

# Teaching Legal Research to the

*What we CAN DO to serve the public and gain supporters*

**H**ave you noticed that when law librarians serve members of the public, we tend to focus on what we can't do: we can't give legal advice, we can't help you fill out that form, and we can't interpret that law for your situation. But there are many things that we *can* do, especially when it comes to teaching legal research classes to the public.

In 2002, the Dane County Law Library faced elimination due to a county budget shortage. Following a successful effort to restore funding, the library staff decided that one way to gain future supporters would be outreach in the form of legal research classes for the public. At that time, no library in the area had such a program, despite the high numbers of legal questions being asked at both public libraries and law libraries open to the public.

We developed a class called "Legal Research in a Nutshell: How to Find and Understand Wisconsin Legal Resources" and designed it as a basic overview of the legal resources produced by the three branches of Wisconsin government. The class, co-taught with a member of the Wisconsin State Law Library staff, is held in locations around the county, including public libraries and community agency offices such as the United Way. This article reflects on what I have learned and observed from co-teaching this program.

## Create Enthusiasm

The instructor must demonstrate his or her enthusiasm for the subject matter to the class participants; the library needs to market its enthusiasm for this service to the public; and the students must participate with enthusiasm. These imperatives all tie back to a simple question: Why offer the class at all? Is there an observed need for this information? Does the instructor want to share his or her knowledge of the topic?

In addition to observing the public's need for this information, the class allows us to offer a tangible outreach service and be more visible in the community, ensuring a new type of support come budget-time. Without one link of the enthusiastic beginnings—the instructor, library, or class participants—the program is likely to flounder or fail.

In order to translate the enthusiasm for the subject matter to the class participants, the instructor must *want* to teach the class. Forcing someone to teach a class that he or

she either doesn't want to do or doesn't feel confident about affects the instructor's attitude and, in turn, the class participants' attitude. If the library is committed to creating quality classes as part of an overall goal of valued outreach and educational services, the quality of each class and instructor should reflect it. You can tell the instructor's confidence and attitude by his or her delivery and from the class evaluations. Enthusiasm flows through the instructor into the class participants. If you're excited about teaching a class, it will show.

## Assume Nothing, Allow (just about) Anything

When we started teaching our class, we didn't know what to expect. We assumed that most citizens had a basic knowledge of the three branches of Wisconsin state government, how laws are made, and what statutes are. However, since more and more middle and high schools are no longer teaching civics or government classes, we quickly discovered that our assumption was incorrect and realized we had to start at the very beginning.

By focusing the class on the three branches of government and their publications, we found that this was a class that even newer law librarians could teach. We could be confident teaching these materials because we use them every day in our work.

Our marketing stated that this was a class on how to find and understand legal information in Wisconsin. Our posters indicated that legal advice would not be given, but this didn't stop participants from seeking it. We allowed participants to ask questions throughout the class, but we watched out for those who tried to commandeer the class. You know the ones: they launch into a long-winded description of their situation and want to know how the material you are presenting will help them with their specific legal problem. We quickly steered the class back on track by telling would-be hijackers that we would try to answer their specific questions at the break or after the class.

## Notice What Works, Change What Doesn't

Who is your audience for this class? The answer to that question may change from one session to the next, requiring a few changes to the content. For example, we

taught a class at a public library branch that serves mainly older adults. By anticipating their questions about wills, estates, and power of attorney forms, we were able to modify the content of the class to meet their particular information needs.

Another audience included members of a labor union, so it was more interested in labor and employment law. Knowing the audience allows an instructor to prepare and gain confidence in order to present the material without hesitation and with enthusiasm.

Even a basic legal research class, with an audience of mixed ages and education levels, requires continual evaluation and updating. In our class, we refer to sample reference questions as we explain resources. We announce the question in the very



Photo by Gregg Fite.

*Peter Meadow uses Westlaw to research primary law at the Bernard E. Witkin Alameda County Law Library in Oakland, California. An important service law libraries can provide is teaching legal research to the public.*

beginning, and after summarizing the resources of each branch, we show how the resources we just mentioned would or would not be useful for answering the question. By using this approach, which is much like following a topic through legislation or caselaw, we continually update the content of the resources and class.

In addition, by evaluating the content and preparing for a specific audience, we can insert locally popular topics, such as finding information about a local smoke-free ordinance, zoning changes, or recent cases in the news. You can change what doesn't seem to work in the class by

following the feedback and evaluations from class participants. Since it's your class, you choose your comfort level with topics. If you face a question from a class participant about an unfamiliar topic, see it as the perfect opportunity to invite the participant into the library for additional research.

### Delivery, Delivery, Delivery

Enthusiasm is mentioned as a key component of a successful program. How does a teacher channel his or her enthusiasm into practical delivery techniques? By being prepared, which results in being confident.

First things first: have a backup plan (or two) with regard to the technical aspects of the class. If the Internet connection isn't working, or the connection speed is too slow for the pace of the class, consider creating a PowerPoint of screen shots as close to the class day as possible. This will allow you the opportunity to check links for broken or re-directed pages. Check the lamp bulbs of the projector before class.

If you're teaching the class outside the library, do a test run on a different day so you can see the space, find the outlets, and talk to the facility staff who will be there when you teach the class. That way, you'll know things like whether they have extension cords or if you need to bring them. Be prepared for the worst, but expect the best. Be organized, but flexible. Make the delivery of the content of the class such that the participants don't notice the technology behind it.

What happens if they fall asleep or, worse, don't show up? If you're offering the class outside your library, be clear with the hosting agency about registering participants or having a sign-up sheet. What's your minimum class size requirement? If five or six people have signed up for the class but only two show up, should you offer the class at all? This has happened to us several times. We chose to roll with it and offer shorter, modified classes, such as a half-hour Q&A session demonstrating how to find specific legal resources.

This doesn't solve the problem of sleepy participants though. Sometimes the hosting agency helps out by offering snacks and coffee. Sometimes it just doesn't matter how enthusiastically you present the material—a warm room, the wrong time of day, or other factors can still threaten to derail the class. Suggest a break. Have everyone stand up

(continued on page 21)

## A CAN DO Attitude Leads to a Successful Class

### Create Enthusiasm

- Demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject matter to the class. Enthusiasm flows through the instructor into the class participants. If you're excited about teaching a class, it will show.

### Assume Nothing, Allow (just about) Anything

- Be willing to adjust the class material if you find your participants are more or less knowledgeable in the subject.

### Notice What Works, Change What Doesn't

- Who is your audience for this class? The answer to that question may change from one session to the next, requiring a few changes to the content.

### Delivery, Delivery, Delivery

- How does a teacher channel his or her enthusiasm into practical delivery techniques? By being prepared, which results in being confident. Double check equipment and venues before class. Have a variety of methods and examples to engage participants in the subject.

### Out the Door, Back Into the Library

- How do you determine if the class is a success? Evaluate! Create an evaluation form for class participants, but don't forget to self evaluate as well.

and move around. Adjust the temperature. If there's a disruptive participant, whether he or she is snoring or asking a long-winded question, address it and steer the class back on track.

How do you communicate your enthusiasm for a topic to another person? Think of a time when you saw a thought-provoking movie or read a fascinating book. How did you describe it to others? With excitement? By explaining why you were personally interested in the topic presented? By giving a complete summary with good *and* bad components? That's how it is with teaching a topic about which you are confident and prepared to teach. You're excited to offer the information to the class, to show how the information can be used and how to locate more information.

You might give an example or two from your personal life about how you've used the information. For example, when demonstrating the Wisconsin Circuit Court Access public database (<http://wcca.wicourts.gov/index.xml>), one of our instructors entered her husband's name to show how even speeding ticket cases appear in the database. While I don't suggest that you show off your family's court records, personal examples can help your audience see the broad range of material in the database.

Because the instructor is the expert, he or she can be confidently critical when describing the advantages or disadvantages of using one legal resource over another and

back up the statements with stories of actual use. You'll find that simply deciphering the code of a basic legal citation will be beneficial to class participants. By going further and showing how that citation relates to an actual case or document, and how the law in that document affects someone's real-life legal situation, you take them from grayscale to Technicolor.

### Out the Door, Back into the Library

How do you determine if the class is a success? Evaluate! Create an evaluation form for class participants, but don't forget to self-evaluate as well. Did participants seem interested or did their eyes glaze over? Did they ask relevant questions or seem totally confused by the presentation? Did they request information not covered in the class, or were their expectations different from what was taught? Since we were looking for potential library supporters, we provided an optional section on the evaluation form where people could register for our mailing list, as well as a section for class participants to suggest other topics for future classes.

Once the class is over, how do you tie in library services to encourage class participants to use the library again? There's a good chance that the questions and comments from class participants are ones that other members of the public are wondering about too. Use the evaluations, questions, and comments from the class to launch brochures, flyers, Web pages, and

even new classes. Mention in class that you're just scratching the surface of legal research, and promote your library's services as a way for your students to continue their personal research. Offer a tour of your library's services as a class or through your newsletter. It ties to the question of "Who is this class for?" and how your library features more and different resources and services to each class audience. For example, highlight services such as database training and help in locating resources, and explain how services can be accessed via the library's Web site.

We started our program relying on the ability of local public libraries and community agencies to host us because we had no space in our own library for a class. Soon we'll move into a new, larger space. How will we transition the class into truly our own? How can we draw enthusiastic participants? Can we market our classes as integral parts of the pro se experience?

These are some of the questions we face as we move into a new library and courthouse. The courts are increasing their focus on making user-friendly products and services for the public. Just as important is educating the public in the basics of state government structure and legal resources, including court procedures. That's something we *CAN DO!* ■

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