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Ensuring Presentations by Practicing Lawyers Engage Students

by Susan P. Beneville and Sandee Magliozzi

One way to bridge the gap between law school and practice is to incorporate practicing professionals into the law school experience. Active practitioners are invaluable to teach students professional practice skills and professionalism. Each outside practitioner is a potential gold mine of skills, experience, and knowledge. The challenge is to mine that gold so that both the law students and the practitioner benefit from the process. That challenge can be particularly acute when the practitioner is brought in for a short-term program or one-time presentation. But, the challenge can easily be surmounted with just a little bit of communication and planning ahead of time on what the practitioner is expected to do and how the practitioner is expected to do it. Here are a few tips on how to help a practitioner develop and present a meaningful program.

Articulate the “What”

When you invite a practitioner to do a presentation, make sure that the subject matter of the presentation is specific, relevant, and practical.

Know why you are asking this particular individual to do a presentation. Before you make the invitation, think about what you know about the practitioner (strengths, skills, experience, and professional status) and ask yourself: What does this person bring to the table that will really be of value to our law students? What are the learning objectives I hope will be achieved?

During your initial call to potential presenters either give them or develop with them a specific topic which will be the subject of their presenta-

tion and outline what your objectives are in having them do the presentation. Understandably, law schools are grateful whenever practitioners, especially alumni, volunteer their time and expertise. But, you don't do the practitioner (or the law students) any favors by saying “just come on in and talk to the students about being an intellectual property litigator.” When the invitation is couched in such vague terms one of two things happens: either the practitioner over prepares and attempts to cover far too much material in the short period of time allotted or the practitioner doesn't prepare at all and ends up telling one amusing war story after another. In either scenario, the law students usually don't learn very much and the practitioner ultimately wastes his or her own time.

The practitioner should define the scope of the presentation and three to five key points that will be made. What specific information, ideas, or skills should the students take away from the presentation? These takeaways should become the spine of the presentation, and all of the content should be concretely and obviously tied to them.

As you and the practitioner refine the scope of the learning objectives, bear in mind that it must be relevant to the law students. How can the substance of the presentation connect to what the law students are learning and doing right now in law school? What have they already learned? What are they in the process of learning? What do they need to know and understand as they enter the practice? What common traps, mistakes, or missteps do you want them to avoid? Ask presenters what they wish their younger colleagues understood about the current realities of legal practice.

In addition to being relevant, the content of a practitioner's program should be practical. Law schools already excel at teaching the conceptual and the theoretical aspects of the law; the emphasis of a practitioner program should be on the practice aspect of the law. Practitioners need to show how the concepts and theories play out in the real world. Their ability to do this in an intentional and credible way allows the law students to anticipate what situations they will face when they begin practicing and helps them to acquire and hone the skills that they will need to respond to those situations. All of this helps young lawyers to be better prepared to jump into the practice of law when they leave law school.

Articulate the "How"

In addition to helping practitioners refine the "what" of their presentations, you also need to support them in developing the "how." Let's face it: not all good lawyers are good teachers. Most have not developed the skills necessary to impart their wisdom in an effective manner. As a result, many practitioner presentations turn into "talking head" sessions that are not very appealing to or helpful for law students. So, you need to work with practitioners to connect with, focus, and engage the students.

To connect with the law students, a practitioner needs to understand who these students are. Give the practitioner some idea of the background of the students, the diversity of the group, any special characteristics of the group, and what you think their expectations and interests might be. Then, before launching into his or her presentation, the practitioner should take some steps to actually "meet" the audience. With a small group, this might mean asking them to introduce themselves and provide some relevant detail about themselves (background, prior experience, subject matter experience). In a larger group, the presenter might ask for a show of hands in response to a relevant question.

The presenter might then pick a few respondents to provide more substantive answers and engage

in a short conversation. This process helps the practitioner to gauge the experience level and knowledge of the group in order to tailor the content of the presentation. It also makes the students in the audience feel as if the practitioner is interested in them and respects them. As a result, they pay more attention, interact more freely, and will gain more from the whole experience.

Once the group has begun to connect, it is important to focus the group's attention on the learning objectives and to maintain that focus. This focus can be stated as blandly as: "Today we will discuss this, this, and this." Or the statement can be more directive "Today I will challenge you to consider ..." or "today I will ask you to think about this, this, and this." The introduction can also be a promise: "At the end of today's program, you will be able to do this, this, and this." The approach will differ based on the content and structure of the program, but the important thing is to provide students with the organizational framework they will use to take in the information, ideas, and skills that the practitioner is discussing. Then, throughout the program, the practitioner should refer back to and reinforce the main points and subpoints being presented. Barebones PowerPoint slides can be very helpful to maintain and emphasize the focus of a discussion. Conversely, slides that contain too much text, graphics, or ideas tend to diffuse or dilute focus. If a practitioner is going to use PowerPoint, offer to review the slide presentation ahead of time and provide feedback.

Finally, the practitioner must find some way to engage the group; to get them actively thinking about and actively doing something with the content being provided. There are number of ways to do this. The choice will depend on the subject matter, the nature of the group, the size of the group, and the time allotted for the program. Students can be engaged simply by asking questions of individuals and creating a group discussion. Or, each participant can be asked to write down a list of something (e.g., four qualities of good leaders) or a response to a question (e.g., what makes a good leader?). Then, a few individuals can volunteer to share their responses, which will form the basis of further discussion. Or, topics can be discussed in

pairs, triads, or groups. If the presentation is skills based, role plays, games, or demos can be effective. The important thing is to make sure that the practitioner has a plan for how to get the students to actively participate in the program rather than sitting there as passive recipients of information.

Collaborate

Obviously, it takes time for a practitioner to develop an effective presentation. If practitioners feel supported and appreciated, most will take the time. You need to stay involved with practitioners throughout the process. They don't want to fall flat anymore than you want them to. But, it's up to you to guide them through the process — from defining the learning objectives to brainstorming ways to connect, to designing the interactive com-

ponent, to creating the slides. Get their commitment early on and be sure to outline for them what you expect — and when you expect it. Offer your time and your resources. Don't forget to flatter and to thank them repeatedly. That's essential.

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