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Commentary: Invisible Teachers: A Comment on Perceptions in the Classroom

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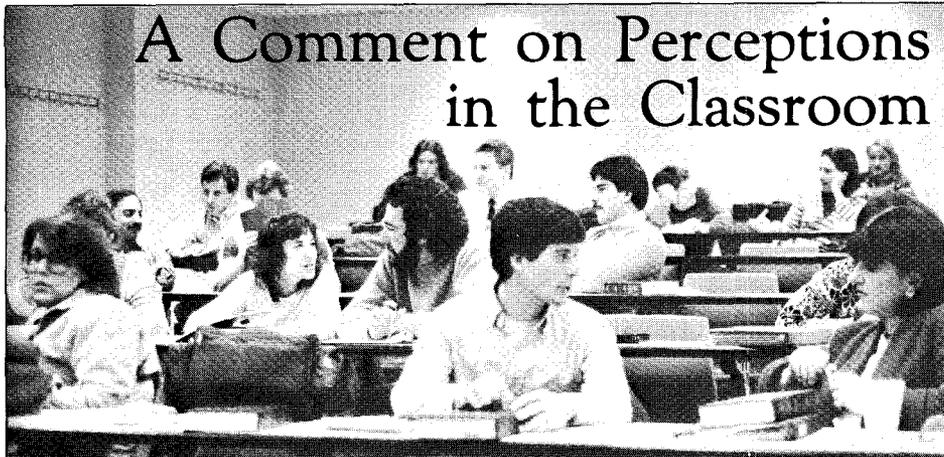
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Invisible Teachers:

A Comment on Perceptions in the Classroom



By Robert F. Nagel

An odd fact about behavior in law-school classrooms is that polite, decent students will occasionally (and apparently unthinkingly) be rude. A student who is normally attentive in personal conversation may, in the classroom, slump sullenly in his chair or feign sleep or read a newspaper. This sort of behavior is not explainable simply as a reaction to the legendary unpleasantness of the Socratic method or to the boredom of a particular class. Everyone has memories going back to grade school of students engaging in open misbehavior—passing notes, chewing gum, staring out windows, brazenly cheating. From the beginning of formal education to its end, what seems to characterize and partially to explain such classroom activity is a sense of invisibility. In some peculiar way students are simply unaware of the fact that the teacher who is standing only a few yards away can clearly see them. Thus it does not occur to the normally polite law student that his boorish behavior is an affront to the teacher before him. Having been a law student in the turbulent period around 1970, I remember occasional angry, even obscene, outbursts in the classroom; and I believe that even those students, at the moment they were so loudly demanding notice, did not understand that they could be seen quite plainly.

The obvious—and incomplete—explanation for students' illusion of invisibility is their low self-esteem. Especially with respect to legal education, it is common to suppose that the role of the student is subordinate, that

students feel powerless, inadequate, and exploited in the classroom. From this assumption it is a small leap to the conclusion that law students, feeling unimportant, also feel as if they are not fully present, that they are, in a sense, invisible. But anyone who has been a teacher must recognize that something more complex is going on. As an illustration, consider this incident: At a bar-association cocktail party, I am enjoying a pleasant conversation with a local practitioner. He asks how things are at the law school, and there is other small talk. Then, without any change of mood or tone, the practitioner says, "I could teach those students more in three weeks about practicing law than they learn in three years at the law school." Now, I am not especially surprised at this idea—I have heard many criticisms of "impractical" legal education before. Everyone, including teachers, expects criticism from time to time. The comment is surprising in that the practitioner does not seem at all embarrassed by his insult. He does not provide the softener so customary in such circumstances—he does not add, for example, "except for a few of the good teachers." He does not seem to expect me to argue or to be angry. He is perfectly matter of fact. In short, to this individual I am not enough of a person to be insulted. I am not fully there.

I have heard similar anecdotes from many teachers: the senior professor referred to in public with friendly amusement and obvious condescension; the hard-working younger teacher asked when he intends to get a real job. I have heard enough to suggest that

such experiences form part of the normal fabric of the law teacher's life. It is not that teachers are especially subject to insult; it is that they are not expected to notice or respond. Such episodes suggest a perverse explanation for the feeling of invisibility that so many students apparently have. Perhaps students do not recognize that there is anyone in front of the room to look back and see them. It is the teacher who is invisible. Of course, students see their teachers at the podium. They listen to them and watch them. But in some way they do not really believe that it is a person up there.

Students' attempts to depersonalize and limit their teachers are evident in an array of commonly observed reactions to law school. Students come to believe, at least from time to time, if not permanently, that law teachers do not notice them or care about them. They find evidence for this in the fact that a teacher might not remember a name during a conversation in the hall or in fact that he passed too quickly over a point in class or in his apparent obliviousness to how the classroom experience affects students. Teachers are perceived as ignoring their students' discomfort and making light of ideas that are offered seriously. This is an adult version of "my teacher cannot see me."

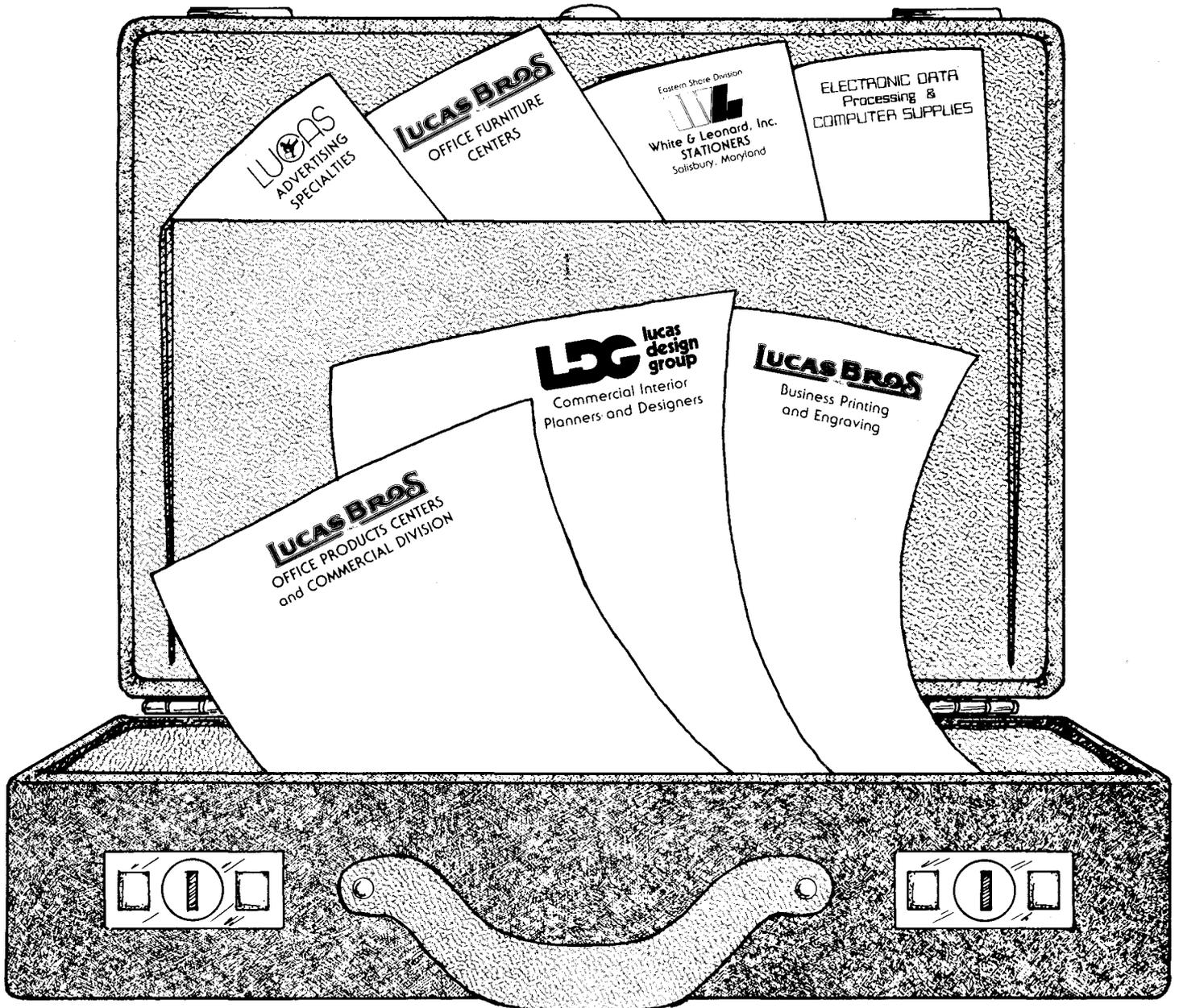
As faculty, we know that many colleagues remember students by name, years and even decades after they have graduated. I have heard accounts of specific answers given to questions posed many years earlier. Teachers frequently talk fondly (and sometimes not so fondly) of students, including students from long ago. Moreover, most teachers are well aware of discomfort in class—or at least assume that some students are somewhat uncomfortable. But, of course, teachers have in mind objectives other than responding openly to discomfort during the class period. After all, the teacher is there to teach and expects to devote his time and effort to that objective. Most teachers are acutely sensitive to whether students are interested, whether they seem to be learning, whether the class is going well. Teaching is our occupation and it is the thing to which our self-esteem is attached. That students so often cannot

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