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Recommended Citation

Gambert, Iselin and Grillot, Benjamin, Making Workshops Work (for Everyone): Creating and Capturing a Student-Driven Writing Workshop Series. *Perspectives: Teaching Legal Research and Writing*, Vol. 18, Nos. 2 + 3, pp. 133-39 (Winter/Spring 2010).

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Making Workshops Work (for Everyone): Creating and Capturing a Student-Driven Writing Workshop Series

By **Iselin Gambert and Ben Grillot**

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I. Building a Better Life Raft: Challenges and Opportunities

As the fall semester of 2009 began, a nervous first-year student walked the halls of the George Washington University Law School (GW Law) clutching a stack of books on seemingly obscure subjects: contracts, torts, and legal writing. A flier posted on a bulletin board in the hallway caught her eye. It was advertising something called the “Fall Writing Workshop Series,” a series of peer-to-peer workshops hosted by the law school’s Writing Center. This particular workshop, titled “Tips on Briefing Cases and Managing the 1L Workload,” looked promising. She jotted down the details and made sure she could attend.

When the student arrived at the workshop she found a room full of fellow 1Ls and a not-too-threatening looking pair of third-year students standing in the front of the small classroom. Settling into her seat, she soon found herself immersed in a brief PowerPoint presentation, after which she turned and worked with a partner on a case briefing exercise. The upper-level students hosting the workshop easily and clearly answered questions she had about case briefing that she’d felt too shy to ask in her other classes. She left happy and overall less stressed, and told a friend about the workshop. Disappointed that her friend was unable to attend, they logged onto the Writing Center’s

TWEN® Web site¹ and were pleased to find that the workshop had been recorded and that the video was available online.

The Fall Writing Workshop Series, sponsored by the GW Law Writing Center, successfully developed both first-year students’ writing and analysis skills and upper-level students’ lesson planning and presentation skills while capturing new and creative ways to teach legal writing for future generations of students. While we broadly accomplished these goals, we learned a great deal in the process that we will use to improve the workshop series in years to come.

II. A Tour of the Harbor: Background and Origins of the Writing Workshop Series

A. About the GW Law Writing Center

The GW Law Writing Center consists of approximately 40 writing fellows (WFs)² who provide one-on-one legal writing assistance to all law students—from first-year students to LL.Ms. However, because the first-year students are required to take two semesters of legal research and writing courses and have the least experience with legal writing, these students are the primary users of the Writing Center. WFs are second- and third-year law students selected based on grades, writing samples, and interviews with both current WFs and a member of the law school’s legal research and writing faculty. Once selected, WFs serve for one

¹ GW Law School uses West’s TWEN (The West Education Network®) courseware to supplement classroom offerings. The Writing Center has its own TWEN page and all first-year GW Law students are encouraged to join the page to sign up for writing conferences and workshops, and to access resources we house there.

² The Writing Center colloquially refers to writing fellows as “WFs” in internal communication and we will use this abbreviation throughout this paper.

“We envisioned offering one-hour workshops on topics ranging widely from ‘bread-and-butter’ legal writing topics ... to more practical topics ... to help first-year students adjust to law school.”

academic year and may reapply for a second year. They meet weekly for a one-hour class session with the director of the Writing Center, where they discuss conferencing techniques and strategies as well as details of the first-year students’ writing assignments.

B. Visions and Goals for a Writing Workshop Series

When we began planning the Writing Center curriculum for 2009–10, we decided to reintroduce a series of workshops hosted by the WFs. Such workshops had intermittently been part of the Writing Center in earlier years, but had never been a formal component of the Writing Center’s offerings. We envisioned offering one-hour workshops on topics ranging widely from “bread-and-butter” legal writing topics including developing statements of fact and legal reasoning through analogy, to more practical topics such as exam writing, workload management, and case briefing to help first-year students adjust to law school.³

We had a variety of pedagogical goals for the workshops. For the entire law school student body, but particularly for the 1L students, we wanted to expand the reach of the Writing Center to more students than was possible through traditional one-on-one writing conferences. For the WFs, we hoped to develop their speaking and presentation skills and give them new insights that they could take back to their one-on-one conferences. Finally, we hoped to capture the institutional knowledge generated by the workshops, and to make available videos and other materials to future generations of students and WFs as a resource.

III. Floating the Boat: The Fall Writing Workshop Series in Action

The Fall Writing Workshop Series was, by several measures, extremely successful. WFs hosted 26 workshops that were attended by hundreds of

³ A complete list of workshop titles is included in an appendix at the end of this article.

students.⁴ Twenty of these workshops were videotaped and made available online. Despite our successes, our close examination of the workshop series revealed that improvement is possible. At the end of the semester we conducted a survey of the WFs to gauge their reaction to the writing workshops. We also talked informally with a number of WFs about their experiences and the student co-author of this paper hosted two different workshops.⁵

To gauge the attendees’ response to the workshops, we posted and publicized a survey on the Writing Center’s TWEN page at the end of the semester, but only received a handful of responses. We also contacted several first-year students and conducted telephone interviews to determine, even if anecdotally, how successful the workshops were.

This article is based on this combination of direct, anecdotal, and survey evidence and is divided into three sections: first, an examination of the WFs’ experience, then an exploration of the 1Ls’ experience, and finally a discussion of the capture and future use of the workshop content.

A. WFs Are Their Own Captains: Topics, Titles, and Formats

The content, format, and logistical details of the workshops were left up to the discretion of the individual WFs. We gave the WFs a list of potential topics, loosely organized around the first-year students’ syllabus, and gave them the option of hosting a workshop either individually or with a partner. WFs were responsible for advertising the workshops and many used fliers and posted announcements on the law school student portal.

We encouraged returning 3L WFs to host workshops early in the semester, both because of their

⁴ Four hundred and nine students signed up to attend workshops, but actual attendance numbers may have varied. Further, these are not necessarily unique students as some may have attended more than one workshop.

⁵ The first workshop, entitled “The Power of Fusion: Effective Analysis and Synthesis of Legal Rules,” was hosted with a partner, while the second workshop, entitled “Shooting Baskets: Crafting Effective Application Sections,” was hosted alone.

experience and to allow first-time WFs a chance to acclimate to the WF experience before hosting workshops. Early topics included workshops on core legal writing subjects, such as “The Power of Fusion: Effective Analysis and Synthesis of Legal Rules” and “Trick or TREAT,”⁶ as well as workshops on more practical topics such as “Managing the 1L Workload” and “Briefing Cases.” These early workshops were extremely popular with the first-year students and were either full or nearly full.⁷ Although the initial workshops were very heavily attended by the first-year students, often without significant advertising, by the end of the semester attendance at the workshops declined.⁸

At the midpoint of the semester, as the first-year students prepared for their midterm exams, WFs prepared workshops entitled “Mastering the Midterm” and “Getting to Maybe: Exam Writing Tips.” These workshops were very popular and had the highest attendance levels for the entire semester.⁹ Additional workshops were given on basic writing topics such as “Grammar and Punctuation” and “Editing and Polishing.” Other notable workshops included presentations on the research aspect of the legal writing process, including the well-attended “Tips for Efficient Online Research” and workshops on very specific aspects of the legal writing paradigm, including

“Perfecting Case Analysis in the ‘A’ Section”¹⁰ and “Making Good Use of Direct Quotes and Parentheticals.”

There was significant variation in the formats of the presentations. Most WFs used a PowerPoint presentation for all or part of their workshop, but many developed interesting interactive sections of their lesson plans. These activities ranged from small-group exercises to working with actual drafts provided by the attendees. Almost all workshops incorporated some form of question-and-answer section, and both WFs and attendees reported that the Q&A sections of the workshops were the most beneficial.¹¹ One WF reported, anecdotally, that students preferred an interactive environment and noted that they didn’t like workshops that “just repeated LRW class.”¹²

B. “The More Experience We Can Get, the Better”: The WFs’ Perspective¹³

WFs in follow-up surveys and interviews mentioned three primary benefits to hosting the workshops. First, WFs felt that conducting workshops allowed them to focus on the bigger picture of legal writing concepts outside of the narrow concerns of the assigned legal writing problems. Second, WFs reported that they were able to use the insights gained while preparing and delivering their workshops to refine their one-on-one conferences to better serve the needs of the students. Third, the workshops gave WFs an opportunity to develop teaching, speaking, and presentation skills different from those gained through one-on-one conferences.

⁶ TREAT is the acronym the textbook used by legal research and writing (LRW) professors at GW Law uses to describe the process of legal reasoning. Similar to “IRAC,” it stands roughly for Thesis, Rule, Explanation, Application, and Thesis (restated as Conclusion).

⁷ None of the seven workshops given during the first month of the semester was less than half full and four of them were completely full.

⁸ Workshops on “Managing the 1L Workload” and “The Power of Fusion: Effective Analysis and Synthesis of Legal Rules” given during the first week of classes were fully booked as was a workshop on “Editing and Polishing Legal Writing.” However, by late October a workshop on “Grammar and Punctuation” only had five students sign up out of 12 available slots and a workshop on “Time Management and Writer’s Block” had five students sign up out of 30 available spots.

⁹ Three midterm-related workshops were held in larger classrooms to accommodate demand. A total of 131 students signed up for these workshops.

¹⁰ The “A” section in TREAT, the legal writing paradigm at GW Law, is the Application section, where the legal writer makes connections between the facts of the problem and the facts and law of precedential cases and shows how, because of factual similarities (or differences), a particular outcome is compelled (or not).

¹¹ Interview with 1L Ben Grillot, Dec. 12–16, 2009. The attendees came to the workshop with questions and used the Q&A section of the workshop to get direct responses to particular concerns.

¹² WF comment from end-of-semester survey. On file with the authors.

¹³ WF comment from end-of-semester survey. On file with the authors.

“Almost all workshops incorporated some form of question-and-answer section, and both WFs and attendees reported that the Q&A sections of the workshops were the most beneficial.”

“In interviews, students stated that the workshops helped alleviate early-semester anxiety and were a ‘life raft’ during the first few weeks of school.”

In a typical one-on-one conference in the Writing Center, a student and WF work closely with text the student has prepared for a legal writing assignment. In contrast, the workshop format provided WFs with an opportunity to step back and explain broad concepts without being tied to a particular set of facts or law. As one WF wrote in a survey: “[The workshop] provided an opportunity to creatively plan a lesson and communicate with a larger audience. I found it to be a great opportunity to get students thinking about legal writing in advance and outside of the context of a particular assignment.”¹⁴

Further, our survey results consistently showed that WFs developed new ways of explaining concepts and were able to take these insights back to their one-on-one appointments. As one WF wrote: “I’ve found it helpful to use several of the analogies that I developed for the workshop in my individual appointments.”¹⁵ Other WFs noted that the workshops provided them with a way to get a sense of the general concerns and issues that first-year students were facing. As one WF put it, they “became more aware of potential problems that students were facing and [] how to address these issues.”¹⁶

Finally, some WFs even recognized that the workshop format allowed them to develop their speaking and presentation skills.¹⁷ Developing these skills in the WFs was our goal, but we didn’t expect all of the WFs to notice. The fact that some reported this as a specific benefit of hosting the workshops is evidence that the workshops accomplished our goal of aiding the hosts as well as the attendees.

¹⁴ Comment from Writing Fellow Survey. Another writing fellow wrote: “[Workshops required] prepping concrete examples to give to students that are simple and disengaged from their memo topics so that they can focus on the writing concepts instead of the law.”

¹⁵ Comment from Writing Fellow Survey. Another writing fellow found that in one-on-one conferences they “use some of the stuff from [their] slides to teach rule synthesis and E sections now.” Still another wrote that they “learned a new technique for explaining TREAT that [they] hadn’t previously considered.”

¹⁶ Comment from Writing Fellow Survey.

¹⁷ Writing fellow comment: “[I learned] general presentation [and] public speaking skills.”

C. Workshop “Life Rafts”: The Attendees’ Perspective¹⁸

Based on survey and anecdotal evidence, we found that the workshops were helpful to the first-year students in two ways: first, they quelled anxiety about law school, and second, they provided students a way to develop legal research and writing skills in a less formal setting. In the words of one first-year survey respondent: “I think the workshops are great, some are better than others, but with time I think they’ll all be very helpful. I definitely think I did better on the memo in part because of my attendance at several workshops.”

In interviews, students stated that the workshops helped alleviate early-semester anxiety and were a “life raft” during the first few weeks of school.¹⁹ This function, aside from the substantive content of the workshops, is important and reinforces the idea that the Writing Center is a friendly, accessible place, staffed by knowledgeable peers. By fostering the image of writing workshops as life rafts for first-year students, the Writing Center will likely benefit from an increase in interest in its services and a resulting substantive improvement in the quality of students’ writing skills.

In the workshops hosted by the student author of this paper, students were very engaged and interactive. The questions they asked showed a serious interest in learning and, on occasion, the WF even saw students’ eyes light up as they gained insight into an issue. The informal nature of the workshops, with plenty of room for give and take between the WF and students, led to a relaxed dialogue that was quite unlike either a classroom setting or a one-on-one writing conference.

D. Keeping a Log: Capturing the Workshops for Future Generations

No sooner did we announce the launch of the Fall Writing Workshop Series than a steady stream of requests came in asking us to record the workshops

¹⁸ Interview with student Ben Grillot, Dec. 16, 2009. Notes on file with authors.

¹⁹ Interview with student Ben Grillot, Dec. 16, 2009. Notes on file with authors.

and make them available online. We liked the idea immediately; it complemented our vision of making writing resources available online in the newly created law school Online Writing Lab (OWL), it was an easy way to build institutional memory of the work of the Writing Center, and it opened up the workshops to far more students than we could accommodate in any given live, in-person session.

Our initial hurdles included (1) ensuring that the WF workshop hosts felt comfortable being recorded and having those recordings made available online to the greater law school community; (2) advertising the existence of the workshop recordings so that students knew that they were available as a resource; and (3) working out the logistics between the law school media center, the IT department, and TWEN to get the workshops recorded, uploaded to the Internet, and posted to the Writing Center TWEN page for general consumption.

The first hurdle—ensuring that WFs were comfortable with being recorded—turned out to be a nonissue. We sent the WFs an e-mail letting them know that all workshops would be recorded and posted online unless a particular WF objected to that practice, in which case we would refrain from recording that particular workshop. No WF voiced an objection, and many actually followed up with the media center on their own to ensure the workshop was set up to be recorded at the appropriate time and place.

The second hurdle—advertising the availability of the workshop recordings—was somewhat more challenging. We sent messages to all of the LRW professors and dean’s fellows²⁰ notifying them about the recorded workshops and asking them to pass the message along to their students. We also encouraged WFs to mention the recordings to the attendees of their workshops. Due to the small number of survey responses obtained from

workshop attendees, we don’t have a full understanding of how many people were aware that recordings of the workshops were available. Of five attendees that we got feedback from on this issue, three knew that the workshops were recorded and two did not. Of the three who knew, one watched a recording and the other two did not. Both people who did not know about the recordings reported that they would have watched one or more had they known.

That left us with the third hurdle: logistics. Recording the workshops and making them available online was more administratively burdensome than we expected. However, because the process was so particular to the way the media center is structured at GW, a detailed discussion isn’t relevant here. Despite the challenges, we recorded and posted 20 out of 26 workshops, including two midterm-related workshops that we posted within 24 hours.

Technological challenges cropped up along the way as well. Sound quality on the recordings was often poor, and the PowerPoint presentations rarely showed up visibly. Because recordings were automatically programmed, they frequently started several minutes prior to when the workshops actually began, resulting in several minutes of “dead air” at the beginning where it is possible to overhear student and WF conversations. The recordings were made available in a format that was slow to load and buffer and that offered no good way to skip ahead to particular segments of the workshop content. Finally, for a time, the recordings appeared to only be viewable on certain Web browsers, though that problem resolved itself midway through the semester.

Perhaps the most unexpected challenge concerned an e-mail we received from one of the WF hosts. The WF wrote to disclose that during his workshop he had used some profanity in connection with an insult about the LRW program, and wanted to make us aware of it in case we needed to censor that portion of the recording. Unfortunately, censoring only a snippet of the recording was not logistically feasible, so we needed to decide whether to post or

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²⁰ Dean’s fellows are third-year law students who teach research and citation to first-year students as part of the legal research and writing curriculum.

“We plan to work closely with the law school media center to explore ways to cut steps out of the process of recording and posting the workshops. We will also work to improve the quality and format of the recordings.”

not post the entire workshop. After watching the recording in question and discussing the issue with the directors of the LRW program, we decided that the benefit to students of making the content of the workshop available online outweighed the negative comments made by the WF host, and we posted the recording in full. Since posting it we have not received any feedback on the recording, and we are not aware of any negative effects of our having posted it.

IV. Trimming the Sails: Lessons Learned and Ideas for the Future

Going forward, our goals for the Writing Workshop Series remain the same: to expand our offerings of peer-to-peer writing instruction to the law school community, improve the lesson planning and presentation skills of the WFs, and capture the collective knowledge for future generations of students and WFs. We have, however, through this first semester of implementation learned important lessons and will adjust course accordingly for the future.

We will continue to give the WFs significant autonomy in planning the workshops while giving them access to examples from this semester. WFs will be explicitly encouraged to bring what they learned in the workshop setting into their one-on-one conferences and WF classroom time may be spent sharing such experiences. WFs may be asked to journal or write about their workshop experience to give us even more insight into what is working and not working.

To improve our awareness of attendee student concerns we will, for all future workshops, be sure to collect survey data along the way. Even if relatively few students complete these surveys, they will still provide important insight into students' needs and concerns. Further, to improve attendance we will be sure that WFs are aware of first-year student schedules and encourage them to plan the workshops accordingly.

We will encourage WFs to focus their workshops on practical topics and will develop ways to market and publicize more “bread-and-butter” topics to make them appear as dynamic and interesting as possible. Finally, we plan to be more explicit in stressing to the WFs the importance of being aware that, as hosts of workshops that are being seen by hundreds of students live and countless more on the recordings we make available online, they are serving as long-term ambassadors of the Writing Center and the entire LRW program. As such, they must choose their language carefully when hosting workshops.

As for capturing the content of the workshops for future viewing, we plan to do a more thorough job of advertising the recordings, including using a flier campaign around the law school to publicize the online availability of the workshops. We plan to work closely with the law school media center to explore ways to cut steps out of the process of recording and posting the workshops. We will also work to improve the quality and format of the recordings. We hope to find a program that allows for quick and easy editing of the videos, and we want to set up the videos with “chapters” so that students can easily skip to different portions of a workshop. We are also exploring the possibility of creating our own GW Law Writing Center YouTube channel as a place to centrally house all of our multimedia content.

Our vision is that in the fall of 2010, as a new crop of anxious first-year students arrives on campus, they will be met by a new set of fliers advertising another year of the GW Law Writing Center's Writing Workshop Series. The fact that the workshops are recorded and available online will be widely publicized. At the end of each workshop, attendees will be presented with a survey to gauge their response and collect ideas for improvement. And a new team of WFs will sharpen their lesson-planning and presentation skills as they build a new series of workshops for current and future generations of law students.

Appendix: Fall 2009 Workshop Titles in Chronological Order

- The Power of Fusion: Effective Analysis and Synthesis of Legal Rules
- Managing the 1L Workload
- 1L 101: Tips on Briefing Cases, Managing Your Workload, and More
- Trick or TREAT: Learning the Tricks of the TREAT Paradigm
- Now! That's What I Call a Q&A Session: How to Write Effective Questions Presented
- Editing and Polishing
- TREAT Yourself to Success: Unlocking the Fundamentals of TREAT
- Diamonds in the Rough: Tips for More Effectively Conducting Online Research
- Shooting Baskets: Crafting Effective Application Sections
- Grammar Workshop
- Getting to Maybe: Exam Writing Tips from 2009 GW Law Order of the Coif Graduates
- Mastering the Midterm
- Burn the Fat: Making Strategic Choices in Fact and Law
- Organizing and Synthesizing Independent Research
- Facing the Facts: How to Write a Top-Notch Statement of Facts
- Writing the Question Presented and How it Leads to the "T" in TREAT
- Techniques for Perfecting Case Analysis and Comparisons in the Application Section
- Grammar and Punctuation
- Making Good Use of Direct Quotes and Parentheticals
- Getting to the Finish on an Hour a Day: Time Management and Writer's Block
- Tying It All Together: Putting the Finishing Touches on Your Writing
- It's Going to Be Okay: Tactics to Get You Through Exam Season
- Making the Grade: Tips on Successful Outlining and Exam-Taking Techniques

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Another Perspective

"It is six in the morning and a law student is walking her dog before beginning a full day of classes. Across town a few hours later, a classmate rushes onto a crowded subway train, forced to stand sandwiched between strangers during his commute to school. That afternoon, an evening student sits in rush hour traffic, hoping to make it into the city in time for class. Later that night, a student jogs on a treadmill at the gym after a long day of school. What do all of these students have in common? They are learning by listening to their professors' podcasts. Even though they are located in different places, at different times of the day, while their hands or eyes may not be free to open a book to study, they can still listen and learn. This Article discusses how and why professors can use podcasts to enhance their students' education. Podcasts provide students with an opportunity to listen to their professor outside of the time and space constraints of the classroom. ... [I]t illustrates how professors can use podcasts as a teaching tool to reach today's multi-tasking, technology-savvy student in a different way than traditional classroom teaching methods. Now instead of just listening to rock, pop, jazz, country, or any other musical genre, students can add their law school podcasts to their playlist."

—Kathleen Elliott Vinson, *What's on Your Playlist? The Power of Podcasts as a Pedagogical Tool*, 2009 U. Ill. J.L. Tech. & Pol'y 405 (2005).