

"A Picnic of Contract Elements"

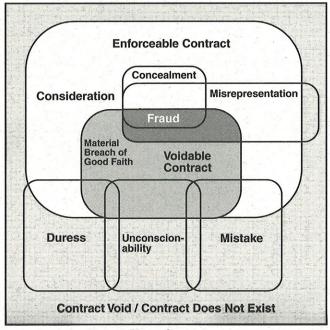
For some, pictures worth more than words

By Stephen L. Sepinuck

any students learn better visually than textually. To help those students, I use many graphics in my materials and in class. One of the most effective uses for graphics is to have students participate in their creation. This makes them more invested in the graphic and requires that they really master the material.

There are several ways to get students to participate in creating a graphic. Sometimes I produce a template and ask students — either in class or as part of their homework — to fill it in. For example, I ask them to map out the parol evidence rule of U.C.C. § 2-202 by filling in a chart indicating what types of evidence are admissible under what circumstances. Other times I ask students to create the graphic completely on their own. For example, in Contracts, after covering the contract policing doctrines (e.g., fraud, duress, unconscionability, mistake, and frustration of purpose), I ask students to present a onepage graphical depicition of how these doctrines interrelate. I then use their work to focus class discussion on the relationship of the various doctrines. For example, the graphic on the right is a Venn diagram submitted by one group of students. It demonstrates a great deal of high-level thinking about the material, and it also prompted an interesting class discussion about whether there is a greater relationship between the doctrines of concealment and mistake than the graphic suggests.

Students are often quite excited about these projects, and frequently exhibit a significant amount of insight into the material. Moreover, they often produce different types of graphics. For example, in addition to several Venn diagrams, I also received a wide assortment of flow charts, as well as the amusing illustration above (which was accompanied by text describing the attributes of the characters depicted).



Venn diagram

There are at least two benefits to this. First, it is a helpful reminder that students may think about the material in a completely different way than I do. If I know that, I can be more sensitive to their learning styles and perhaps be more likely to disabuse them of any misunderstanding they may have. Second, and perhaps more important, it also may prompt me to think about the material in a new way.

Stephen L. Sepinuck is an associate professor of law at Gonzaga University School of Law, P.O. Box 3528, Spokane, WA 99220-3528, (509) 328-4220 (ext. 6379), FAX (509) 324-5840, e-mail sepinuck@gulaw.gonzaga.edu.