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How to Learn From Failure

Mon, 04/02/2012 - 4:13pm -- [admin](#)

Steve Jobs, the late founder of Apple, said his success came from his ability to learn from his failures. The same principle can apply to the bar exam.

In California, bar examiners return graded essay answers to candidates who fail the exam. Gil Peles, a graduate of University of California, Berkeley and an attorney, has started BarEssays.com to help students learn from past exams.

BarEssays.com offers a database of nearly 2,000 graded and returned essays from prior California bar applicants who failed the California Bar Exam, including high scoring, low scoring, and barely passing essays.

The idea is that students can learn what differentiates high scoring from low scoring essays in terms of issue spotting, rules statements, and IRAC formatting. To help students get through the database, he developed a search engine that sorts essays by subject, score, handwritten/typed, and exam year. The search results provide the question for each essay next to each graded answer, and a link to a corresponding sample answer released by the California Bar Examiners.

BarEssays.com costs \$75 for access to the essay database, which comes along with a set of short outlines and checklists on each tested subject, through the completion of the next bar exam.

Q: What prompted you to start BarEssays.com?

Gil Peles: When I was studying for the bar exam, I met a student who was repeating the exam. This student shared with me her essays from the unsuccessful exam, which included a few high scoring essays and several low scoring essays. The process of looking at "real" graded essays was so helpful. I immediately thought – "So that is what the bar exam graders are looking for! Why hasn't anyone shown me this before?" I wanted to find a way for others to have access to this type of material. I spent several years assembling a large database of bar exam essays returned to failed applicants, along with their results from bar graders. My theory was that students will learn how to pass a bar exam essay more effectively by studying examples of actually graded past bar exams.

Q: You quote Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, on your website. What do you think he meant when he said: "We learn by example and by direct experience..."

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Gil Peles: Specifically, on the California Bar Exam essays, telling a student he or she needs to write proper rule statements in IRAC format does not cause a student to write proper rule statements in IRAC format. Students must see examples in action so they can practice and emulate what they need to do. That's where BarEssays.com comes in. Students emulate a passing score under testing conditions.

Q: I noticed several laws schools, such as UC Berkeley and University of San Diego paid the access fees for their students. What value did these schools see in BarEssays.com that they would pay the fees for their students?

Gil Peles: Law schools are now actively taking part in bar exam preparation. Administrators from several law schools contacted me to provide access to all of their students. First year law students use the site to develop IRAC writing skills. Reaction has been overwhelmingly positive and the pass rates at these schools have increased.

Many students credit BarEssays.com for helping them pass after they've taken the bar exam multiple times and tried many tutors and review courses. These students say that without graded examples, they would not have understood how to write a high scoring essay.

Q: Are there any plans for new service offerings?

Gil Peles: Yes. I enlisted former graders of the California Bar Exam to develop new content for the website. Beginning with the July 2012 exam, BarEssays.com will offer approximately 150 annotated reviews of the essays in the database by former bar graders. This will provide a student with commentary on exactly why a particular essay received a certain score. In addition, I plan to offer an option for students to submit practice essays to former bar graders for personalized reviews.

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