**PRACTICE MAKES PREPARED**

Hi. Welcome to the Practice Makes Prepared podcast. I’m Laura Mott from CUNY School of Law in New York City.

And whether you are in your first semester of law school, your first year, or even beyond, it can be incredibly tempting to avoid doing practice questions until just a short time before your final exams. This happens to all law students, if you’re a 2L, it’s probably happened to you.

Let’s face it – law school exams are intimidating. Whether you feel like you are a strong test-taker or not, having a substantial portion of your final grade in your classes riding on one or two cumulative exams can be extremely stressful– especially after having already invested so much time and energy into getting into law school and preparing for and attending classes the whole semester! Our brains tend to devote a lot of energy to resisting things that we think will make us uncomfortable or give us anxiety. Practice hypos, with their seeming direct connection to exam scores, and therefore seeming direct connection to our ultimate success are no exception.

Exam writing is totally unique. You can write down what you hear in lecture in your notes, you can write case briefs and distill them into outlines with your study group, you can write and edit memos for your legal writing and research classes, you can reflect or journal about law school – but none of those exercises a) involve the same processing steps as exam-writing does, b) happen under strict time conditions, c) involve parties and sets of facts that you will have to absorb right in that moment, or d) have large chunks of your grade attached. This is a completely unique moment.

It almost seems like we think of writing out hypos as requiring a kind of magic, special equation that only other people understand. Or, that the more we keep studying the more we keep outlining, the more likely it is that we’ll eventually reach the level of knowledge that will allow us to perform well on practice questions and on our exams. Performing well will feel good, performing less well, well, won't.

And that makes sense! It’s reinforced by our lived experience as learners. In past academic contexts, it’s likely the case that reading and studying the adjacent material passively would lead to a better final exam result. But – you’ve heard it before and you’ll hear it again – law school is different.

Maybe we also resist because it seems hard and labor intensive, and we doubt the immediate returns it will give us. It likely won’t be something that we will instantly be excellent at – and this will make us maybe lose confidence, motivation, maybe lose time – missing an issue, or not being able to just get our thoughts out on paper the way they are in our heads. It will buffet us with waves of self-doubt that now becomes extra work to just get through before we can right our ships and sail back into the land of law school with confidence. That’s not a very positive reinforcement or positive feedback loop. Right?

But that also makes sense! For those of us that chose law school, not feeling proficient at something sometimes rather quickly can be a hit to our academic self-esteem, and in some cases our identities themselves… something that we hold in very high regard. And rather than paying rewards by positively reinforcing our choice to go to law school, struggling with hypos can have cascading negative consequences and self-reflections on our situational chosen identities as graduate students.

So, yes, this is a podcast about law school strategy, but it also has a bigger message. **Don’t let fear and imposter phenomenon win.** You are all future leaders that are going to impact the world. Outsmart that fight-or-flight instinct in your brain that might be telling you to avoid practice questions because it will be a confirmation of what you already know - you have no idea what you are doing, you don’t understand the complex magic and math at work behind how all of these concepts are strung together, you don’t know the rules well enough yet – heck, you haven’t even memorized them – so any effort you make at putting it all together and applying it is going to be minimally successful at best. You might be saying why start now and extend what you anticipate will be a period of struggle. Maybe a period of pain. Well, let’s be clear – this process is not painless – but the longer you wait to do practice, probably the more anxiety is going to ensue. Will you get stuff wrong? Probably. We all do. Many who hold high offices or are in positions of great power have been in your exact shoes, doing practice questions and getting them wrong. No doubt, legal writing– especially timed legal writing - is a difficult, multifaceted skill that takes time, effort and energy to learn. But the earlier you get things wrong, the more time you have to learn from your mistakes.

And really at its most basic, learning how to write timed exams or doing multiple choice questions is really no different than learning skills you already have. Think about something you already know how to do, or would consider yourself good at. Do you know how to drive a car? Sound of car horn] Play an instrument? Maybe cook a dish? Maybe you are excellent at a kind of job skill, like land surveying, or sales.  Now think about the first time you did that thing. Did you accidentally buy the wrong ingredients at the store? Did you play the wrong notes? Did you hit the wrong pedals or signals while you were learning how to drive? Probably! Or when you first started your job, did you lose a sale or do something wrong in a particular document or a customer? But did you ultimately, though, over time, with trial and error become proficient at these things? Yes. This is the same kind of skill.

There is an expectation of “I’ve been doing school, I’ve been in law school, I’m an expert” – but testing yourself is not a Part Two. They say you need 10,000 hours for expert level performance - so why wait in starting to get there?

You must make mistakes before you make progress. You must get frustrated before you get the skill that you want.  [Sound of ocean waves] You must immerse yourselves in the crashing waves before you can make it out of the crash zone.

The last thing to mention about the importance of doing practice hypos and multiple choice questions long before your mid-terms and final exams has to do with acclimation and minimizing exam anxiety.

Have you ever felt that “freezing” sensation when you open a test and read the questions for the first time? [Sound of heartbeat] Ever felt like you don’t have a plan or strategy to approach a task, and that sends you into moments of panic maybe?

Much of the science and logic behind doing practice before the big day is to create neural pathways through which your brain will automatically re-route on the day of the test, offering you feelings of productivity and comfort as you launch into your issue-spotting and writing, rather than panic.

So in conclusion, practice probably won’t make perfect at first, but it will definitely make you much more prepared, and likely a lot less anxious.

The best tool for conquering that unmoored, anxious feeling when you think about exams is experience. Give yourself every experiential advantage that you can; start practice questions early. [Sound effects of horn, waves, and heartbeat] It might feel stressful, chaotic, and un-doable at first, but remember, you don’t want the first time you practice with questions to be on the exam. The only way out is through - all you have to do is take the first step, the rest will follow, you will start to see the issues, map out the patterns, and form your strategy for test day. Good luck out there!

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