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## What Is Your Friday “Slightly Crazy Idea”?

Posted on [April 4, 2015](#) by [Catherine Lemmer](#)

by [Catherine A. Lemmer](#)

After five years of teaching legal research online and in traditional podium classes, I remain perplexed by those law students who settle for an okay answer rather than pushing their research and analysis for the best answer. This seems particularly incongruent to me because the research classes I teach are required, credit-bearing, graded on the law school curve, and, of course, calculated in the GPA. Law practice demands the more robust answer, so I'm intent on getting all of my students to move to practice-level performance.

### Creating the Information Junkie

The willingness to settle disturbs me because it evidences a lack of intellectual curiosity. How could you not want to know, for lack of a better phrase, the “better why?” I always want to know the “better why.” I am the first to admit that I am an information junkie, that I think about information differently. Early on, I realized the direct correlation between information and power. I also spent ten years of my formative professional life as a transactional attorney. This combination means I read every footnote, push the relationships of data, and research for multiple best answers in the event the underlying parameters change. In short, I want to be prepared. Because I want my students to know this intellectual rush rather than the fear of being unprepared, I set aside a few hours today to think about this instructional problem.

Discussions with my colleagues on this topic typically get shorthanded to: “How do we get our students to be analytical?” or “Why does it seem like they don't want to be analytical?” or “Why aren't they making the connections?” I deliberately avoided this “usual” description of the issue in approaching how to structure my thinking time. Instead, I took my lead from the [Corning R&D lab](#), where scientists are encouraged to take 10% of their Friday afternoon to develop *slightly crazy ideas*.

### Info

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## Knowledge Brokering: Critical Thinking Skills From Other Arenas

Because I do not believe that my students lack intellectual curiosity or perhaps alternatively stated, don't enjoy being afraid of not having an answer for their client, I wanted to spend time thinking about the issue from a different point of view. Knowledge brokering is to take an idea that is commonplace in one area and use it in a different context where it is not, so I started with my pedagogical objective: to develop in my students the ability to synthesize insights from different resources into a comprehensible whole. This is a common discussion in the literature on the development of executive management and leadership skills. My slightly crazy idea, then, was to spend a few hours reading the gurus who write on developing critical thinking skills in business executives.

### It Takes More Than A Brain

To my great interest, some of the literature focused on the nature of information and how we process information. Embodied cognition researchers advance the idea that the entire human body and the physicality of information itself has an impact on how we process information. See Natalie Angier, [Abstract Thoughts? The Body Takes Them Literally](#), N. Y. Times, Feb. 2, 2010. For example, humans tend to lean back in a chair when asked to describe a past event and sit forward when discussing upcoming events. In addition, the physical weight of the information source contributes to how students value the information. In short, we use more than our brain to interpret and value information. The digital information environment is flat in appearance, and other physical attributes (e.g., table of contents, hierarchy) are not readily apparent. Could this perhaps be a reason students fail to understand which search result is the best (i.e., most important or relevant)?

### What's Intuition Got to Do With it?

Equally interesting was the literature on “human intuition” versus “fact gathering and analysis” in decision making. Humans are “irrationally influenced by the first information received on a particular subject—it becomes, as decision researchers put it, the ‘anchor’ that determines and distorts how we process all subsequent data.” Eric Bonabeau, [Don't Trust Your Gut](#), Harv. Bus. Rev., May 1, 2003. In addition, humans are hardwired to see and apply patterns to force new situations into old patterns. The resulting big picture is this: our inability to deal with prolonged ambiguity means sustained exploration of alternatives—the very skill needed for intelligent decision making—is lost. See *id.* Many of the students' responses to legal research assignments start to make more sense when viewed in this context.

My slightly crazy idea to read literature on critical thinking skills in executive leadership has helped me reframe my instructional issue. I am now inspired to look for solutions that look to understand how my students view and understand information and the relationships between data in both the print and electronic environments. Cognitive scientist Guy Claxton writes: “[C]reative people do...intuitively know the value of alternating the rhythms of work; when to let the mind wander, when to get down to hard work and when to put a problem on the back burner and leave the subconscious to mull it over.” Guy Claxton, [What's the big idea?](#), The Guardian/The Observer, Sept. 21, 2002. I

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Multimedia Learning, Part I

- beausteenken on Experiences, Simulations, and Games in the Classroom
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plan to take his advice, mull this all over for a few days and take it up again next Friday afternoon when I continue developing my slightly crazy idea.

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**About Catherine Lemmer**

A life long learner interested in most aspects of the creation, use, management, and control of information.

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