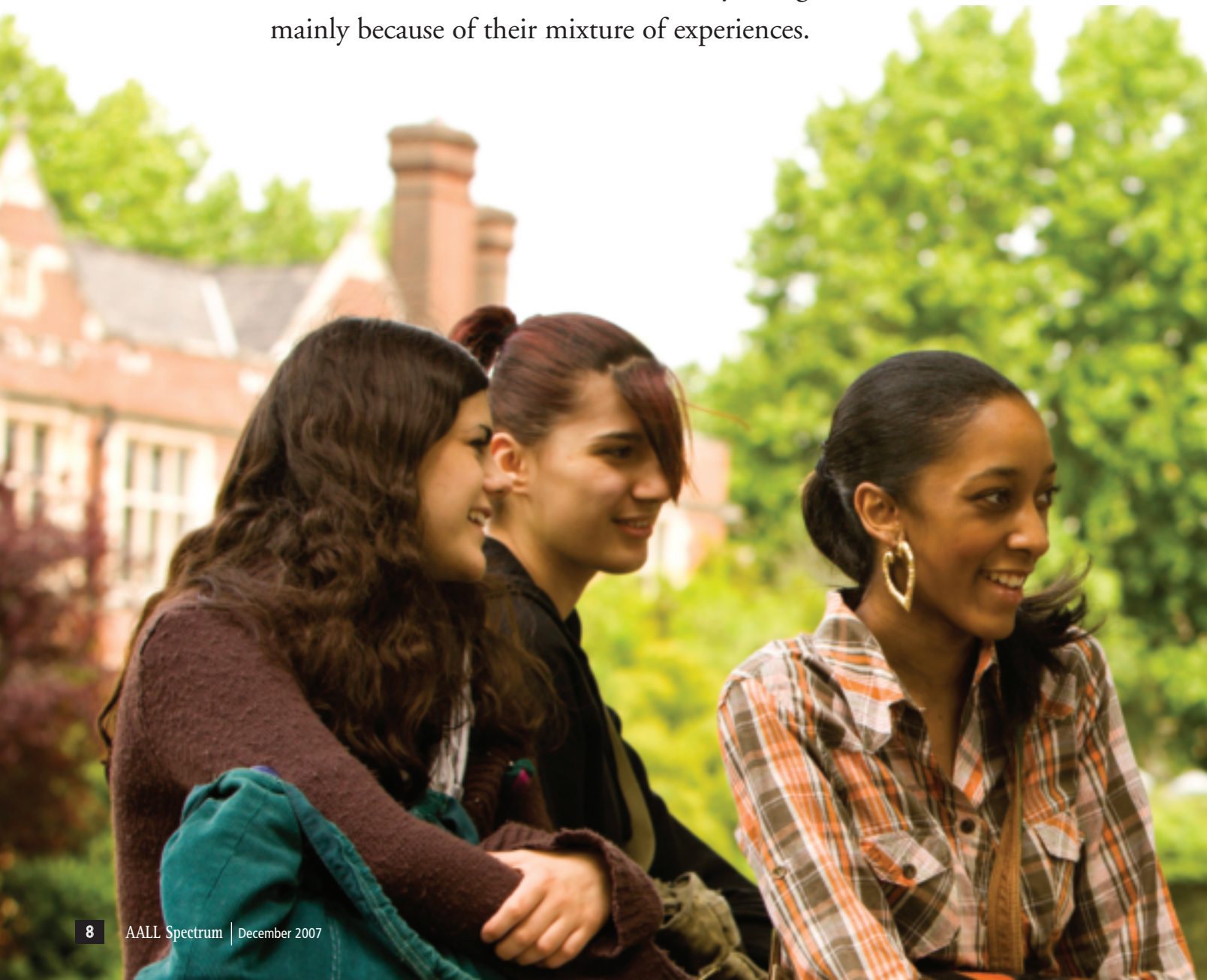


Community College Students

Teaching this diverse group of learners has its challenges and many rewards

One of my greatest professional joys is teaching. I have taught middle school students, college students, and first-year law students. I've even taught pre-trial detainees on Rikers Island. But the most fun I've had in the classroom has been with community college students, mainly because of their mixture of experiences.



Through my various teaching opportunities I have encountered students of various nationalities and age groups, but they tend to be homogeneous in their classroom composition. Law students come from a variety of social and racial classes, but for the most part they are young people fresh out of college. My community college experience has been different.

My most recent experience was at the Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Here I worked with students fresh out of high school and others who were grandparents returning to complete their education. I taught students who worked in auto plants for years, were laid off, and were

returning to retrain themselves for a new career. I worked with men who were taking their lives in a different direction after being released from prison and jail. And then there were the young people, who when they graduated from high school, sought other options only to return to community college with the goal of continuing their education at a four-year institution.

The Course

I taught a three-hour legal research and writing course one day a week. Our course covered the basic aspects of briefing case law,

preparing interoffice memorandums of law, and performing legal research using both Westlaw and print legal resources. We worked in a computer lab classroom so each student was able to use his or her own terminal. Each was provided a Westlaw password by the college so that he or she could log into the database.

In addition to the electronic resources, we also took time to visit the library at the community college, which did have a small legal collection. However, I arranged a session of class to take place at an academic law library in the area that offered a

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Six Instruction Methods

1. Lecture
2. Structured Exercises
3. Reading
4. Case Studies
5. Group Discussion
6. Peer-to-Peer Teaching



broader set of federal materials so that the group could complete a research assignment requiring them to locate information for a search based upon a hypothetical fact pattern. This afforded them the opportunity to gain proficiency using the print resources. They were able to determine how to use a legal encyclopedia, which led them into digests or case reporters and statutes.

As a legal research instructor I like to spend an academic semester discussing and using print materials before moving into the electronic resources the following semester. However, because the course was to last only one semester, I was forced to minimize the time spent with the print materials.

The Range of Experience

My students ranged from those who had a clear understanding of the principles involved in drafting legal memoranda and performing thorough legal research to those who were new to the field and just learning the basics of legal writing and research. At times this created a dilemma; however, whenever an issue arose I found that putting the students who were confident in their abilities with those who required more assistance was a valuable way to effectively manage time and engage both sets of students. It also lent itself well to the notion of the students working together and taking an interest in each other's academic success.

One of my students was concerned that she was not performing her research efficiently and wanted to know what tips

she could use to become more proficient. My response was that practice is the best means of becoming an effective researcher and that as she searched she would become aware of a saturation point. In addition to this advice, I would also suggest that a student become proficient spotting issues and utilize the Nutshell Series for Legal Research and The Center for Computer Assisted Legal Instruction (CALI) tutorials. After about three weeks she was very happy to report that she understood finally the saturation point and was feeling more confident about her research.

I also limited my lecturing on topics to the first hour of class and used the remaining two hours

to work with students individually, if necessary. I was also able to use this time to review the work that my students prepared from the previous week as well as what they were working on for that particular day in class. This way we could address any errors or concerns on the spot.

The most efficient means I have employed in presenting information clearly and concisely have been pre-class preparation and a step-by-step presentation. Prior to class I read and outline the book chapter(s) that will be covered, and I design a research outline to use and follow throughout the lesson. As to presentation, I walk the students through each step of using the legal research materials. With the electronic resources this ranges from how to log on to the database(s) to whether to use a Boolean or terms and connectors search.

With the print resources we start with the index and cover all pieces of the print volumes being discussed.

The Challenges and Rewards

Classroom discussions are an excellent teaching tool, and I encourage my students to bring their own experiences into what is being discussed in the classroom. Because there tends to be a wide age and experience range among community college students, I find that this helps the younger students get a better idea of the world beyond school and how to approach a professional position, and it helps the more mature students get a better idea of current issues from a young person's perspective.

The challenge of teaching legal research in this particular setting was a unique one. The community college students that I have worked with tend to view the experience of learning to become effective legal researchers as a necessity to their professional development. The people I have worked with have identified the fact that as they move into the professional world of legal assistance they will be valued by their ability to effectively locate information in a timely manner and then effectively communicate the results of their searches. This drive to hone their skills and focus on accuracy, authority, currency, objectivity, and coverage is encouraging as an educator.

My students also demonstrated a passion to succeed that many do not assign to community college students. I worked with a group of highly motivated, intelligent people who were taking command of their lives and realized that their education is the tool to achieving their goals and realizing their passions. What more could a legal research instructor ask? ■

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Teaching Techniques

- Prepare outline of readings.
- Prepare outline for use with database.
- Use different access points to get to same case/statute.
- Reinforce idea of "access points" to reduce anxiety.
- Students follow on own computers as instructor performs search.
- Location assignments.
- Group work.
- Take your time and be patient!