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Why I Teach

By Sophie Sparrow

I teach because I am awed and fascinated by the power in learning. Witnessing this is a true joy. This gift—seeing students grow—is why I teach. On the days when work presents its toughest challenges, I gather strength by envisioning students gaining confidence. Like fledglings, some students soar farther and higher than others. But almost all fly. It is such a pleasure to witness them going from tumbling around in dazed confusion to owning the strength of their wings.

This happens each semester. Science majors who studiously avoided every college writing course begin law school convinced that the ability to write fluidly is reserved for the chosen few. Later I see these students apply for clerkships, seek positions on journals, and sign up for advanced writing classes. I know they now believe in the power of their words.

Other students infectiously rejoice in their new strengths. Students who never thought they could speak in public emerge from oral arguments exclaiming, “I want to be a litigator!” Standing tall in their suits, shoulders back, faces beaming, they look like professionals. More important, they see this in themselves. They are going to be lawyers.

Regardless of how ready students are to study law, my goal is to coach each of them to a new level. Some progress from having little understanding of the law to actually being able to apply a rule to a set of facts. Others move from seeing discrete doctrinal details to understanding the broader principles that weave them together. The joy is in seeing this growth.

Sometimes learning comes with sadness. It hurts to receive low grades and to go from believing that law school isn’t too hard to painfully realizing that something crucial is missing. But when, upon reviewing their work, students can start to diagnose the problems and suggest ways to address them, I know that they are developing skills that can last them a lifetime.

Ultimately, this is the best gift of all. It is when students know that they can fly without me. Then they own the power in their own learning.

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