

Suffolk University

## Digital Collections @ Suffolk

---

Suffolk University Law School Faculty Works

Suffolk University Law School

---

Spring 2021

### #ThisIsMe

Kathleen Elliott Vinson

*Suffolk University*, [kvinson@suffolk.edu](mailto:kvinson@suffolk.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.suffolk.edu/suls-faculty>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Vinson, Kathleen Elliott, "#ThisIsMe" (2021). *Suffolk University Law School Faculty Works*. 99.  
<https://dc.suffolk.edu/suls-faculty/99>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Suffolk University Law School at Digital Collections @ Suffolk. It has been accepted for inclusion in Suffolk University Law School Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Suffolk. For more information, please contact [dct@suffolk.edu](mailto:dct@suffolk.edu).

Cite as: Kathleen Elliott Vinson, *#ThisIsMe*, 29 PERSPS. \_\_\_\_ (2021).

# #ThisIsMe<sup>1</sup>

By Kathleen Elliott Vinson

*Kathleen Elliott Vinson is a Professor of Legal Writing and Director of Legal Writing, Research, and Written Advocacy at Suffolk University Law School.*

## I. Introduction

“Look out because here I come  
I’m marching on to the beat I drum  
I’m not scared to be seen  
I make no apologies,  
This is me.”<sup>2</sup>

Do you recognize these lyrics from the song, “This Is Me,” from the movie, *The Greatest Showman*? Do you start to tap your feet or sing along when you hear it? I play this song during the first class of my course.

## II. Why<sup>3</sup>

Teaching can be challenging under ordinary times; however, teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was extraordinarily difficult, regardless of the mode of instruction.<sup>4</sup> While preparing to teach an online synchronous Legal Practice Skills course to first-year law students last year, I grappled with how I could foster connections, community, and trust with students I had never met before and would only interact with online. I was mindful of the mix of emotions students could be

experiencing, including stress, isolation, trauma, loss, racial injustice, and economic concerns. While I was an experienced teacher who had used a variety of techniques to connect with students at the outset of a course,<sup>5</sup> given the unprecedented times, I wanted to be even more intentional about developing connections, community, and trust. After all, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.”<sup>6</sup>

Connections, community, and trust are critical components to enhance student learning in law school courses, especially given the circumstances of the last year with extreme health and economic challenges related to a pandemic, the fight for racial justice, and continued political division.<sup>7</sup> Beyond these recent obstacles, students need to connect with other students in their class, their professors, and the course content.<sup>8</sup> Students need to be seen, heard, and included in their new law school community. They also need to trust their professors, themselves, and their fellow students and to experience a supportive learning environment where they can learn from their mistakes and feel comfortable asking questions.<sup>9</sup>

## III. How

Before the first day of the course, I required my students to complete a #ThisIsMe assignment.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Common ice breaker techniques in the first class include: having students introduce themselves or interview a classmate, asking students to share a fun fact about themselves or classmates, and having students complete student information sheets about their background, interests, and concerns, etc.

<sup>6</sup> See JARED DIAMOND, *UPHEAVAL: TURNING POINTS FOR NATIONS IN CRISIS* 1, 44 (2019) (quoting Winston Churchill).

<sup>7</sup> See Pope-Ruark, *supra* note 4.

<sup>8</sup> See Beth McMurtrie, *Teaching: What Students Want Their Professors to Know*, *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Sep. 24, 2020), available at <https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/teaching/2020-09-24>.

<sup>9</sup> See Harmony Decosimo, *Professor Mom: The Pandemic’s Disruption of the Personal-Professional Divide in Legal Academia*, 25 *LEGAL WRITING* 1, 4 (2021) (noting trust has a positive impact on “productivity, engagement, and success”).

<sup>10</sup> My inspiration to incorporate this assignment came from colleagues who shared their ideas and experiences. See Andrele Brutus St. Val, Prof. of Legal Writing, Univ. of Pittsburgh School of Law, presentation at Legal Writing Institute One-Day Workshop (Dec. 4, 2020) (discussing engagement

“Connections, community, and trust are critical components to enhance student learning in law school courses, especially given the circumstances of the last year with extreme health and economic challenges related to a pandemic, the fight for racial justice, and continued political division.”

<sup>1</sup> The title of this Essay is based on an exercise from Suffolk University’s Leadership Institute, conducted by Amit Mrig from Academic Impressions and Gary Meyer from Marquette University, in Spring 2021. Thanks to Edward Twohig for his assistance with this article.

<sup>2</sup> KEALA SETTLE, *THIS IS ME* (Atlantic Records 2017).

<sup>3</sup> See SIMON SINEK, *START WITH WHY: HOW GREAT LEADERS INSPIRE EVERYONE TO TAKE ACTION* (2011) (discussing inspiring leaders succeeding by focusing on ‘why’ not ‘what’).

<sup>4</sup> See Sherri Keene & Eun Han, *Community Building for Better Outcomes: Our Silver Lining from Teaching in a Pandemic*, 34 *SECOND DRAFT* 1 (2021) (explaining strategies for building community in virtual law school settings); Rebecca Pope-Ruark, *INSIDE HIGHER ED, Beating Pandemic Burnout*, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/04/28/advice-faculty-help-them-avoid-burnout-during-pandemic-opinion> (Apr. 28, 2020) (providing advice for law faculty on recovering from virtual teaching burnout).

“Whenever students receive an assignment, it can cause stress, so I encouraged students to have fun with the exercise and explained the assignment’s goal was to promote connections, community, and trust.”

The assignment asked students to create a short introduction video (maximum of two minutes) or a PowerPoint slide presentation (maximum of five slides) that would be shared with the class, answering questions or prompts about themselves that I provided them.<sup>11</sup> Creativity was encouraged.<sup>12</sup> My teaching assistant and I each posted a video or a PowerPoint answering the prompts to model an example, provide a template, and introduce ourselves to the students. The variety of possible questions or prompts is endless; below are some examples of questions or prompts, although I recommend only picking a few for students to answer:

- What is your name and what are your preferred pronouns?
- Where are you a local<sup>13</sup> or where did you grow up?
- What is your favorite place to travel or where is a place you would like to visit?
- What is your favorite movie, book, or binge-worthy series?
- What is your favorite food?
- What is something that makes you proud?
- Who is a leader you admire?
- What is something you value a great deal?

strategies used by professors, such as introductory videos); Amit Mig, President, Academic Impressions & Gary Meyer, Prof. of Communication Studies & Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, Marquette University, presentation at Suffolk University Leadership Institute (Spring 2021) (requiring participants to complete a #ThisIsMe assignment).

11 You could give students the choice to do a video or PowerPoint presentation, or you could direct students to all do the video or all do the PowerPoint presentation. Various technology could be used, such as Flipgrid or Miro for this assignment. See AALS Balance in Legal Education, *Wellness from Day One*, at 20:30–27:30 (webinar Jun. 3, 2021), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYn5v286Fa4&list=PLYl\\_uIKrHw\\_xO9YNcsiNNsZRYKckafjBQ&index=5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYn5v286Fa4&list=PLYl_uIKrHw_xO9YNcsiNNsZRYKckafjBQ&index=5) (Aric Short presenting on using Miro, an electronic whiteboard, for virtual student introductions).

12 I created my video outside as a way to set a more informal tone and a respite from seeing me on a Zoom screen all semester.

13 See Taiye Selasi, *Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm local*, TED (October 2014), [https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye\\_selasi\\_don\\_t\\_ask\\_where\\_i\\_m\\_from\\_ask\\_where\\_i\\_m\\_a\\_local](https://www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local) (explaining why to ask “where are you a local” instead of “where are you from”).

- What is something new you recently tried?
- What is a fond childhood memory?
- What is something that frightens you?
- What is something you like to do for fun?
- What is something you are good at?
- What is something you struggle with or find challenging?

Whenever students receive an assignment, it can cause stress, so I encouraged students to have fun with the exercise and explained the assignment’s goal was to promote connections, community, and trust. I reminded them that bloopers and mistakes were okay. I also noted how students may be surprised by how much they have in common with others, how much they will learn about themselves, and how it may spark their curiosity to learn more about others in their class.

After creating a video or PowerPoint slide presentation, I asked students to post it to the discussion board section of the course management platform, Blackboard, where it was visible to everyone in the class.<sup>14</sup> Then, students had to review at least two videos<sup>15</sup> or slides of others in the class and post a response, commenting on each of them. I gave them examples of appropriate responses, such as commenting on something you have in common, something you want to know more about, or some connections to the class or law school, such as: “Public speaking makes me nervous, too”; “That author is one of my favorites—have you read her latest novel?”; “Sounds like you enjoy cooking—do you have any favorite vegan

14 Course management platforms may allow the professor to choose whether students may watch other students’ videos or PowerPoint presentations before they upload their own. One benefit is students may find it helpful to watch others; however, one downside is repetition in student responses can occur if students look at other students’ assignments and replicate the same type of response—they all talk about cooking if one student uses that as an answer or they all talk about running, etc. You can set up the options to not allow students to see other students’ assignments until after a certain date.

15 Depending on your class size, you could limit the number of responses required or ask them to respond to all of them. I asked them to respond to students who did not have any response yet to make sure all students got feedback. Although I limited the number of responses students were required to provide to two, many students responded to more and some responded to all of them.

recipes you could share?"; "How did you learn how to play poker so well?" My teaching assistant and I responded to every student's video or PowerPoint slide presentation. It was an easy way for me to remember the individual students and signal that I had reviewed their work, cared about them, and wanted to get to know them individually.

On the first day of class, as students entered class (signed on to the class Zoom), I played the song "This Is Me," thanked them for their efforts on the assignment, acknowledged their vulnerability and authenticity in sharing information about themselves with the class, and noted the breadth of responses while specifically referencing some unique responses.<sup>16</sup> You could take a few minutes in the first class and ask each student to share a few slides with the class that convey information that others may not know about them or find surprising.<sup>17</sup> Or you could ask a few students to do this in each class throughout the semester.

Finally, in the last class of the semester, I referenced the #ThisIsMe assignment and pointed out how our shared class experience with breakout rooms, peer review, and individual conferences had contributed to our getting to know each other better by the semester's end. It brought the class full circle and was a nice way to bookend the first and last class.

## IV. Benefits and Challenges

### A. Benefits

#### 1. Promotes wellness

Stress, burnout, anxiety, depression, feelings of isolation, alienation, imposter syndrome, or other mental health or well-being issues create barriers

<sup>16</sup> See Settle, *supra* note 1 ("and I'm marching on to the beat I drum, I'm not scared to be seen, I make no apologies, this is me"). In addition to the #ThisIsMe assignment, I also played music at the beginning of each class from a playlist created by a favorite song I asked each student to send me.

<sup>17</sup> If presenting online via Zoom, students could respond in the chat feature of Zoom to the slides.

to learning, and later on, to practicing law.<sup>18</sup>

Student wellness is vital as lawyer well-being is a professional responsibility to clients.<sup>19</sup> While #ThisIsMe is not a panacea, it can promote student well-being and help create an inclusive learning space that maximizes their cognitive function. Students' answers to the prompts can remind them of their resilience, grit, accomplishments, relationships, and interests outside law school. Also, the introductions accomplished through the #ThisIsMe assignment may lessen the nerves of the first day of class and replace them with some excitement. It sets the tone for the class, focusing on students as individuals and valuing the whole person.

#### 2. Cultivates a common bond and trust

The assignment helps foster bonds among students in the class as they discover common ground. It also can enhance cultural competency as they hear about different student experiences, backgrounds, and cultures.<sup>20</sup> The professor, teaching assistant, and students demonstrate vulnerability in answering the questions or prompts about themselves and in viewing others' responses to their answers.<sup>21</sup> Students experience that people often connect more with weaknesses than strengths and that it takes courage to be vulnerable; vulnerability is a strength, not a weakness. Students also remember they

“While #ThisIsMe is not a panacea, it can promote student well-being and help create an inclusive learning space that maximizes their cognitive function.”

<sup>18</sup> See SHAILINI GEORGE, DOING WELL AND BEING WELL (2021); R. Lisle Baker, *Integrating Positive Psychology into Legal Education*, 48 SW. L. REV. 295, 297 (2019); Gill Corkindale, *Overcoming Imposter Syndrome*, HARV. BUS. REV., May 7, 2008, <https://hbr.org/2008/05/overcoming-imposter-syndrome> (imposter syndrome can be defined as a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success); Bree Buchanan & James Coyle et al., *The Path to Lawyer Well-Being: Practical Recommendations for Positive Change: Creating a Movement to Improve Well-Being in the Legal Profession*, NAT'L TASK FORCE ON LAWYER WELL-BEING (2017), [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/professional\\_responsibility/lawyer\\_well\\_being\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/professional_responsibility/lawyer_well_being_report_final.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> See Janet Stearns & Ayat Nizam, ABA FOR LAW STUDENTS, *The Path to Reforming the ABA Standards to Promote Law Student Well-Being*, <https://abaforlawstudents.com/2021/04/22/path-to-reforming-aba-standards-to-promote-law-student-well-being/> (Apr. 22, 2021). In 2021, the Council proposed changes to Standard 508, which describes essential Student Services, to include "law student well-being resources." See *id.*

<sup>20</sup> For example, I don't have to ask students how to pronounce their names, as I can learn that from the video.

<sup>21</sup> See BRENE BROWN, DARE TO LEAD 1, 50 (2018) (noting vulnerability in front of others is most important dynamic for successful teams). Trust is not earned through grand gestures in big moments; trust is built in very small moments. *Id.* at 46-47.

“In the law school setting of anonymous grading, the Socratic method, and large classes, students appreciate the individual aspect of this assignment and sense of humanity.”

are not one-dimensional and may have common interests or experiences outside of law school, which they often lose sight of when embroiled in studying and classes amid the semester.

Before the first class even occurs, the #ThisIsMe assignment builds rapport that continues to grow during the semester. I can continue to show an interest in my students during office hours or in class throughout the semester, by referencing specific responses of a student. I can also create assignments, hypos, or exercises during the course that build off of their responses. Finally, my letters of recommendation can be more personalized as the assignment helps me get to know them beyond their academic performance in my class.

### 3. Develops communication and self-reflection

The assignment requires self-reflection, communication skills, following directions, and meeting a deadline—skills students will need to apply throughout my course and in legal practice. While I aim to teach them core legal skills, emotional intelligence and connecting to others are essential skills for lawyers as well. This assignment gives them an opportunity to practice the interpersonal skills that are also needed to practice successfully.

### 4. Fosters creativity

Law students often don't feel like they can be creative; however, this exercise can be a creative outlet for students. The assignment is a safe space for students to highlight their personalities. It ignites curiosity and a sense of fun. In addition, because I encourage students to record the video once and not redo it even if they make a mistake, the assignment helps them to become more confident. They learn that they don't have to be perfect and that mistakes are part of the learning process.<sup>22</sup>

### 5. Sends a supportive message

This assignment signals to students that I care about them as individuals, that I will take the time to get to know them, and that I want them to get to know each other to develop support and

networking systems. In the law school setting of anonymous grading, the Socratic method, and large classes, students appreciate the individual aspect of this assignment and sense of humanity. Finally, by establishing connections, students are more likely to reach out to me or their fellow students for help when they need it during the semester.

## B. Challenges

### 1. Time

The amount of time the #ThisIsMe assignment takes from class varies. The assignment can be done entirely outside of class before the first class, during the first class, or during a few minutes at the beginning or end of numerous classes throughout the course. It does take time for students to complete the assignment, including creating the video or PowerPoint and responding to others. It also takes time for the professor to develop the assignment, including drafting the directions and questions or prompts, designing a template for the PowerPoint, creating the video or PowerPoint presentation, reviewing students' assignments, and responding. Being clear about the assignment's goals and how it connects to the course, as well as individually responding to student assignments, can prevent students from perceiving the assignment as busywork. Connections, community, and trust take time to develop but can be fostered in small ways.<sup>23</sup>

### 2. Comfort zone

The #ThisIsMe assignment may seem different than students' usual assignments for their first day of law school classes. In addition, they may not have ever completed an assignment like this before and may be surprised by how much self-reflection it requires. Students will face challenges throughout the course and law school that take them out of their comfort zone; this assignment may be the first but will not be the last. Getting students comfortable being uncomfortable at the outset of the course can help students succeed during the semester. Also, when they see their professor modeling

<sup>22</sup> Students could also save their videos with mistakes for a bloopers reel that would be fun to include as well.

<sup>23</sup> See STEPHEN M. R. COVEY & REBECCA R. MERRILL, SPEED OF TRUST: THE ONE THING THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING 1, 52 (2018).

vulnerability and authenticity, trust develops, and students see the efficacy of the assignment.

## V. Conclusion

In the future, no matter what the instruction in law schools may be—online, hybrid, or in person—using the #ThisIsMe assignment can help promote an

inclusive learning space and enhance learning. Long after the course is over, students may remember this assignment more than any other because of the connections, community, and trust that it fosters. “[Students] may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> See RICHARD L. EVANS, RICHARD EVANS’ QUOTE BOOK 244 (1971) (quoting Carl Buehner).

“Long after the course is over, students may remember this assignment more than any other because of the connections, community, and trust that it fosters.”