



# Humanizing the Law School Classroom for Those Who Learn Differently: A Case Study of Law Students with ADD



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Although law school pedagogy has not changed significantly over the years, the demographics of the students attending law schools have changed immensely.



# Some Facts About Our Current Law Students:

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- Approximately five to eight percent of Americans have ADD which means that more than 10 million Americans are affected by ADD.
- Of the 16.5 million undergraduate students in the U.S., 6.4 % of the students reported having ADD---which suggests that there are over one million students who know they have ADD and report it to the institution.
- Just as many students may have ADD and do not report it, or are unaware that they are affected by the disability without knowing it.



# Humanizing Legal Education

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What obligations do we have as legal educators to teach to those students who learn differently?

What is the experience of those students who learn differently?

# The Study

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- Purpose: To examine the perceptions of law students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) about their law school experience.
  
- Leah M. Christensen, *Law Students Who Learn Differently: A Narrative Case Study of Three Law Students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)*, \_\_ Journal of Law and Health \_\_\_\_ (forthcoming Fall 2007).



# Three Students with ADD

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- ❑ ADD is a neurologically-based condition characterized by inappropriate levels of distractedness, inattentiveness, and impulsiveness
- ❑ Students with learning disabilities are usually very bright, yet their learning disability can sometimes result in a “discrepancy between aptitude and achievement,” despite their high level of intelligence.

# The Three Students in This Study

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□ Alexa: Top 5% 2L

Diagnosed with ADD in college.

\*Receives disability accommodations in law school.

□ Kelsey: Top 30% 1L

Diagnosed with ADD in grade school.

□ Baker: Bottom 15% 2L

Diagnosed with ADD in elementary school.



## Four Main Themes:

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1. Isolation in Law School
2. Each of the Students Learned Differently
3. The Failure of the Traditional Socratic Method to Reach Law Students Who Learn Differently
4. Concerns About Practicing Law



# Humanizing Legal Education

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- 1. Isolation in Law School
- 2. The Failure of the Socratic Method When Used as the Only Teaching Methodology (or Teaching to Multiple Learning Styles)

# Isolation and the “Need to Hide” the Disability

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Alexa:

. . . . I didn't tell anyone my first year [about my disability] because I was embarrassed. And then, getting good grades makes me more embarrassed because I don't feel like [the accommodations are] warranted.

I'd say in law school it's been difficult. Very difficult.

Again, because I'm getting this [accommodated] testing. The grades that I'm getting, I don't feel like I deserve them. Like in college, . . . I was getting good grades, but I was working extra hard for them. Or, if I didn't get a good grade, it was because of the disorder.



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## □ Kelsey

I don't like to be set apart for [ADD] at all. I feel like you can use ADD to your advantage and actually have an advantage over other students.

. . . I very much feel isolated. . . . I don't really have very many friends here. I almost feel like I've intentionally "outcasted" myself in a way. Well, I guess I just – I don't want to study with them . . . And I don't go out with them or anything like that. . . I guess, I don't know, I have had a hard time making friends in law school which is really strange to say because I've never had a problem with it before.



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## □ Baker

To me . . . I don't want accommodations for my "thing." I'll get the grades I get in the system [because of] the way it's designed. I don't want an accommodation. Part of that is because I fear that if I got the accommodation and I didn't do any better, then what is the consequence of that? I don't know, I haven't really thought about it.

# How Do We Combat “Isolation” For Those Who Learn Differently?

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- ❑ A theory of inclusion so that all voices and experiences are heard and respected.
- ❑ Law professors need to adapt their teaching methodologies to serve multiple learning styles.
- ❑ Alter the law school curriculum to value differences, not only differences in learning, but also differences in talent, skills and experience.
- ❑ We need to assess our students' abilities differently.

# Using Only the Socratic Method Fails to Teach Those Who Learn Differently.

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## Alexa:

- My favorite was Professor ["Z"]. It was his power points that really helped me. Just being able to really see where he's going. And it just seemed like every single step, he knew, and so it made it easier for me.
- I think, for example, my torts class [was more difficult] where there were absolutely no visual aids. I actually stopped using my computer because it was – it was just not helpful. I had to write it down because that way I could be a little bit more free-flowing [in my note-taking]. Also, in Property. I hand wrote all my notes because [then] the stuff is . . . a little bit more visual for me.

# The Socratic Method . . .

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## Kelsey:

I am petrified every time I'm there [in class]. And I know that's a horrible thing to say, but a lot of times people with ADD can only experience so many emotions and so many thoughts at the same time. And, so, I'm experiencing fear. . . and . . . anxiety. . . It's hard because I can't believe I let someone get to me like that. And why does she get to me?

It's beyond [the traditional Socratic method]. . . . I was yelled at one day for not being prepared when I was actually fully prepared. I actually didn't say the words that she wanted me to say it.

[She said:] . . . "I can't believe you would come here unprepared. I can't believe you would . . . not brief a paper like I told you." "You know I told you what you needed [to do] and you're not doing it.

. . . [F]or the rest of the day, you sit there and you think about it.

. . . So, when I go to that course, it's like, "[I]s she going to call on me? Am I not going to know the answer?"



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## Baker:

The first two weeks, I felt confident coming in that I was as smart as everybody else. I really didn't think that was going to be a problem. I still don't think that's a problem. I was definitely afraid of having to give an answer "on my feet." [T]here [were] a million different things they could ask you. And the social pressure around you. Like most people, I was terrified to go to class. The reading was fine. The material was fine. But going to class was horrible.

. . . I think it was the whole first year just stress in general. Some professors were tougher. And I looked back at my grades and I didn't do any better or worse really. So it was just a stressful environment.



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And it's all new. And I don't understand that. I don't understand why when people are new at something you would grill them off the bat.

. . . . That's kind of the problem in law school for me. Especially when it's "on you're feet" thinking. I'm just not that quick, I need to sit down and I write a lot. I write well. I worked through things as I write. I think slower than other people.

# Why Does It Persist ?

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- The status quo is preserved under the hiring, retention, and promotion practices that value scholarship over teaching effectiveness.
- The pressure on most young faculty is on the production of scholarship.
- Creative professors who strive to teach to multiple learning styles may be viewed as “less rigorous” by other faculty *and* by the students' themselves.

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- Unless we begin to recognize and promote professors who strive to teach more effectively, and to reexamine our perception of “rigor” in the classroom, it is our students who will be most severely affected.

## Practical Suggestions From the Students to Facilitate Learning For Those Who Learn Differently

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- ❑ *Be Organized:* Follow your syllabus. Arrive to class on time. Be timely with your grading.
- ❑ *Vary the Format of Your Lectures:* Students' attention spans are approximately 20 minutes. Use cooperative learning and small group activities to change the classroom dynamic.
- ❑ *Teach to a Multitude of Learning Styles:* Keep students involved in the classroom. Employ "active learning" techniques. Make use of student laptops hooked up to the internet. Encourage collaboration among students. Utilize role-plays.
- ❑ *Increase Student Feedback (and Assessment):* Break down assignments into "mini-assignments," and build in reinforcement as the class completes each part.



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- *Spend Time at the Beginning of the Law School Experience*  
*Discussing Learning Styles and Learning Strategies:*

Students may benefit from spending time at the beginning of law school to discuss individual learning styles and organizational strategies.

- *Give Clear Directions Both Orally and Visually:* Whenever possible, provide students with a model of what he or she should be doing.

- *Be a Mentor:* Students who learn differently may benefit a great deal from having opportunities outside the classroom to talk to professors about the material.



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# Legal Educators Can Profoundly Affect the Learning Experiences of Law Students Who Learn Differently



# Follow Your Own Path....

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[W]hatever [you do], don't doubt yourself. You will find your way. The system may not be perfect for you. Just find your way through it. You are not going to change the system. Tailor what you do with your time with what makes you feel comfortable. Get help if you can. There are professors who are willing to help you outside of school. . . . And just play to your strengths. Be prepared to be isolated. Because there might not be a lot of people who study like you or think like you do and . . . you'll just have to find new ways to compensate.



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□ Thank you!