectedly fell behind was to continue on as usual, calmly finishing as much as I could *without* rushing. Then, after class, when I could be calm and take my time, I would give myself permission to consider cutting some material going forward.

However, those decisions about what to cut posed additional challenges. Surprisingly, my perfectionism often prevented me from making the pragmatic, sensible changes in the syllabus that were needed. For some reason, I felt compelled to try to accomplish the coverage task I had originally set out for myself, even when it was impracticable to do so. I had to learn to resist the temptation to back my own self into a corner, falling into the trap of feeling captive to course structure or elements that *I myself* had created to begin with.⁸³ Over time, I found that being overly stressed because I was behind

82 Compare HOOKS, *supra* note 10, at 15 (“[T]eachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students.”).

83 For example, for years I have asked my students to struggle with how to determine the *mens rea* for “circumstances” elements in a criminal statute when the defendant is charged with attempting to commit that crime. The analysis is complicated and difficult, and differs somewhat depending on whether common-law rules or Model Penal Code rules are applied. See JOSHUA DRESSLER, UNDERSTANDING CRIMINAL LAW 389, 408 (6th ed. 2012). Many never master it, and even those who do likely forget it by the time they take the bar. More importantly, the issue rarely comes up in criminal cases. Yet, for some reason—perhaps because I like the neatness and completeness of the analysis, perhaps because I suspect that someday knowing about it will help one of my students win a case—I’ve found it almost impossible to omit this material from my course. It’s not worth the time it requires or the

on or struggling to master an overflowing set of readings served neither my interests *nor* the students'. I now believe that slowing down and making sure they understand what you *do* cover will help them (and you) stay calm at the end of the semester and assure they go into the final exam feeling prepared and confident.⁸⁴

In addition, I found that when I had realistic expectations of myself, it was also easier to have them of my students.⁸⁵ When I was free from stress and anxiety, I had the reserves needed to respond patiently and helpfully to student errors. I now believe that, when the professor has given herself permission to be imperfect, it is easier for her to give the students that permission as well. And their imperfections will no longer strike her as signs of laziness or disrespect; she will have empathy for the students' flaws or foibles, and patience with their errors—precisely because she has the same patience with herself. Let me emphasize though: I'm *not* advocating that we abandon our high expectations for excellent performance. Rather, I'm suggesting that it is possible to teach, model, and inspire that performance far more easily than *demanding* it—of the students or oneself.

* * *

This section has focused on the emotional dynamics that might influence a professor's effectiveness in the classroom—especially if the professor is a perfectionist. Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this article, and this author's expertise, to analyze in any depth the psychodynamic source or impact of perfectionism among law teachers. But I suspect that working with a therapist could help some (as it did me) to banish (or at least tame) the ghosts of the past and cement a self-generated sense of value and worth that provides the confidence to control the pace of the course and any other factors that would otherwise cause stress to professor and/or students. Therapy, along with supportive mentoring from colleagues, family, and friends, helped me to address the perfectionist aspects of my personality that prevented me from reaching my fullest potential—and from truly enjoying myself—in the classroom.

The rest of this Part discusses a variety of improvements I made in my teaching after I was able to stop seeking validation from others, taking things personally, and imposing unrealistic expectations on all of us. Once I got a handle on my perfectionism, I was able to think critically about my pedagogy and improve my equanimity in the classroom. Many other pedagogical and emotional insights flowed from those first steps as well.

stress it creates, and yet I struggle (perhaps because of my perfectionist nature?) against letting it go.

84 For further discussion of the challenges and benefits of reducing coverage, see *infra* section IV(B)(3)(b).

85 As one popular author has noted, "[W]e cannot practice empathy with others unless we can be empathic with ourselves." BROWN, I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST ME, *supra* note 81, at 49.

B. Meeting Students “Where They Are”

Meeting students where they are requires *thinking* about where they are to begin with. As time progressed, I began to think less about the substantive content of my courses (and my mastery of it) and more about what the classroom (and law school) experience was like for my students, both intellectually and emotionally. First, I needed to develop the ability to empathize with them, imagining what law school might be like for students today. Second, I had to acquire the awareness to accurately perceive student reactions *during class*—to focus on how effectively the content was being presented as well as on how students were *receiving* it.⁸⁶

Once I understood better what was going on in the classroom, it became clear that I needed to slow down and much more concretely and effectively present the information I wanted to impart. Learning to meet the students where they are entailed breaking down legal analysis much more systematically and explicitly, tailoring coverage to the students’ needs, and taking my time. As I began to appreciate how the students might be experiencing my teaching approach, I found that my patience, empathy, and desire to help (rather than impress) them increased.

1. How Students Feel

Over time, I began to try to imagine what legal education is like for today’s students. I began to consider, for example, how a generation that is not guaranteed a job after first year (as my generation was), much less a job on graduation, might feel, and how employment insecurity might affect the pressure that is surely already generated by the huge loans many law students face.

Eventually, as I became more aware of my own perfectionism, I also learned that some law students struggle with perfectionism themselves. Researchers report that perfectionist traits can cause students to procrastinate or prematurely end a task due to fear of failure.⁸⁷ This tendency can, in turn, lead to a perfection-paralysis cycle⁸⁸ of procrastinating and prematurely ending tasks because of increased pressure to perform perfectly.⁸⁹ Students with perfectionist tendencies are more likely to see small mistakes or setbacks

86 See COMM. ON DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SCI. OF LEARNING, HOW PEOPLE LEARN: BRAIN, MIND, EXPERIENCE, AND SCHOOL (John D. Bransford et al., eds., expanded ed. 2000) (summarizing studies on student learning); see also ANDREA CONKLIN BUESCHEL, LISTENING TO STUDENTS ABOUT LEARNING (2008) (discussing listening to students as crucial to developing an effective teaching style).

87 Bishop, *supra* note 1, at 969–72 (summarizing and citing to relevant studies and defining “dysfunctional perfectionism” as being “neurotic” and “self-defeating”).

88 *Id.* at 972 n.58.

89 *Id.* at 969 n.43 (2018) (citing Joachim Stoeber et al., *Perfectionism and Negative Affect After Repeated Failure: Anxiety, Depression, and Anger*, 35 J. INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES 87, 91–92 (2014)).

as significant failures and to feel guilt, shame, anxiety, depression, and anger after repeatedly falling short—either in reality or in their own minds.⁹⁰

In a similar vein, law students have been found to be “skeptical, even cynical, judgmental, questioning, argumentative and somewhat self-protective”⁹¹—all traits associated with perfectionism. Of course, some traits associated with perfectionism can help students to be successful in law school and to achieve the high standards they often set for themselves. Over time, however, such tendencies can become “excessive, negative, and destructive”⁹²—especially in an environment, like law school, that focuses on outcomes and extrinsic measures of success (e.g. grade point average, number of on-campus interviews, law review membership, etc.).⁹³

Becoming aware of student perfectionism helped me not only to feel empathy for those I was teaching, but also not to seek validation from them or take things they said personally. I realized that behavior I had previously interpreted as disrespectful was often about them and the pressures they faced, not about me. As a result, I felt both more comfortable with my own missteps and more charitable toward theirs. I began to see both as teaching moments.

2. Seeing More by Not Fearing Mistakes

As I developed more empathy for the students, I realized that I often didn’t sufficiently assess, *during class*, how well the students were grasping what was discussed. I now believe this oversight was a habit I developed early on—and that it stemmed from perfectionism-related insecurity. Learning not to fear making mistakes in class liberated me from a focus on my own performance, which in turn enabled me to notice student reactions, sense their anxiety level, and assess their level of comprehension.

Like others (I assume), as a beginner teacher I was quite nervous. Certainly many of us, starting out, feared making mistakes and embarrassing ourselves in front of 90-plus students. Who doesn’t remember that sinking feeling when a student disagrees with you, saying confidently that in fact on page 212 the court clearly said the opposite of what you just asserted? Eventually, of course, we all learned to ask for the precise language to which the student was referring, since almost inevitably he was looking at the dissent, or a summary of the lower court’s opinion, or some other discussion that definitely did *not*

90 *Id.* at 970 (citing Roz Shafran & Warren Mansell, *Perfectionism and psychopathology: A review of research and treatment*, 21 *CLINICAL PSYCH. REV.* 879, 881 (2001)); Stoerber, *supra* note 89, at 90, 93).

91 *Id.* at 969 (quoting Richard, *supra* note 53).

92 *Id.* at 969 (citing Shafran & Mansell, *supra* note 90, at 881 n.92) (identifying people with perfectionism as those who set “unrealistically high standards, rigidly adhere to them, and define their self-worth in terms of their achieving these standards”).

93 *Id.* at 970.

communicate what he thought it had. But before we figured that out, those classroom moments could border on terrifying.⁹⁴

Of course, sometimes the student *is* right and the professor wrong, in which case the teacher needs to figure out how to backpedal without feeling badly about herself or overapologizing for being human. (One colleague makes a point of laughing at herself when she makes mistakes.) Naturally, dealing with our own mistakes is a lot easier to do if we've made sure to be gentle and non-judgmental with our students' mistakes as well.

Eventually, becoming aware of my perfectionism also helped me to realize that the mortification I felt at the thought of making visible errors was both unrealistic and counterproductive. After all, nobody is perfect; we all make mistakes. My colleague, Professor Roberto Corrada, first made me aware of this perfectionist strain in legal academic culture by critiquing our faculty's tendency to excoriate themselves, and sometimes (privately) each other, for every little error or typo, even in e-mails or other informal and relatively unimportant work products. We not only shouldn't overreact to such email errors when we (or others) made them, Roberto argued, but similarly shouldn't be chagrined if we made mistakes in class.

In fact, our job was to teach our students not only that legal work requires meticulous, careful attention to detail, but also that mistakes are inevitable, and rarely fatal. Moreover, we could model for them how to handle their own errors honestly and professionally. I would add that revealing our fallibility to our students can also undermine their image of us as omniscient and/or judgmental, thereby reassuring them that they won't be judged too harshly for errors and freeing them to take the risks necessary to learn. In addition, as noted above,⁹⁵ recognizing our own perfectionism can help us to be aware that many of our students may struggle with perfectionism themselves.

In summary, the lack of confidence that I already had about my mastery of the substantive material was exacerbated by my generalized anxiety about making errors in the classroom. But being focused on my own performance only hampered my ability to meet my students where they were. Once I became comfortable with errors in the classroom (both mine and theirs), I was able to let go of my perfectionism enough to notice various classroom dynamics. I could see when the students hated a particular case result and were frustrated at their inability to adequately critique it; when the group felt particularly stressed or confused; whether one student's questions were frustrating the

94 That said, I also know that many of us—perhaps especially young teachers, white women, people of color, and other stereotyped subgroups—can be punished more harshly than others for our mistakes, whether by colleagues, students, or administrators. So it's natural, and in fact logical, for those in such positions to feel more anxious about revealing their errors. And each person must of course assess his or her own situation individually. Nevertheless, in my experience, it is still immensely liberating to give myself permission to make mistakes and not beat myself up after they happen—regardless of how I decide to handle them after the fact.

95 See *supra* text accompanying note 88.

others; etc. And, of course, once I was more in tune with the class, it was much easier to address the sources of their discomfort—to give them the case critique they’d been struggling to articulate; deliver a pep talk about how they would “get” this hard material in time; or gently rein in the student who was getting on others’ nerves. As is discussed below, perceiving student reactions more accurately also led me to change some fundamental aspects of my teaching.

3. *Slowing Down and Breaking it Down*

As I began to focus less on my own performance and more on my students’ comprehension, I realized that I often covered the material in class too quickly and cursorily (as well as too abstractly), oblivious of how the students were receiving it. I needed to (as Richard Reuben said of himself) “communicate with students where they [were] rather than from where I [was].”⁹⁶ I focused too much on my own personal performance and not enough on assessing the needs, assuring the success, and increasing the confidence of my students.⁹⁷

Only when I could focus more on classroom dynamics in the moment did I realize how many things that seemed relatively straightforward *to me* were not necessarily so for my students. The relatively traditional Socratic method of teaching that I used—with its reliance primarily on volunteers and on-call Socratic performances—likely exacerbated the disconnect between what I thought the students understood and the actual level of class comprehension.⁹⁸ After all, when using that approach (at least as I did it then), you’re hearing only from those who prepared ahead of time to be called upon or those who volunteer because they believe they know the correct answer.⁹⁹ The rest can easily be left in the dust—and their professor might just as easily be oblivious of that fact.¹⁰⁰

Once I stopped assuming that the students were necessarily following (and comfortable with) the in-class discussion, I came to realize how much they were

96 Richard C. Reuben, *Bringing Mindfulness into the Classroom: A Personal Journey*, 61 J. LEGAL EDUC. 674, 676 (2012).

97 *Cf. id.* at 678 (stating, “[T]he purpose of teaching is to help students learn, not to demonstrate our brilliance ...”).

98 The “on-call” Socratic calling that I used involved telling students ahead of time when they would be called upon, and spending several minutes with each student. In a class of 90 students, this meant that a student might get called on only two or three times in a semester.

99 Of course, when those volunteer answers reflect error or confusion, that can provide useful information to the professor about where the class might be. But I still don’t think one can assume that volunteers necessarily give an accurate picture of the entire class.

100 Carol Springer and Andrea Curcio suggest use of midterms as a way to get feedback on how the students are processing the material covered in class. Carol Springer Sargent & Andrea A. Curcio, *Empirical Evidence that Formative Assessments Improve Final Exams*, 61 J. LEGAL EDUC. 379, 400-01 (2012). While I think that can be helpful, and have used midterms in my courses, I don’t think it fully solves the need for contemporaneous and continuous observation of student comprehension. For a discussion of how changing to cold-calling helped, see *infra* section IV(C)(1).

sometimes missing along the way. So I slowed down, broke things apart, and took it all step-by-step. I also began to focus more on determining where the students were and tailoring the coverage,¹⁰¹ discussion, and opportunities for practice to their needs. In addition, I began taking the time to talk more about concrete examples, including inviting students to remember incidents from their own lives that illustrated legal rules and concepts.¹⁰² As they understood more about how to approach the material, they seemed more comfortable and confident. However, as will be addressed further below, teaching in this way takes time; to change the way I taught, I had to let go of my iron grip on coverage.

a. Focusing on Nuts and Bolts

I found that, for 1L courses (and perhaps especially first-semester, 1L courses) at my law school, each of the following demanded more explicit and focused attention than I had been giving:

- Reading comprehension—Far too often, I found, students struggle to understand a case because they haven’t adequately comprehended (or retained?) what it says—even as to non-technical parts of the case, such as the description of the facts. In addition, many students need modeling and practice, not only at reading legal materials in general, but also at vocabulary expansion, meticulous reading, and content retention.
- Procedural posture—Especially in private law courses like torts, but to a lesser extent in public law courses like criminal law also, many 1L students require repeated and detailed explication and exploration of how procedural posture influences the analysis in a case. It’s easy to think they understand it when they don’t. I now spend a lot more time (especially in *first-semester*, 1L courses) asking questions like: who won below, what the procedural posture is, what the alleged error below was, what the appellant is asking the court to do and why, what the other side’s response to that is, what the disposition of the case was, etc.
- Rule application—Of course, a big part of the project in the first year is to teach students how to understand the relationship between facts and rules. But I found that I was underestimating how much practice with concrete examples students need to really “get” it. (Of course, inviting discussion of factual variations also helps students to understand that while legal rules can be wrongly stated, legal analysis of how a rule applies to a set of facts is often less about being right or wrong and more about learning how to argue.)¹⁰³

101 See *infra* text accompanying note 114.

102 For example, when using a “receiving stolen property” statute in criminal law, I asked students if they had ever bought something they thought might have been stolen. So my surprise, many of them had. The ensuing discussion helped the class to see why receiving-stolen-property laws usually require that the actor *knew* the item had been stolen.

103 And once they understand this, they won’t plague the poor 1L prof with endless “what

- Repetition—Research has made it very clear that repetition is key to learning. Empirical studies have shown, for example, that “distributed practice” (repeatedly revisiting something already learned in new contexts) significantly increases retention.¹⁰⁴ Fortunately, as is discussed further below,¹⁰⁵ although returning to already-learned material takes time, opportunities abound to do it within the context of the current day’s study.

Some readers will already know many of these tips, but I mention them because I suspect other teachers are like I was—unaware of how hard this material is for many students,¹⁰⁶ and too inclined to jump into the complex substantive questions that engage law professors before ensuring that the students understand the assigned case well enough to tackle those questions.¹⁰⁷

In fact, scientific findings show that those who do something well (such as those who do well in law school, often a necessary prerequisite to becoming a law professor), aren’t necessarily the best ones to teach it.¹⁰⁸ In a recent *New York Times* piece, industrial psychologist Adam Grant notes that those who take naturally to a skill may very well be less effective at explaining it to someone else—precisely *because* they never had to break it down and figure out all the steps to success. He uses, as an illustrative example, an Olympic springboard diver who responded to a question about how to do three and a half somersaults by saying “Go up in a ball and spin fast.”¹⁰⁹ Those who take naturally to a skill sometimes (at least initially) lack facility at explaining how they do what they do. Thus, while law professors may know quite well how to do legal analysis, many of us may not have fully appreciated the number of steps into which it

if” questions that cannot be answered without legal research in a particular jurisdiction. They’ll understand why the issue isn’t what *result* would have occurred in the assigned case if the facts were changed (an impossible question, often, to answer) but rather *which way* that change would cut – what arguments it would make available to the attorney for the plaintiff and/or the defendant, and why.

- 104 Warren Binford, *How to Be the World’s Best Law Professor*, 64 J. LEGAL EDUC. 542, 546-47 (2015).
- 105 See *infra* text accompanying note 113.
- 106 The fact that beginner professors are known to give unrealistically hard exams would seem to be evidence of that tendency. I can certainly report that my first finals were ridiculously difficult, with far too many issues and actors.
- 107 This insight can elude professors of 1Ls at first, as it did me. I found that my students often *loved* talking about policy issues or facts—which would seduce me into spending too much time on such (admittedly interesting, and also valuable) discussions. Perhaps both they and I were avoiding doing the hard work of rule application precisely because we felt uncomfortable about our ability to do and teach it, respectively.
- 108 See Adam Grant, *Those Who Can Do, Can’t Teach: Advice for College Students: The Best Experts Sometimes Make the Worst Educators*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 25, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/25/opinion/sunday/college-professors-experts-advice.html>. As one expert noted, “As you get better and better at what you do, your ability to communicate your understanding or to help others learn that skill often gets worse and worse.” *Id.* (quoting Sian Beilock, President, Barnard College).
- 109 Grant, *supra* note 116.

must be broken down to teach it effectively to our students.¹¹⁰ To make matters worse, we may not even realize that we've inaccurately assessed where the students are to begin with.

Of course, working more intensively with students on reading comprehension, procedural posture, rule application, and repetitive practice necessarily requires cutting substantive coverage.¹¹¹ The next section discusses how I eventually became more comfortable doing that.

b. Doing More with Less

Fortunately, much more can be done with one case than I realized in my early years of teaching.¹¹² Opportunities abound to practice *new* substantive material by revisiting a case that was initially assigned for another point, or to review *previous* rules introduced in a different factual context by applying them during discussion of a *new* case. Repeated analysis of the same case from different doctrinal angles not only brings efficiencies; it also probably increases understanding of the case's facts and procedural posture, thereby augmenting students' appreciation of the relationship between facts and rules. My goal is to continue looking for these opportunities and using them in my classes.

But making room for these important pedagogical strategies did not come quickly or easily to me. For years, I was so worried about coverage that I never found class time to seize the opportunities for review.¹¹³ However, as I developed a more realistic picture of what the students needed to know at this stage and how much they were ready to process, I realized that I needed to be less ambitious—not only about the number of cases I covered, but also about the detail with which I explored each one. And the more I gave myself permission to cut material, the more comfortable I felt giving students the time to master what we did cover. As is discussed in more detail below, I needed to focus on the basics and resist the temptation to probe every nuance of every case.

110 Of course, this theory perhaps proves too much. After all, some law professors appear to take to the task easily.

111 Perhaps the popular saying “The more you teach, the less you teach” shows that experienced teachers often recognize the importance of such a change.

112 Thus, the adage referred to above, *supra* note 111, suggests also that many law faculty may recognize the value of revisiting cases as a technique for cutting coverage.

113 Thanks to my colleague and friend Carnegie Scholar Roberto Corrada, I had already learned that research on pedagogy strongly emphasized the beneficial effects of reducing coverage. See, e.g., COMM. ON DEVELOPMENTS IN THE SCI. OF LEARNING, HOW PEOPLE LEARN: BRAIN, MIND, EXPERIENCE, AND SCHOOL, *supra* note 87, at 20; L. DEE FINK, CREATING SIGNIFICANT LEARNING EXPERIENCES: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO DESIGNING COLLEGE COURSES 61–63 (rev. ed. 2013) (distinguishing between content-based teaching, which emphasizes comprehensive coverage, and learning-centered teaching, which (among other things) shows students the human implications of the subject of study and how to learn more about it in the future)). However, I still struggled to get myself to actually do it.

c. Letting Pedagogy Drive the Train

For years I've told students that they should not structure their course outlines around the cases we study. As any law professor knows, the cases are merely illustrations of the doctrinal rules and analyses we are asking the class to learn. Yet for some reason, I often allowed the assigned cases to determine the scope of class discussion. I tended to cover each legal issue discussed in a case, be it major or minor, wasting a lot of precious time in obsessively complete (read: perfectionist) coverage of the readings.¹¹⁴ Once I realized that I couldn't, and shouldn't, discuss every square inch of each case, I began to focus on just a few takeaway points that I wanted the students to glean from each reading. In other words, I needed to be clear (both in my own mind and with the students) about the pedagogical purpose of every reading I assigned.

Thus, for example, I began to consider how deep a dive I wanted to take into each case. How much did I think the students would be able to understand at this juncture? And how much would they likely remember in the future? How much did I want—and yes, have time—to talk about with them? And how important was each subtle point at this point in their educational career? Once I tailored the materials in my casebook to myself and my students, the material became manageable, no longer overwhelming.¹¹⁵ I had the time to teach it to the class, and they were able to feel challenged, but still capable of mastering it.

The perfectionist tendency to examine *every corner* of a case not only can potentially confuse and overwhelm the students but also is much harder on the professor (in terms of both in-class time pressure and the challenges of teaching complex, sometimes overly difficult material to beginners). As I became more selective about how I wanted to use each case, I learned to limit the discussion of each one to just the salient points.¹¹⁶

This focus on pedagogy also resolved the student-control complaints. As previously mentioned,¹¹⁷ I had always ignored comments in my course evaluations about failure to control irrelevant student questions, because I was

114 While it was easy for me to skip a section of the casebook on the grounds that I didn't want to teach those materials to my students, for some reason I hadn't asked the same question of every little detail contained in each reading (case, article excerpt, or whatever) that I *had* decided to assign.

115 Think about it: Every casebook is designed to be useful to multiple professors with all varieties of students. Why in the world, therefore, did I ever think I should try to cover every point in every case I assigned—or that *anybody in their right mind* would try to do that? This impulse strikes me as just the type of perfectionist over-performing that Rockquemore discusses in her work.

116 Please note: I am *not* saying that I now oversimplify the material or don't challenge the students to use their brains. But I am clear that, after 40 years of being a lawyer, I can quite easily underestimate the challenges the course material poses to my students, as well as the amount of material they'll be able to retain after the semester is over. So it only makes sense to carefully consider the level at which I pitch the material.

117 See *supra* text accompanying note 12.

quite certain that I entertained only relevant ones. I could usually see why someone asked the particular question she did; its connection to the material we'd been discussing was clear to me. And I often wanted to engage the question in order to correct a slight misapprehension or reward an incipient insight that it reflected. So I would answer it. Thus, because I could see the connection between a question and the assigned material, I tended to dismiss student-control criticisms about allowing irrelevant questions. Eventually, however, as I began to question the validity of probing every nook and cranny and could more accurately see my students, I started to consider the effect of individual students' questions (and my answers to them) on others in the class.

Many students, I realized, might not even *understand* a (tangential) question being asked, much less appreciate its relevance. Moreover, unless I told them the question was central to something I really wanted them to learn (which was usually not the case), they might resent having to waste brain cells trying to follow the exchange. Finally, I realized, the complaints about my classes being disorganized could be stemming, at least in part, from my allowing student questions to bounce us around here and there without any apparent connecting threads. I could see a question's relevance to the material (or perhaps to a topic we'd discussed ten minutes earlier), but many of the students probably couldn't. And every time we paused for some exchange that seemed incomprehensible and irrelevant to many of them, they were likely to feel anxious about why they couldn't follow the discussion—and (sadly, but understandably) whether they needed to understand it for the final. Once I figured this out, it was easy to rein in class participation, limiting questions to those that clarified the material I thought was important, while promising to respond to other questions after class.¹¹⁸ The result was a tighter discussion, more class time, and less classroom anxiety.

Being clear about my own pedagogical goals, as well as knowing the students well enough to be able to imagine how my teaching decisions could be affecting them (both intellectually and emotionally), helped me to improve both my effectiveness and their classroom experience. In the end, by pitching my classes at the appropriate level, I made life much easier—not only for them, but for myself as well.

C. Additional Techniques for Improving Learning and Minimizing Stress—Your Own and Your Students'

Several additional changes further improved my pedagogy, as well as reducing stress for both myself and my students. Those included changing (counterintuitively) to a cold-calling Socratic method; relying less on class notes; and being transparent about my pedagogy.

¹¹⁸ Alternatively, I occasionally elaborate on a question so that it's more comprehensible to everyone and then answer it, but that's only if I think it's relevant to the learning goals I have for that class.

1. *Using Cold-Calling to Reduce Tension and Create a Conversational Feel*

Yes, you read that title correctly. I think cold-calling can actually reduce tension and improve learning in the classroom. But that's a far cry from what I originally thought. For decades, I was convinced that cold-calling on students was cruel¹¹⁹ and ineffective.¹²⁰ But watching my colleague and friend Professor Celia Taylor conduct a contracts class disabused me of this view. Watching Celia was like watching the conductor of an orchestra. She moved *fast*, calling on one person for one question (literally, a question—not a request to recite all the facts or to give a three-paragraph dissertation on some contracts concept) and then quickly hopping to another with the next question.¹²¹ Over to the horns, then the strings, then back to the horns or over to the percussion section. She easily called on 15 to 20 people in one class session. It was a *conversation*.

The mathematical implications were clear: Students in a 60-person contracts course would be called on a minimum of two to three times a week. And of course, if they volunteered in addition, that meant they were talking virtually every day, even multiple times a class. The impact of this frequent participation was just the opposite of what cold-calling had meant to me. Instead of spending once or twice a semester sweating under the professor's (and entire class's) scrutiny for fifteen minutes or more while being grilled on a case that she might or might not have found interesting or even comprehensible, each student was talking about everything, all the time. And because class members' moments in the limelight were brief, and frequent, each individual question from the professor didn't mean that much. A student could make a mistake one day and shine the next. Sure, there were still those few whom everybody knew were nailing virtually every question, but the performance of the vast majority was a mixed bag. There was no ignominy in making mistakes and not much glory in getting something right.

Seeing Celia's snappy and cheerful use of cold-calling reduced the protectiveness I had felt toward my students on this issue, and I started to use her approach in my classes. Of course, this kind of discussion can't be scripted; it evolves organically. But that doesn't mean it's chaotic either. As my concern with student approval decreased and my confidence in the classroom—especially my willingness to detach from my notes¹²²—grew, I was more willing to try flying without a net. And, while Celia's version was masterful,

119 Requiring students to be on pins and needles throughout every class session just seemed unnecessarily harsh. Besides, I reasoned, no student would succeed at being fully prepared for every single class, so it was serendipitous (and therefore arbitrary and unfair) to consign some of them, but not others, to bad performances primarily attributable to bad luck.

120 In fact, I assumed, the stress of being on call would so distract them that they'd likely learn less. Especially if a student called upon was caught off guard, or just very nervous, what were the odds that he would retain much from the exchange?

121 Sometimes the question was focused on a narrow doctrinal point, other times it was merely, "Do you agree with what Joe said?" or "What have we left out?"

122 The next section notes some additional benefits of cold-calling. See *infra* section IV(C)(2).

I found that I could do cold-calling at least decently right off the bat—and without that much effort. It turned the classroom interaction from a stiff and uncomfortable grilling into an interesting, engaged, and mutual exchange—not a colloquy between one student and the professor, but a discussion among all participants in the class, facilitated by but very much also including their teacher. Cold-calling turned out to be not only more humane, but also more effective—and fun as well.¹²³

2. Relying Less on Notes (Without Even Trying)

If the students are telling you you're disorganized, as mine were, the last thing you feel like doing is walking away from the security blanket of your class notes. Moreover, if you demand of yourself that you never make a mistake in the classroom, you might see those notes as a lifeline—even if the students *don't* think you're disorganized. Obsessively detailed class plans also elicit unhealthy overreliance on them.

For many years, my notes were very thorough, including (often nearly verbatim) every point I intended to raise. That level of detail of course also made it virtually impossible to return to where I'd left off if I ever moved away from the notes. So I rarely did. But once I began to feel more confident in my abilities and less worried about seeming perfect, I began to develop the courage that would ultimately free me from my planted place at the lectern. Moreover, as I became very clear in my mind about what my pedagogical goals were for each class, the notes became increasingly superfluous. And once I stopped trying to cover everything but the kitchen sink, it was far easier to internalize my class outline and leave it behind.¹²⁴

I didn't try to fly completely without a net, as Professor Richard C. Reuben reports having done;¹²⁵ the liberation just happened organically. Eventually, I found that I often knew what the notes said without looking at them. The more streamlined class outline also made it easier to check back in whenever I didn't remember where I wanted to go next. Most importantly, once I had a clear, uncluttered vision of the learning goals for each class session, I was able to keep the students focused on the big picture as well.

Becoming less attached to your notes (along with being more flexible about coverage) creates opportunities for genuine dialogue with the students. If a student raises a relevant and valuable topic that you hadn't planned on

¹²³ Parenthetically, it is also the closest approximation I have seen in a law school to the enviable experience of my anthropologist friends in their small interactive graduate school classes back when I was a law student.

¹²⁴ At some point in this evolution, I started mentally reviewing my class plan during the hour-long drive to work. I found that I could easily remember each case and the main points I wanted to cover when discussing each one. This exercise not only built my confidence, but also cemented the material in my brain to such an extent that, once in the classroom, I found myself increasingly wandering away from the podium.

¹²⁵ See Reuben, *supra* note 96, at 679.

discussing, you are fine with exploring it, and thereby become much more responsive to exactly what they have on their minds in the moment. Severing the umbilical cord to your class notes is delightfully freeing. You can wander up to the students in the first row, or farther. You can look people in the eye, gesticulate, jump around. You can cold-call on them at a snappy pace, and enjoy the conversational orchestra you're conducting.¹²⁶

3. *Being Transparent about Pedagogy*

In addition to becoming a cold-caller and moving away from my notes, over the years I've also significantly increased the transparency of my pedagogy. For example, I frequently explain to the students the various *micro*-coverage decisions described in section B(3)(c) above—such as how and why I focus class discussion of a particular topic in a particular way and which parts of the assigned reading I view as central to their understanding or not. I tell them things such as why I am cutting off conversation, or entertaining a question that might seem extraneous, or requiring them to read material I didn't discuss in class. I inform them when a student's statement, although wrong, is understandable—and explain how and why it's easy to make that mistake.¹²⁷ I discuss what a particular line of questioning is designed to reveal to them; why I like my organization of the material on a particular subject better than the casebook's; and how the current topic, X, might seem a bit obscure, but will be much clearer after we have time to also cover Y.

As I've become more comfortable being transparent about my pedagogical decisions, I have also begun to reference those considerations in controlling class participation—by saying things like, “That's not important for our purposes” or “That's not central to the court's holding here, so we won't spend time figuring it out” or “You don't need to know that for this course” or “True, some states use that (minority) rule, but unfortunately we don't have time to talk much about it today.” Students often seem to appreciate all these different types of metacomments about pedagogy,¹²⁸ and the conversational

¹²⁶ Richard Reuben nicely describes how leaving your class notes behind turns the classroom experience into a much more immediate and conversational one: “Rather than bringing all of my material and plans and expectations into the room, I was working with what was already there, shaping the discussion and supplementing it with what my students needed to know from the course materials and my own experience, working with their questions to clarify and elaborate and helping them to identify and grapple honestly and rigorously with difficult issues.” Reuben, *supra* note 96, at 680.

¹²⁷ For example, I can always count on some student in Criminal Law to mistakenly identify committing a crime at gunpoint as an involuntary act—even though both I and the textbook have explained that such “hard choices” might justify a duress defense but not an involuntariness one. The concept of involuntariness is hard for students to grasp, and many of them miss this subtlety at first. So, when a student invariably makes that error, I often thank them for helping me to teach the class by modeling a common misunderstanding that (as I tell them) many others likely share.

¹²⁸ It seems likely that today's students might particularly appreciate this sort of transparency regarding pedagogy. However, that's not to say that such information wouldn't have

atmosphere that my classes now often have¹²⁹ makes such comments feel natural and appropriate.

* * *

All the while that I was making the very specific pedagogical changes described in this section, a much more global set of issues lurked in the background. As my perfectionism diminished, I recognized the need to rethink how I wanted to present myself to the students. I needed to find an approach that was effective without being foreign to my personality, my pedagogical inclinations, and/or my political commitments. The next section addresses some challenges related to performing the professorial role.

D. Law Teaching as Performance

I've found that I'm calmer and more effective in the classroom when I think of law teaching as performance.¹³⁰ Critical scholars such as myself recognize that we perform our identity—that it is fluid, situational, and relational.¹³¹ Awareness of the performative dimension of our work can help us to keep the audience in mind, calibrating each class to their needs. It has also helped me to negotiate difficult tensions between the person I see myself as being and the one the students seem to expect or want me to be—that is, their image of the “law professor.”¹³² Over time, I've changed my persona (and my preoccupations about persona) quite a bit, with salutary results for both my comfort level and that of my students. This section describes my struggle to maintain control and project confidence in the classroom while simultaneously presenting a genuine version of myself—one that is true to my nonhierarchical inclinations, my candid personality, and my progressive politics. It first describes my early

benefited students of my era, too—as well as likely reducing our stress level. See SCHWARTZ ET AL., *supra* note 7 (identifying transparency as important to teaching).

129 See *supra* section IV(C)(1).

130 On law teaching as performance, see, e.g., Devon W. Carbado & Mitu Gulati, *Working Identity*, 85 CORNELL L. REV. 1259 (2000); Martha Chamallas, *The Shadow of Professor Kingsfield: Contemporary Dilemmas Facing Women Law Professors*, 11 WILLIAM & MARY J. WOMEN & L. 195, 198 (2005).

131 On performativity theory, see generally Judith Butler, *GENDER TROUBLE: FEMINISM & THE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY* (1990) (introducing idea of gender as performance). See also Carbado & Gulati, *supra* note 130; Frank Rudy Cooper, *Our First Unisex President?: Black Masculinity & Obama's Feminine Side*, 86 DENVER L. REV. 633, 638–41 (2009) (providing helpful, straightforward description, with examples, of several aspects of performativity theory).

132 On the ways that others' expectations can cause harm by influencing our expressions of identity, see Carbado & Gulati, *supra* note 130, at 1307 (citation omitted) (noting that “outsider scholars “are disciplined for not performing their identities in ways that are palatable to their insider employers”); KENJI YOSHINO, *COVERING* (2007) (arguing that civil rights law should address the harm caused when people are coerced into conforming to social norms by “covering” their disfavored traits). On students' expectations of law professors, see Chamallas, *supra* note 130, at 197–98.

anxiety about professorial performance, then turns to how I think about presenting myself today.

1. Then: Academic Perfectionism and Critical Pedagogy

For many years, the challenge of figuring out how to approach classroom performance was exacerbated by the anxiety and frustration that perfectionism wrought. My mood in the classroom too often veered back and forth between irritation (at perceived student inadequacies or disrespect) and anxiety (about revealing my own flaws). As I mentioned above,¹³³ it was especially difficult to keep my cool during discussions of “hot button” topics. And I suspect that, as I vacillated between frustration and fear, the students probably did as well.

In addition to the challenges of controlling my stress and disappointment in the classroom, the influence of critical theory on my fledgling pedagogy didn’t help things either—thanks to my lack of experience, not any shortcomings of the theory. My goal was to create a nonhierarchical, collaborative classroom atmosphere¹³⁴ and to reject objectivist assumptions¹³⁵ by being transparent about the particular perspective I brought to my teaching. However, I didn’t know how to adequately explain these aspects of my pedagogy to the class, and I doubt that the students were particularly aware of them.¹³⁶

Plus, along with my candid personality and my performance anxiety, the desire to be collaborative sometimes led me to be too open with the students. The result was that I could overly apologize for my own mistakes one day, and then fail to hide my impatience with student errors the next. This contrast between my candid and apologetic side (on the one hand) and the critical

¹³³ See *supra* text accompanying note 24.

¹³⁴ See, e.g., Duncan Kennedy, *Legal Education & the Reproduction of Hierarchy*, 32 J. LEGAL EDUC. 591 (1982); see also PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* 1970 (describing author’s experience teaching Brazilian adults to read and rejecting top-down traditional model of education). For a voluminous and valuable introduction to critical pedagogy, see *THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY READER* (Antonia Darder, Marta Baltodano & Rodolfo D. Torres eds., 2003).

¹³⁵ Of course, the critique of objectivism (which goes all the way back to the critical strand of American Legal Realism, see Gary Peller, *The Metaphysics of American Law*, 73 CAL. L. REV. 1151, 1222–26 (1989), if not before) is one of the foundational principles of many identity-based strands of critical theory and is widely shared among progressive social justice movements as well. See, e.g., *FEMINIST THEORY: A CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY* 22–24 (Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, & Barbara C. Gelpi eds., 1982); Ann Scales, *LEGAL FEMINISM: ACTIVISM, LAWYERING & LEGAL THEORY* 86 (2006).

¹³⁶ Consider, for example, my decision, in a fit of youthful enthusiasm for transparency in teaching, to introduce myself to my first criminal law class (in 1989) by telling them that I taught from a “socialist feminist” perspective(!). (On the socialist feminist theory of that day, see, e.g., ZILLAH R. EISENSTEIN, *CAPITALIST PATRIARCHY AND THE CASE FOR SOCIALIST FEMINISM* (1978); NANCY C.M. HARTSOCK, *MONEY, SEX, AND POWER: TOWARD A FEMINIST HISTORICAL MATERIALISM* (1983)). Not surprisingly, the student evaluations that first semester were peppered with disdainful references to my “socialism.” I learned from this experience not to wear potentially inflammatory labels for which the students were unlikely to share my definitions.

and judgmental me (on the other) must have felt confusing at the least, hypocritical at the worst. For years, I couldn't find the sweet spot between being too nice and too mean; in fact, I didn't even know I was looking for it. I too often presented a completely unfiltered version of myself, devoid of strategic or performative dimensions, which could leave me feeling exposed and out of control.

However, once I became aware of my tendencies to seek validation from others, students no longer held the power of judgment over me. And once I began to see the anger I sometimes felt toward them as, at least in part, a side effect of my own performance anxiety, my reactions in class evened out. Finally, as I developed empathy for the students, I also began to appreciate that, given their apparent embrace of the prevailing relatively top-down vision of legal pedagogy, they probably saw *me* as their ticket to success.¹³⁷ That is, they seemed to want me to be the expert in the room and to believe (perhaps understandably) that their performance would be a function of my expertise.¹³⁸ Thus, any visible stress or inconsistency on my part could cause them to lose confidence in my teaching ability—and, hence, in their future prospects. My anxiety, it seemed, was helping to create theirs.

As I began to think more deeply, and strategically, about my classroom persona, I became more comfortable with the idea of teaching as a performance. Eventually, I was able to find a middle spot between a false and forced persona that wasn't me at all and one that sufficiently approximated the professor the students appeared to expect and want to see.¹³⁹ Feeling much more comfortable and in control in the classroom, I began to relax. And so did they.

2. Now: Balancing Student Expectations with Self-Identity

Today, my teaching style is quite different from what it used to be, and I enjoy being in the classroom much more. In describing my current approach, however, I intend to convey no normative conclusions. The teaching style that

¹³⁷ In my experience, that view is rather difficult to dislodge. As is discussed further below, setting a collaborative and nonhierarchical tone in a law school classroom can be challenging.

¹³⁸ Of course, students' expectations are often a function of their teachers' race, class, sexuality, and gender identities. See, e.g. Pamela J. Smith, *Teaching the Retrenchment Generation: When Sapphire Meets Socrates at the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Authority*, 6 WM. & MARY J. OF WOMEN & L. 53, 125 (1999) (“[I]n the 1990s [Black women] still are expected by White people to behave like Mammy in many institutional settings (university classrooms where the professor is a Black female and corporate boardrooms where the board member is a Black female).”); PRESUMED INCOMPETENT (Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs et al. eds., 2012) (recounting the challenges and biases faced by female academics of color); Chamallas, *supra* note 130. Thus, again, what works and what doesn't in this area will likely vary from one professor to another.

¹³⁹ Once again, it's worth noting that the vagaries of positionality will necessarily influence whether and to what extent individual professors' performances can influence their rapport with their classes, the respect they receive from their students, or their comfort level in the classroom. Moreover, I've found that the tone and interpersonal dynamics within a particular group of students can affect how things go; sometimes a professor just won't “click” with a particular class.

I describe here is not offered as an “ideal” way to perform one’s identity as a law professor. Rather it is just a set of coping strategies that have worked relatively well for me (as a white, straight law professor), and that I hope might work for some others as well.

The changes I’ve made have been made much easier by my reduced perfectionism, as well as my willingness to see teaching as a performance. I now willingly assume the hierarchical role I resisted earlier, although with a good dose of kindness and without relieving the students of responsibility for their own learning. At the beginning, my goal is just to establish confidence and trust. Once I’ve developed a rapport with the students, I can take on difficult issues, sometimes gently pushing them to reconsider their own starting assumptions.

I now believe that a slight distance between professor and student can be useful. After all, even if the students come to like and respect you as a person, they are unlikely to forget that you are still their professor. And since professors control their students’ grades (and hence, in the students’ minds, their future), our power is hard to deny. In fact, I’ve concluded, if a professorial performance ignores this reality, it risks appearing ungenune. I suspect that acting too informally with students can even elicit anger and resentment when the reality of power becomes apparent.

So, today, I aim to make it clear that the classroom is mine¹⁴⁰—but, simultaneously, never to abuse that power. My aim is to act like the professor I suspect the students want and expect me to be: a professor who is confident, in control, and decisive—but also kind, considerate, and calm.

Today, while I still hope to push my students out of their comfort zones in order to expand their knowledge and skill, I have abandoned the early (and rather naïve) belief that I can significantly alter their views. Realizing how little I know about them as individuals, I now settle for raising questions in their minds, and hoping that over months or years those questions might percolate into additional insights. Through focusing on the goal of just getting them to think critically, I have learned to assess how much of any particular critique a given student or group of students is ready to hear and to remember that we cannot ultimately control whether any particular idea “sticks” for any particular person. All of this was much easier to do once I stopped seeking validation from students, projecting my own perfectionist standards onto them, or taking what they said in class personally.

I have also developed more effective techniques (for me) for dealing with disturbing or offensive comments in the classroom. Now that I am clear in

140 For example, I don’t apologize for or overexplain minor glitches that students might grumble about—such as a typo on a syllabus or a last-minute class cancellation. If mistakes are a normal part of life, then there’s no need to dwell on them. In fact, I’ve come to believe, if I *do* act like a small error is a big thing, they might lose confidence in me and be tempted to blame me when they feel confused or anxious. I’ve also concluded that a confident and nondefensive reaction to errors can model for the students the professional confidence they will need when faced with their own mistakes.

my own mind that in the end students need to reach their own conclusions, I try to convey that message to them as well. However, I don't hesitate to push back against bigoted, uninformed, or even simply unconvincing positions—such as by providing empirical information that contradicts them or by mentioning a commonly articulated critique of a particular argument. When my perfectionism is in check, I find that I can usually respond to unappealing arguments without visibly expressing anger, frustration, or offense. And it's my sense that, the more that I demonstrate my genuine desire to help the students learn, the more open to hearing my views they become.

Hopefully, most critical law professors will, sooner or later, find that they can push the envelope and challenge students to move out of their comfort zones. Of course, I realize that some professors experience more resistance than others. I realize also that professors will vary as to whether and how much they will ever be willing to leave unchallenged the problematic views or assumptions they hear expressed in the classroom.¹⁴¹ And some professors might absolutely *not* be willing to perform their professorial role in the ways I have described here. These are very personal decisions, and will likely be a function of many factors, including personality, identity status, and politics. To the extent that I'm suggesting holding in reserve (at least temporarily) parts of one's personality, identity, or political views, for some that will not be possible. For others, it will be unacceptable. And, of course, these are matters of degree. Some sorts of accommodation to the students' expectations might be less problematic than others. In the end, individuals have to decide what works best for themselves.

I can only report on my own evolution. Over time, I have developed a classroom persona that blends, in a way that works for me, my personal identity and the performative dimension of my role as a teacher. I now see my law professor self as a particular version of me (closer to the version I might present, say, to another academic at a conference, but quite unlike the person I am with family and close friends), rather than as false or forced. In short, not only addressing my own personal perfectionism, but also embracing the postmodernist understanding of identity as fluid, situational, and relational has helped me to feel comfortable with the performative dimension of law teaching.

V. Conclusion

As my experience illustrates, academic perfectionism can cause law professors to get in their own way. It can contribute to tension and irritability in the classroom and stimulate a need for approval from students that saps teacher confidence, disabling empathy and reducing credibility.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Mine was in part a pragmatic decision as well; what I was doing definitely wasn't working (for me or the students), so I decided to try something else. But, like everyone, I have my limits; there are things I simply won't ignore.

¹⁴² Of course, the time and energy that perfectionist professors often dedicate to inefficient, obsessive class preparation can also deprive such professors of valuable family time and

If my experience is any indicator, identifying and addressing her perfectionist tendencies can significantly improve a law professor's comfort and success in the classroom. Once a teacher learns to conduct a discussion that comports with students' interests and levels of understanding, class members are likely to feel less tense and more engaged. Focusing on teaching, not popularity, leads to classes structured around clear, focused, pedagogical goals, thereby increasing students' comfort level, as well as the professor's. And when law professors no longer expect themselves to be perfect, they might (as I did) no longer expect the students to be so either, resulting in a more patient, supportive, and conversational teaching style.

However, there is no quick fix for perfectionism. I still sometimes struggle with unreasonable expectations of myself or my students and still sometimes experience anxiety or frustration in the classroom.¹⁴³ I don't always succeed at letting the students reach their own conclusions or at keeping class discussion from taking unnecessary detours.

The emotional histories and dynamics that make us vulnerable to perfectionism don't disappear overnight. But the battle is well worth the effort. For me, taking on this project made teaching more engaging, rewarding, and just plain fun than it had ever been before.¹⁴⁴ It is my hope that the thoughts presented here will help other academic perfectionists as well to learn, improve, and possibly even find some joy in teaching.

recreational activities—both of which not only enrich their lives but also are needed to sustain their professional selves.

¹⁴³ Teaching is always, after all, only a work in process.

¹⁴⁴ Parenthetically, the beneficial impact of this work even improved other areas of my life and relationships.