

2019

Exploring Diversity with a "Culture Box" in First-Year Legal Writing

Ann N. Sinsheimer

University of Pittsburgh School of Law, ans24@pitt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.law.pitt.edu/fac_articles



Part of the Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics Commons, International and Intercultural Communication Commons, Language and Literacy Education Commons, Legal Education Commons, Legal Studies Commons, Legal Writing and Research Commons, Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons, Rhetoric Commons, and the Sociology of Culture Commons

Recommended Citation

Ann N. Sinsheimer, *Exploring Diversity with a "Culture Box" in First-Year Legal Writing*, 32 *The Second Draft* 23 (2019).

Available at: https://scholarship.law.pitt.edu/fac_articles/509

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Scholarship@PITT LAW. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articles by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@PITT LAW. For more information, please contact leers@pitt.edu, shephard@pitt.edu.

Exploring Diversity with a “Culture Box” in First-Year Legal Writing



Ann Sinsheimer
Professor of Legal Writing
University of Pittsburgh School of Law

Studying law is in many ways like studying another culture. New law students may often feel as if they are learning a new language with unfamiliar vocabulary and different styles of communication. They are also exposed to a profession comprised of unique traditions and expectations. The study of law can be both engaging and frustrating and may even challenge some students’ values and belief systems. The value system reflected by the legal system can make some students feel alienated.

This year, I decided that a good place to begin the study of law would be for students to take time to examine who they were as well as what they thought about the law and why they wanted to pursue a law degree. Exploring their own values and cultural backgrounds, I reasoned, could help them feel more comfortable in the unfamiliar cultural milieu of the law and recognize how the law itself reflects culture. It would help me connect with my students early on and understand their motivations for attending law school, which would help me guide them through the conventions of legal writing. Finally, it might even ultimately help the law reflect the diverse community in which it operates.

So I started my legal writing class with an exercise to help my students learn about themselves as well as each other’s culture and worldview—and to help

them learn to appreciate diversity. I asked my students to create a “culture box” to share on our first day of class.¹ In an e-mail that went to all forty of my first-year legal writing students the week before classes started, I explained that the culture box would be a collection of objects of their choosing, which they feel define them or their social identities. I told them that the goal of the culture box was to help them, their classmates, and me understand their life stories and who they are today.

In these preliminary instructions, I asked my students to pick two or three items, focusing on three areas: 1) Things that represented who they were, which might include significant events that shaped them and their view of the world; 2) things that represented who they were in a professional sense or illustrated significant past experiences, perceptions, or insights that led them to their choice to study law at this particular time; and 3) things that represented what they thought about the law, the legal profession, and their vision in regards to a legal education.

Their culture box could be a tangible box containing physical objects or it could be pictures or representational objects, verbal descriptions, quotes, single words, family stories, or narratives of important events. The choice was theirs. I asked them to be prepared to briefly share some of the contents of their box with the class on our first day. After the class, I asked them to write a 500-word reflection on what they included in their culture box and why. I also asked them to share in the writing what they thought would make them a successful law student and how, at this moment, they imagined they would use their legal education.

I devoted the whole first class to the culture box exercise instead of going over the syllabus and doing my typical introduction-to-the-legal-system lecture. At the start of class, I urged my students to be selective about what they discussed from their culture box, keeping in mind that they had only three or four minutes to present, and for the most part, students were able to keep within the time limit with little urging from me. I asked everyone to listen actively and empathetically, but not to ask questions since we did not have time for that. No one was reluctant to participate, although one student mentioned that he had prepared something relatively unrevealing and then at the last minute decided to share something more personal after he heard what others were sharing. I discussed my own culture box at the start of the sharing.

My class and I heard some amazing things on that first day. One of my students explained that she had wanted to come to law school since her family's seventeen cows were rustled from their farm when she was a child and she sat through the criminal trial that ensued. We heard about two professional soccer careers, as well as a hockey scholarship that shaped an undergraduate experience. A thirty-five-year-old student revealed that his shoulder had been destroyed in a horrible car accident that happened just after college, and he talked about the years of recovery necessary to pursue his original plan to attend law school.

A number of students brought physical objects: We saw business cards that represented expertise in other fields and identification cards from dead-end jobs people longed to escape. We saw passports from Germany, France, and the Ukraine; one student brought a photocopy of his grandmother's passport that she had used to enter the United States as a refugee from the Soviet Union. There were favorite books, textbooks, and poems. We saw a pair of cufflinks belonging to a student's grandfather, who served as a policeman and had taught this student "everything." We saw a cocktail wizzle stick that a student had used as a bartender – a job that taught him how to network. One petite female student pulled out a welding helmet saying it reflected her personality and ambition (when she was working as a lobbyist for the construction industry she became a welder to give her a better perspective on the people she was representing). Another female student revealed

The students were interested and enthusiastic, fully engaged with each other, with me, and with the work of this first assignment. They were clearly excited about entering their new chosen field of the law.

a shoulder full of tattoos and explained what each represented in relation to the law.

The students were interested and enthusiastic, fully engaged with each with each other, with me, and with the work of this first assignment. They were clearly excited about entering their new chosen field of the law.

The exercise helped me to connect with them at the start of the year. It has also helped me give feedback on their first legal memorandum, six weeks into the semester. It has allowed me to give personalized comments that draw on their initial excitement, point out their strengths, and encourage them to approach their challenges through the window of their interests and reasons for being here. For example, when I saw in a student's first memorandum that she was struggling with legal reasoning, I was able to look back at the paper she wrote about the contents of her culture box and remember that this was the student who shared the quote on her grandfather's office door: "Make the moments matter." I could then direct my feedback to a unique individual who wants to understand how to make each moment in law school matter. I also identified an at-risk student earlier than I might have and was able to help him because of what he said during his culture box presentation.

The culture box exercise has also helped me pedagogically. For example, I noticed that a student, who had captivated the class with the story of how he was falsely arrested, was struggling to analyze the law in the Discussion section of his first memorandum. However, his presentation of his client's story in the Fact section displayed that same ability to captivate an audience. Because I already knew this student was an excellent storyteller, I was able to acknowledge this strength to keep him engaged and to help him analyze the law. When I met with him, we talked about how he could think

of writing the memorandum as telling a story—a story that was not just about his client’s facts, but also about the results of his own research and his objective understanding of the legal standard. In other words, he needed to tell me the story of the legal precedent and how it applied to help or not help his client.

I anticipate that the culture box exercise will also help the students later on in the year, after all their exam results are reported. This is a low point for many of my students. The novelty of being in law school is lost for most students by then and many have to grapple with grades that are less than perfect. The experience can be a blow to their self-esteem. I will be able to remind them, indirectly, of the motivation and skills they confidently presented in that first class and rekindle their initial excitement.

The culture box exercise began as a way for me to get to know my students and to help them get to know each other. I wanted them to understand the diverse backgrounds of everyone in the class and to appreciate that each individual contributed something significant to the class. Without the exercise, these unique strengths and characteristics easily could remain hidden and become buried in the demands of legal education.

The exercise has added yet another dimension to my course. The students are engaging with the legal

writing material at a more personal level. They are thinking about how they can write about the law in the appropriate style and still use their unique voices. They appear better able to devise strategies to master the writing process they need to master.

Legal education leaves little room for reflection, particularly in the first year. Students must quickly acclimate to a legal culture that is demanding and arcane. Students have little opportunity to reflect on who they are and how the information they are receiving challenges their definitions of self. By specifically acknowledging that they are entering law school with a box full of experiences, the culture box can help students adapt to their new profession. It also gives them a vivid appreciation of their own and others’ diversity. If enough students started their legal educations with this exercise, the culture box might ultimately help the legal culture adapt to the diverse and inclusive world in which we live.

NOTES

1. I adapted this exercise from an exercise used by Dr. Abdesalam Souidi in his sociolinguistic class at the University of Pittsburgh. See Abdesalam Souidi, *First Person: What’s in Your Culture Box*, PITT CHRONICLE, Sept. 19, 2016, at 13.