

2021

Zooming Through Law School: Lessons Learned from Remote Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Kia H. Vernon

North Carolina Central University, School of Law, kvernon@nccu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/lj>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kia H. Vernon, *Zooming Through Law School: Lessons Learned from Remote Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 65 St. Louis U. L.J. (2021).

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.slu.edu/lj/vol65/iss3/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Saint Louis University Law Journal by an authorized editor of Scholarship Commons. For more information, please contact [Susie Lee](#).

ZOOMING THROUGH LAW SCHOOL: LESSONS LEARNED FROM REMOTE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

KIA H. VERNON*

“We are the sum total of our experiences. Those experiences—be they positive or negative—make us the person we are, at any given point in our lives. And, like a flowing river, those same experiences, and those yet to come, continue to influence and reshape the person we are, and the person we become. None of us are the same as we were yesterday, nor will be tomorrow.”

-B.J. Neblett

As law schools around the country quickly transitioned to remote teaching in March 2020 due to COVID-19, law professors were suddenly faced with an unprecedented challenge: teaching law classes remotely in the middle of a global pandemic. While the virus spread, devastating communities around the world, professors sought to strike a delicate balance between providing students with a sense of normalcy and equipping them with the tools necessary for them to be successful lawyers. The experience had a profound impact and afforded me the opportunity to grow in ways I never imagined. Although I was the teacher, I also became a student, gaining valuable insight and learning lessons that transcended the virtual classroom. It is because of this experience that I became a better teacher and person.

INTRODUCTION

I once read that there are certain traumatic events that people will not only remember, but in doing so remember the exact moment, and be able to recall vivid details about where they were, what they were doing, who they were with, and how they felt during that precise point in time.¹ Although recent research

* Kia H. Vernon is an Associate Professor of Law at North Carolina Central University School of Law where she teaches Contracts I and II, Spanish for Lawyers, and Bar Preparation Courses. During the Spring semester of 2020, Professor Vernon taught two sections of Contracts II. Professor Vernon would like to acknowledge her colleagues at North Carolina Central University School of Law for their constant support and encouragement, especially during this challenging time. A special thanks to Professors Deedee Nachman, Susan Hauser, Don Corbett, Angela Gilmore, and Krishnee Coley for their wisdom, guidance, and moral support. Finally, she would like to thank her students for being her superheroes.

1. *Flashbulb Memory*, AM. PSYCH. ASS'N DICTIONARY OF PSYCH., <https://dictionary.apa.org/flashbulb-memory> [https://perma.cc/2JTX-YCM5].

indicates that the details regarding these “flashbulb memories” are not always as accurate as we remember them,² I vividly recall the exact moment I received notification that our law school classes would immediately transition to a remote learning format due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a Wednesday evening at 7:28 p.m. (okay, I admit, I looked the exact time up), and I was taking a break from grading midterms to watch television and scroll through emails. My heart seemed to stop for a couple of seconds when I read that our students would not return to campus after Spring Break ended on Sunday. While many schools opted to extend Spring Break an additional week to allow students and faculty to transition, our law school would begin remote instruction the following Monday. In theory, it was already Thursday; I had less than three days before I would be required to teach all my classes via Zoom. In the words of my daughter, “I was shook.”

Though I am extremely fortunate to work at an institution that has a wonderful IT staff that was always ready to assist me on the rare occasion that I had to teach a class remotely, I knew that technology was the least of my worries.³ My immediate concern was for my students, whose world was being upended at what was already one of the most difficult times in their lives. As anyone who has matriculated in the hallowed halls of law school can attest, law school is one of, if not *the*, most challenging academic endeavors in even the best of circumstances. Throughout my tenure as a professor, I have seen some of my students endure this challenge through unimaginable circumstances: personal health issues, divorce, homelessness, and the loss of a parent are just a few examples. Now, all of my students were being forced to finish their first year of law school in the midst of a global pandemic. It was inconceivable. What made the switch to remote learning even more daunting was that I was teaching two first-year, bar-tested classes. As a result, it was critical that my students mastered the material, as their failure to do so would not only affect their grade for the semester, but could impact their ability to be successful on the bar examination.

There are many articles on best practices for online and distance learning. I do not profess to be a scholar on distance learning. In fact, I am still learning and evolving in this area. I am incredibly grateful for the scholars that have shared their invaluable research and experiences that have enabled me to be more effective when teaching remotely.⁴ My goal is not to proffer how to teach

2. *Id.*

3. Special thanks to Elias Brown, Khalia Spivey, Mauranda Elliott, Paul Jackson, and Brian Daniel for all your IT support!

4. I am currently enrolled in a six week Promoting Active Learning Online microcredential course sponsored by the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) and highly recommend its courses. See *Promoting Active Learning Online*, ASS’N OF COLL. & UNIV. EDUCATORS, https://acue.org/?acue_courses=promoting-active-learning-online [https://perma.cc/9WUL-6LMN].

remotely. Instead, I would like to share my experiences zooming through law school and how teaching law online made me a better teacher, and more importantly, a better person.

I. THE BEGINNING

I am fortunate to work with incredible people who are not only colleagues, but good friends. We immediately began to talk through how we would conduct our remote classrooms. One decided to pre-assign cases and record briefs with the students that she would use in the class. Another opted to assign a focus group for each class that would be responsible for the class discussions for that day. I opted to conduct my classroom in a manner that was as close as possible to the real classroom experience. I knew that the sudden transition would be unnerving for many students and, in my eyes, I thought it would provide them with a sense of normalcy.

Traditionally, I begin the first semester of classes using the Socratic method. Students are randomly called upon to stand up and brief a case, and subsequently are asked probing questions to engage them in thoughtful dialogue about the principles being discussed. This provides a foundation for the Spring semester, when I switch to an advocacy-based approach to presenting the cases. By the second semester, students are more comfortable speaking in class and have a solid understanding of how to dissect the different parts of the case. Thus, students are asked to stand up and present the case as counsel for the plaintiff or defendant. This allows them to have a deeper understanding of the cases, the rules, and the importance of being a good advocate. In the years since I switched to this method, I have watched students blossom as they actively engaged with their opposing counsel to present the cases. They often forgot they were learning and began to read the cases more carefully and critically. Students now hope they are the lucky ones called on to present the cases. As a result, it is my favorite semester of teaching. It was my hope that we would still be able to continue in this manner even through remote learning.

On Friday, three days before students were to begin remote instruction, I went to the law school to gather some materials. While I was in my office, a member of IT stopped by and showed me how to host my own class.⁵ She patiently walked me through setting up my remote classrooms. That Sunday, I participated in another remote learning work session with our faculty, and I was confident that I would be ready to start my classes on my own the following day. Not wanting to interrupt the final days of their Spring Break, I waited until Sunday to email all my students to address the transition and included a list of class expectations for our new remote learning classroom. The most critical were that students were still expected to be prepared with the materials each day, they

5. On prior occasions when I conducted classes remotely, a member of IT served as the host for my class and I was essentially a participant along with the students.

needed to be present with cameras on,⁶ and they needed to be appropriately dressed.⁷

On Monday at 9:00 a.m., I greeted my first class in Zoom. I received a couple of emails from students before class started asking to be excused from having cameras on, but most were “present” and ready to begin in our new platform. This class was my largest—fifty-one students—and it was surreal to have to scroll through several screens to “see” all of them. We talked a little bit about how I would conduct the classes and then dived into the material assigned for the day. After I finished that class, I immediately opened up my next Zoom class—this one with only twenty-three students—and the experience was a little less awkward with only having one screen to view. Like the first class, we discussed the expectations for the class and moved on to the material. Since both of these classes were the same course, just with different students, I tried throughout the semester to keep both classes on the same schedule, and I ended class exactly at the same point of my previous class.

The rest of the week and the next week were unremarkable. We all did our best to be present and adjust to our new normal. While I was adapting to teaching online, others in my household were also adapting to remote learning and working. My twelve-year-old daughter’s school was held via Zoom; my nineteen-year-old son, who is a sophomore at New York University and had been studying abroad in Abu Dhabi, was now home and taking classes online, but on Gulf Standard Time; my twenty-six-year-old son was home all day, as the office where he worked was closed due to the pandemic, but was still taking master’s classes online; and my husband was working remotely as well. My daughter, who dances on a competition dance team, even had four hours of dance classes at night, again, all on Zoom. It was quite an adjustment, to say the least.

Things were going well, considering the circumstances, or at least I thought they were. However, around the third week in, cracks started to surface “at work” and home. In my classes, students were present, but more declined to have their cameras turned on, and less students were prepared. None of the different methods I used to engage them seemed to help. I could tell they were struggling, and as a result, I was struggling. At home, my daughter was frustrated with Zoom school, as she was convinced that the classes were significantly harder than in-person classes and they were responsible for more assignments. She was

6. Students who were unable to have their cameras on were asked to email me for an exemption based on their individual circumstances. Students were also allowed to use the virtual background feature if they had any privacy concerns.

7. I thoroughly enjoyed the following article and related to the judge’s frustration after having similar experiences of students—or worse, significant others—showing up in video classes in revealing clothing while still in bed. See Debra Weiss, *Lawyers are Dressing Way Too Casual During Zoom Court Hearings, Judge Says*, ABA JOURNAL (Apr. 15, 2020, 9:24 AM), <https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/lawyers-are-dressing-way-too-casual-during-zoom-hearings-judge-says> [https://perma.cc/9R4V-EC57].

also exasperated trying to dance in her Zoom classes at night with such limited space. One son was miserable after two years of living his best life in New York and then Abu Dhabi, as he was now confined to the house with all of us while having to attend classes from one until six in the morning. The other son was happy to not be working, but was finding it difficult to find quiet spaces to study and take exams. My husband was irritated with the four hours of bouncing and banging sounds coming from my daughter's makeshift dance studio and was ready to get back to work. Even our dog was depressed as his peaceful existence without humans all day was interrupted. And these were not even big problems. The novel coronavirus was spreading like wildfire and the death toll was staggering. I was so stressed that I barely slept all night and instead spent hours after everyone went to bed, reading the dismal news about the current state of the world.

The first epiphany came one day as I tried to console my distraught daughter, whose dance teacher had just spent a portion of the class scolding the students because they were not trying hard enough. "Why can't these people understand it isn't the same?" I yelled. Suddenly I stopped in my tracks to internalize what I just said. "It isn't the same," I said to myself. Taking the same information and just moving it to an online experience would not produce the same result. It does not matter how great the in-person experience is (or was), it is not the same experience once it is moved online. No matter how great I thought the second semester experience was for students pre-COVID-19, I had to acknowledge it was not the same and I had to be willing to think about other ways of reaching my students.

As if the universe was trying to tell me something, the second epiphany came later that night. While I engaged in my post-midnight ritual of reading about the state of the world as it grappled with the deadly virus, I read an article that warned that the immediate switch to online learning was a mistake. Instead, the author opined, we needed to take a moment to acknowledge the magnitude of the pandemic and the effect it was having on all of us. I thought about my own household and how every one of us, albeit in different stages of our lives, was struggling to maintain a sense of normalcy in what was, for most of us, a crisis unlike anything we had experienced before. While I concede that the immediate switch to remote learning was the best thing to do, doing so without acknowledging what I was asking my students to do, and without understanding the effect it had on them, was contributing to their frustration. I did not know what I was going to do, but I knew I could not continue to do what I was doing. Tomorrow, I promised myself, I was going to do things differently.

II. THE PIVOT

The next morning, I woke up with cold feet. I had a lesson that was already planned and the switch to online learning had already resulted in a lot of lost time during the transition. I did not know if I could afford to lose additional class

time. I also did not know what I was going to do or say. Another internal struggle was my perception of what my responsibilities were as a law professor. I was there to teach law, and this was not on the syllabus. However, I have always believed that my job as a professor was not merely to teach my students the law; it was also to teach them how to be lawyers. As an essential part of lawyering is listening to clients to understand their issues; this, I reasoned, was a valuable lesson on empathy. I quickly wrote down five questions: How are you doing? What has been your biggest challenge in the transition to remote learning? What has helped you the most during this transition? What about this class do you enjoy? How can I help you?

I started the class by acknowledging the unprecedented times that we were living in and the seemingly insurmountable challenges they faced as a result. Next, I informed them that I wanted to take a moment to assess how everybody was feeling. I conceded that what I was doing was unconventional, but asserted the extraordinary circumstances required an extraordinary response. I provided the rationale and what I hoped they would gain from the experience. I opted to use breakout rooms to provide students with an opportunity to discuss the questions in small groups. I informed them I would not join the sessions because I wanted them to be free to share openly with their colleagues. I asked them to select one person to be the moderator, who would lead the groups through a discussion of each question and summarize the group responses for the rest of the class. I moved them to the breakout session and quietly waited, and again, second-guessed myself. After thirty minutes, I sent them a message that I would be closing the breakout session and waited for them to reenter the main room. The next thirty minutes of class completely changed me. I was no longer the teacher; I became the student. I listened and learned.

The students shared stories of myriad adversities: some were single parents and were juggling law school with small children, some were now back at home with their parents and struggled to find a space to focus on their studies, the students who remained in the area were alone and now isolated, a few suffered from food insecurity, one had parents who were ill which required the student to become the primary caretaker for them, some had family members who were suffering from the pandemic, or who tragically succumbed to the virus, and all of them were scared. In sharing what worked for individual students during the transition, other students discovered things they could do to assist them during this difficult time. I learned what worked in class—and what did not—and received thoughtful responses regarding what I could do to help them. After all groups shared their responses, I thanked them and told them that I heard them. I vowed to provide additional resources for them and asked them to reach out to me if they needed additional assistance. Finally, I promised that I would show up every day to be there for them and to help them through this difficult semester, and I asked them to do their best to do the same.

The second class was very similar to the first. Their feelings mirrored those of their classmates and the process was likewise transformational. At the end of the classes I compiled a list of resources based on the concerns they shared and sent it to them later that day. From that day forward, the classes were dramatically different. What resulted from that experience and the remaining months were lessons that helped me evolve as a professor of law and student of life.

The most important lesson was to take the time to listen and understand my students. Throughout my tenure as a teacher, I had many who shared some of their challenges with me; some shared out of necessity as they were unable to complete an assignment, and others because they needed assistance or advice. However, every student has a story. While I could not change the circumstances, learning about the challenges they faced as a result of the pandemic allowed me to adjust what I was doing to further assist them.⁸ As childcare was an issue for some, having all of my office hours during the day, prevented those students from attending them. As a result, I offered later office hours to ensure that they could also receive additional support.⁹ I also made sure that students with children knew it was never a problem if their children were present during office hours, or ran into the room they were using to attend class. Admittedly, not all issues could be resolved. However, for the students, the process of simply listening to the concerns and acknowledging them was cathartic.

This experience also helped me to understand how important it is to build a sense of community within my classrooms. I assumed that this already existed as the students had spent several hours a day in class with each other for the past eight months. However, it was evident that they knew each other, but they did not really *know* each other. Part of this can be attributed to the way students communicate with each other. Generation Y and Generation Z students prefer to communicate more online than in person.¹⁰ Instead of talking with each other face-to-face, much of their communication is through texting, direct messaging and emailing,¹¹ which makes it difficult to foster interpersonal relationships. Taking the time to help them establish a village is critically important, especially when students are attending school online. It enables them to share and learn

8. Devon Price, *Laziness Does Not Exist*, HUMAN PARTS (Mar. 23, 2018), <https://humanparts.medium.com/laziness-does-not-exist-3af27e312d01> [<https://perma.cc/K4X3-ZZRU>] (exploring why situational constraints predict behavior better than intelligence or other individual-level traits).

9. When I discussed Professor Price's article, *supra* note 8, with my son who was taking classes in a different time zone, he shared that one of his professors even had office hours to accommodate the time difference, which was at 12:00 a.m. Gulf Standard Time.

10. *The Evolution of Communication Across Generations*, NOTRE DAME OF MD. UNIV. (Feb. 6, 2019), <https://online.ndm.edu/news/communication/evolution-of-communication/> [<https://perma.cc/PZQ7-C8HV>].

11. *Id.*

from each other. During the breakout session, when students discussed what they were doing that was helpful, it provided their classmates with invaluable tips and resources, and it opened the door for them to establish a line of communication to continue to help and support one another. For some, just learning about what some of their classmates were enduring gave them a greater perspective and made them work harder. More importantly, they realized they were in this together. This sense of community will transcend law school; their fellow classmates will soon be fellow attorneys. They will be referral sources, advisors, opposing counsel, and even the judges in their courtroom. This community will not only benefit them; our profession will be better because of it.

Another valuable lesson was to not be afraid of showing my students that I care about them and that I see them. While I have always cared about my students and their learning, I did not make a point to tell them that I did or explain why what they were doing mattered. Hearing students say that I was the first professor that cared enough to ask them how they were feeling was difficult because I knew all my colleagues were passionate about their job and cared deeply about their students. However, I acknowledge that sometimes in an effort to impart the law, I forget to check-in to see how they are doing in the process. I know a lot of colleagues may bristle at this proposition, but by telling the students—and more importantly, showing them—I cared, it made them work harder and more willing to ask for help. It does not make the work any easier, but knowing that I cared about them and their journey and that I wanted them to be successful made a difference.

One example of this was when a student, who pre-remote learning had been one of the most engaged students in class, was noticeably silent in Zoom classes. I reached out to him to tell him that I was concerned about him and missed hearing his voice in class. He discussed how difficult the transition was for him and resulted in him feeling removed from the classroom experience. We discussed ways to make the experience better and he promised to try. The next class he was engaged and asked several thoughtful questions. When I reached back out to him to thank him for his contributions, he stated that he decided that if I could care enough about him to want him to do well, he could care enough about himself.

In addition to checking up on students who demonstrated that they may be experiencing difficulty, I wanted all my students to know that I saw them. One of the things that I missed was greeting my students every class period as they walked in the classroom. In the group discussion, they indicated they missed it as well. As a result, I began to open my classroom earlier to greet each student as they entered. It took time, but it was a simple way for students to know they were seen. As a result, they were “present” and engaged again.

Finally, I learned to not be afraid of doing different things. Moving outside of the classroom helped me to teach outside of the (classroom) box. It was a

tremendous opportunity to see my students in a different way and to reimagine my classroom in a way that promotes not just learning, but intellectual and emotional growth. I will readily admit, not all of the things I tried worked, but the students knew I was trying. Surprisingly, the simplest things elicited the best responses. One day, I asked the students to bring a small whiteboard or plain paper with markers to class. As I moved through the material, I asked questions to gauge their understanding. I asked the students to write short responses on the whiteboard or paper and put it up in front of their cameras when I counted to three. They loved it! It was interactive and it allowed me to ascertain if they were all understanding the material. Another fan favorite was a video that I showed for one of the cases. I had a student record a reenactment of the case, breaking the case down like a soap opera. Her classmates immediately laughed and cheered for her. It was a fun way to introduce the case and it launched her side-business reenacting cases and posting the videos on YouTube.

The rest of the semester seemed to fly by. The students learned, but they also laughed and genuinely seemed to enjoy the class. Likewise, seeing them every class period brought me joy. I will forever be thankful for the lessons I learned along the way and for my students, who helped me learn them. I cannot wait until the day when I am able to bring these lessons back into the classroom and to be in the same space again with my students. Until then, I will continue zooming through law school. I just started teaching another year of Contracts with my new class of first-year students.¹² And of course, I began by greeting each one by name.

12. NCCU School of Law invites a small cohort of students to begin law school in the summer. The Summer Start Initiative just welcomed its fifth class. The classes are conducted remotely.

