



SOPHIE SPARROW: *Professor of Law*

Turning a Love of Teaching into a New Book for Law Faculty

“Anyone with enough interest can be a good teacher.” – Professor Sophie Sparrow

Q: Why did you decide to become a teacher?

SS: I’ve always liked helping people acquire new knowledge and skills, watching them grow and become independent.

Working in a summer camp, teaching first-year law students while I was in law school, practicing law — I love teaching and always learn something new. When I was practicing law, clients would come in and say, “I need you to do this.” And I would say, “Actually, let me show you how to do this yourself.” Helping other people learn gives me lots of energy. I feel fortunate that I do this for a living.

Q: When did you first get involved in researching teaching methods and when did you decide to write a book about them?

SS: I have always been fascinated by the complexity of learning. Several years ago, I became licensed to teach public elementary school. During a year of studying and practice teaching, I was captivated by the current science of learning. Educational experts today know what helps students learn across any discipline.

When I joined the Pierce Law faculty a year later, I tried to apply those principles to my classes. From going to law teaching conferences and talking to other professors, I also realized that most law professors have had little exposure to the science of teaching and learning.

My co-authors, Michael Hunter Schwartz (Washburn) and Gerald Hess (Gonzaga), and I had been thinking about writing a book for a while. Mike, Gerry, and I have presented many law teaching workshops and programs over the years and our idea was to put out a basic “soup-to-nuts” law-teaching book. There are loads of resources that talk about teaching. There are fewer that walk you through the steps. For example, educational experts say, “Engage students in active learning.” Faculty asks, “How do I do that in a tax class with 80 students?” Our book will show them how.



Q: Please tell us about your book.

SS: It’s called *Teaching Law by Design: Engaging Students From the Syllabus to the Final Exam*. It was published by Carolina Academic Press in July, 2009. The book includes concrete suggestions based on the current science of teaching and learning. How do you design a course? Prepare a syllabus? Choose a text? Plan a class? Start a class? Answer students’ questions? Create a positive learning environment? Write and grade a test? We’ve also included an appendix with samples. For many people, these sample problems, questions, syllabi, and rubrics — scoring sheets — will be really helpful. It is one thing to read about what goes into a good syllabus; it’s another thing to have an actual example that you can build on.

Our hope is that this book will be useful for teachers at all levels of experience. We have many suggestions; we recognize that we don't even follow them all, and we explain this to our readers. But we wanted to showcase the kinds of teaching practices that can make a difference in student learning. You have to be authentic as a teacher. Some suggestions may work for some teachers, some not. We wanted to provide choices but also not make the book so long no one would read it.

Q: You worked for a year as a member of the faculty at the Phoenix School of Law. Did your experience there help you to write this book?

SS: Absolutely! As part of the founding faculty at Phoenix, I taught first year students and worked on faculty development. We had “best practices” meetings at least every other week where the entire faculty would discuss how to improve teaching. For example, one week we focused on the best practices for writing an exam. At another meeting, we talked about how to create an effective classroom dynamic. We'd brainstorm ways to solve problems we had in our classes.

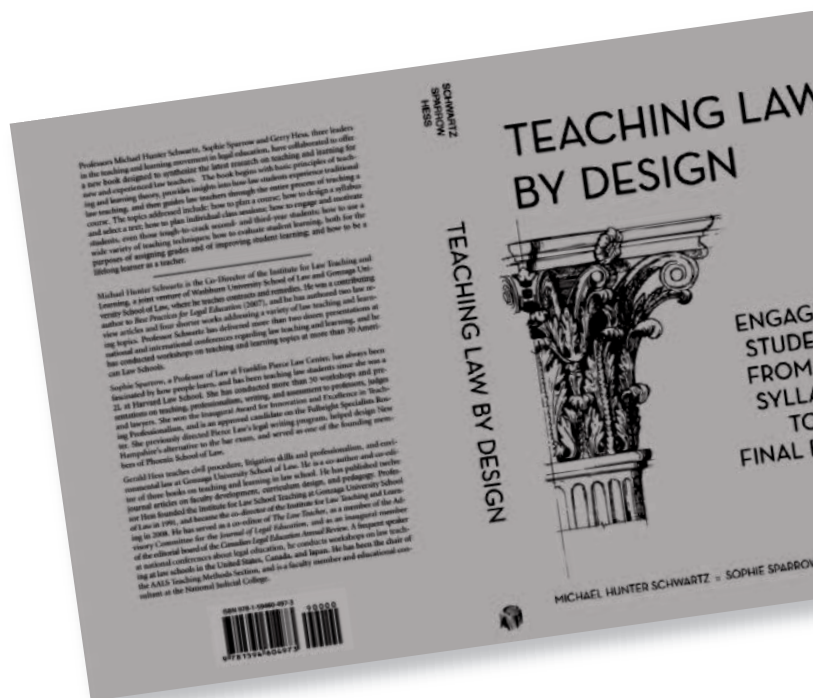
We'd also sit in on each other's classes. As a teacher, sometimes it's hard to get a feel for what is really going on in the classroom. An observer can give you that feedback. Did the diagram on the board make sense? When did the students start to fidget?

Q: Have you assisted faculty members at other schools? What do you look for when you are observing a class?

SS: Every year, I do several faculty development workshops at other schools. Some of these involve observing others teach. I have two basic questions: “What is the dynamic?” “Who is acting like a lawyer?”

First, I look at what the students are doing. Are they taking notes or checking their email? How many students are volunteering? Are the discussions mostly between individual students and the teacher, or are students speaking to each other? How long does the teacher wait before calling on a student?

One observation approach I often use is to note, minute by minute, who is talking - the teacher or a student? The people talking are practicing and getting feedback on their lawyering skills. It's wonderful to see a class where many of the students are getting that kind of practice.



Q: Have teaching techniques changed over the years? What are some of the best teaching techniques that you have observed?

SS: Some techniques are classic, like asking good questions. Remember Socrates? But any technique can be done well or poorly. There are ways to ask questions that don't stimulate learning. Same with technology. PowerPoint™ slides can be highly effective or a waste of time.

Over the last 30 years we've made huge gains in understanding learning, incorporating new research on brain patterns, emotional and social intelligence. Some of the research confirms what good teachers have been doing all along. Sometimes the science suggests we should do the opposite of what we're used to.

One of the most effective techniques is having students work in small groups where they have to draw upon their collective knowledge and skill sets. It takes a lot of preparation to design suitable tasks, but when the students are prepared and engaged in solving a hypothetical problem, they are more likely to significantly learn the material. To do this well, you have to create a culture where students are willing to work hard, take risks, and help each other learn.

Q: Is a positive learning culture developed schoolwide or just in the classroom?

SS: Ideally it's both, but it doesn't have to be. Even where there is little sense of school community, you can create a positive culture in one classroom for one semester.

One of the things about teaching at Phoenix School of Law was that everyone was invested in making the school a success. That was a unique opportunity, which is harder to achieve at an established school. But you can still do it.

We're lucky here. Pierce Law has a great environment and a great sense of community. People from other schools talk about it when they visit — there is a sense that people are positive about being here.

Q: Does the size of the class affect learning?

SS: Yes, large classes are harder, but you can work with it. Lately I have been focusing on a teaching strategy called team-based learning. Students work in diverse teams during the whole semester. They are held accountable for individual assignments, team projects, and their ability to contribute to their team. Because students spend most of their class time solving problems in teams, they have more opportunities to gain deep knowledge and refine their skills.

I've now used team-based learning in required and elective courses, ranging from nine to 85 students. Students can be pretty skeptical at first, especially 2Ls and 3Ls, but by the end of the semester, many students have said that they learned a lot from the process. I'm still working on it.

Q: You have another teaching book in the works? What is that one about?

SS: Along with Elon Professor Steven Friedland, my co-authors from *Teaching Law By Design* and I are working on a second book, *Techniques for Teaching Law II*. Like the first book, *Techniques for Teaching Law II* will include contributions from law teachers about how they implemented different techniques. We will be writing overviews, including our examples, and editing submissions from our colleagues. We want to honor diverse views and approaches to teaching law students.

Q: Do you have any final words of advice for those working to improve the effectiveness of their teaching using your techniques?

SS: Start small and take incremental steps. Try one new thing each semester. Talk to colleagues and ask for help. Invite students to help you out — almost everything I do has been improved by students' feedback. Spend ten minutes a week writing in a teaching journal. Keeping a teaching journal turns out to have an enormous impact in helping teachers develop confidence in their teaching. We all have ten minutes a week.

Sparrow specializes in teaching and learning. She is particularly interested in active teaching strategies that help students develop the skills they need for a balanced life practicing law: working with others; writing well; navigating complex legal doctrine and facts; engaging in self-assessment; and practicing professionalism. She teaches Legal Skills I and II, Remedies and Torts.

Sparrow has conducted more than 50 workshops and presentations on teaching, professionalism, writing and assessment to professors, judges and lawyers, including conferences hosted by the Institute for Law School Teaching, the American Association of Law Schools, the Legal Writing Institute, and the New Hampshire Judicial College.

In January 2004, she won the Inaugural Award for Innovation and Excellence in Teaching Professionalism, sponsored by the American Bar Association and Conference of Chief Justices. She became an approved candidate on the Fulbright Specialists Roster in September 2008.