

## ***USING A MOCK TRIAL ACTIVITY FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING***

Judith S. Ettinger, Ph.D., University of Illinois at Springfield  
ettinger.judith@uis.edu

### ABSTRACT

*The world is increasingly made smaller by rapidly advancing technological development. As we rush headlong into the 21st century in such a world, challenges and opportunities become more complex, and the rate at which these challenges must be addressed is increasing at phenomenal speed. Consequently, as we prepare students to live and work in contemporary society, we must provide them with the opportunity to learn how to successfully and simultaneously access the potential contributions of many differing disciplinary areas. We must also change the way we view learning. In the absence of multi-disciplinary activities in the classroom, students could easily lack an appreciation of the complexities confronting them in their work environments. An interdisciplinary approach to classroom learning can address the complex nature of contemporary business challenges. The Mock Trial activity is designed to be a vehicle for providing an interdisciplinary classroom experience, as well as enhancing communication skills. This paper explains how the Mock Trial activity translates to an interdisciplinary classroom experience. The objectives of such an activity are explained as well as a discussion of how to use the activity in the classroom.*

### INTRODUCTION

Fueled by technology, the rapid pace of change is an inevitability in today's environment, and most forecasts predict this pace to continue. Preparing students, who will be responsible for the leadership in organizations of the future, increasingly demands an approach to equipping them with the skills and abilities to effectively manage in these conditions of change. Along with the accelerating pace of change is an increase in the complexity of the world in which we live and a concomitant need to increase our capacity to handle that complexity. Providing students with cross-disciplinary learning experiences introduces them to a wide range of resources available to them in the situations they encounter and thus helps them "think outside the box." The Mock Trial activity provides an opportunity to explore interdisciplinary experiences in the classroom.

Bringing to bear a myopic, single disciplinary approach to problems of the 21st century will likely, more often than not, be unsuccessful. Educators must enthusiastically go

about designing and providing classroom experiences that will capture the imagination and energy each student brings to the learning process. One way to prepare graduates for a lifetime in which they make many career changes is to provide a truly liberal education through which they develop the capacity to seek wisdom, to reflect, to use disciplined inquiry, and to question. There is a future that cannot be prepared for by narrow training and professionalism. Yet at the same time, we must provide the links between cross-disciplinary learning and the professional education most students pursue. Incorporating breadth in business school curriculum is essential (Porter and McKibbin, 1988).

This interdisciplinary emphasis is getting increasing attention in literature addressing future business needs as well as educational preparation for students aspiring to work in business (Hancock, 1998; Porter and McKibbin, 1988; Milter and Stinson, 1995). Not only do graduates from business schools need to be adept at problem analysis and problem solving, but they must also be capable of vision (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). That is, students must not only on present problems, but also on creating of new approaches for the future. An interdisciplinary focus introduces students to ways viewing situations that a more narrow discipline-only focus does not do.

Relevant literature in management education as well literature addressing successful managerial behavior and organizational performance clearly indicate that communication skills are not only an essential variable for effectiveness (Luthans & Larsen, 1986), but these skills also comprise a significant part of managerial time (Kotter, 1999). Further, teaching communication skills is an important part of management education (Porter & McKibbin, 1988). The importance of and interest in communication skills is heightened by an increasing emphasis on team behavior in organizations operating in a collaborative, interdependent world (Bassin, 1996; Linden, Wayne & Bradway, 1996). Of particular emphasis in team behavior is the key part played by eliciting input from and subsequent discussion of diverse ideas from all team members (Hart, 1996; Leavitt & Lipman-Blumen, 1995; Nahavandi & Aranda, 1994). To capitalize on the diversity available in a team, managers must understand the value other functions and disciplines can provide to the solution of problems in an increasingly complex world (Milter & Stinson, 1995; Coppola & Daniels, 1998).

## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 28, 2001

Increasingly, organizations demand that their members have good communication and other interpersonal skills. One criticism perpetually plaguing business school education is that graduates with this degree have not been provided sufficient opportunity to develop proficiency in communication skills, oral and written, and other interpersonal behaviors needed to effectively manage people (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). Including activities that incorporate concepts and perspectives from the social and behavior sciences would address this perceived business education deficiency (Porter and McKibbin, 1988).

### INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING THROUGH A MOCK COURTROOM ACTIVITY

**Purpose:** With the belief that a multi-disciplinary approach is educationally valuable and important, the Mock Courtroom activity was utilized as a vehicle to expose students to experiences in other disciplinary areas. Two previously unrelated courses at the University of Illinois at Springfield were examined as potential for a cross-disciplinary experience. One, MGT 441, Managing Organization Development is offered in the School of Business and Management, Management Department, and the other, COM 312, News Gathering and Writing is offered in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Communication Department.

**Procedure:** MGT 441 examines theories and applications of organizational change and development as they relate to the management of organizations. Topics included in this course are diagnosis, strategies, interventions, group development, and team building.

In order to examine change strategies, group development and team building, students in the MGT 441 course were engaged in a Mock Courtroom activity (Ettinger, 1982). This activity involves selecting an issue related to the subject matter of the course. After identifying on which side the students fall on the issue, the instructor then assigns them to defend the opposite side. This provides them with a first hand and personal experience with change. One side is assigned to be the defense, and the other the Prosecution, and preparations encompass issues in group development and team building. One or two students (depending upon the number of students in the class) serve as attorneys for their side, and the remainder of the students role play witnesses. During this experiential activity, witnesses are examined (a situation for which students are prepared) and cross-examined (a situation in which students must think quickly on their feet) by the students in the role of the respective attorneys (See Appendix A for Mock Courtroom format). Every effort is made to make the simulation a real life experience including the submission of exhibits, raising objections that are sustained or overruled by the Judge (the instructor of the course), the use of side bars, a jury vote and other actual courtroom proceedings.

COM 312 examines techniques involved in interviewing, reporting and writing. In order to acquire an understanding of the principles and practical applications of journalism, students are assigned the task of writing weekly, in-class news stories. Furthermore, the skills students develop and hone in this course likely would help them in all forms of communication although primary emphasis was placed on reporting and writing for the print media.

General preparation included the instructors of the two courses involved reviewing the trial issue, procedures in effect during the mock trial, and their respective expectations of student performance during the activity.

In addition to general preparation by the instructors involved, students also received preparation in their respective courses. In this cross-disciplinary experience, the MGT 441 class had chosen an issue, and students were preparing for the mock trial event (Appendix B). The week prior to the simulation, the instructor informed MGT 441 students that students from another course would be attending the simulation, and discussed the rationale. The explanation was that these students were responsible for reporting on the "trial" just as actual newspaper reporters would do, complete with deadlines and printed stories. Further, the instructor informed the students that the "reporters" would, as any reporter might, ask questions of "witnesses" and "attorneys," and instructed the students to cooperate fully. They were also made aware that the professor of the other course would send copies of reporter stories to the class for review.

The week before the simulation, COM 312 students engaged in preparation as well. The instructor explained the courtroom simulation exercise. The students were informed they were to attend the simulation, cover it as a trial, and would have the opportunity to question the "attorneys" and "witnesses" at the trial's conclusion. They were then to return to their own computer classroom to write the story. The instructor outlined the main arguments of the trial so that the "reporters" would better understand the proceedings.

The Mock Trial activity went as scheduled, and at its conclusion, students in the COM 312 class interviewed witnesses and attorneys as well as the Judge. These reporters then proceeded to write, edit and submit their stories on deadline. The COM 312 instructor then made transparencies of the stories, and sent them for the MGT 441 students to review.

**Discussion:** The Mock Courtroom experiential activity serves a variety of purposes in any class and is adaptable to any course content. Unlike more traditional classrooms having a focus in predominantly one disciplinary area, courses utilizing this activity encourage cross-disciplinary activity and thinking.

Several different skills are utilized when engaging in this Mock Courtroom activity. Students in one discipline not only interact with students in another or even multiple other disciplines, but they also are exposed to learning that

## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 28, 2001

pertains to those disciplines. Because this learning happens within the context of their own disciplinary framework, this exposure is different from that which students get when they simply enroll in a course in another discipline.

The Mock Trial in and of itself presents many different learning opportunities as well ways in which to practice different important skills. Students not only examine issues relevant to a particular field of study, but they are called on to learn about and take a stand on these issues that is opposite from the position they hold initially. This allows students to examine some dynamics involved in change, and encourages them to explore their own abilities to be open minded and flexible.

The Mock Courtroom activity also provides ample opportunities for students to practice a variety of communication skills. During the trial itself, students experience situations where they must present the material they have researched for the trial. During examination on the stand, they are presenting material they have prepared for the activity, and this provides them with an opportunity for them to practice oral presentation skills. However, during cross-examination, they must respond to situations for which they can not totally prepare ahead of time. Consequently, they have practice speaking extemporaneously.

Not only during the trial itself, but also during all preparation time for the Mock Courtroom activity, students are working in small groups gaining experience working collaboratively. The respective teams plan and execute their examination of the issue on trial. This exposure to small group behavior is an important aspect of the Mock Courtroom activity.

In addition, the interdisciplinary aspects of the Mock Courtroom activity provide other opportunities for communication skill practice. Management majors might, as part of their future managerial responsibilities, be involved in journalistic interviews. Consequently, the aspect of the activity where the MGT 441 students were interviewed by the COM 312 students provided a realistic simulation of potential future experiences.

Also, since the trial participants were Management majors who might one day be the subject of journalistic interviews, providing journalism students with the opportunity to interview future managers in a cross-disciplinary exercise provides benefits to the students in that discipline as well.

Upon de-briefing the courtroom simulation, MGT 441 students reported that having students from another course in the room had several important outcomes. First, students expressed feelings of increased reality to the trial, and a heightened sense of importance of the activity as a result not only of having this audience, but also knowing that the other class would have an assignment associated with the experience. Some students even reported feeling somewhat responsible for providing sufficient and credible material to assist the student learning in the COM 312 course.

The COM 312 professor sent overhead copies of the "reporters" stories to the MGT 441 professor, and upon viewing these, the MGT 441 students were clearly both pleased and impressed. The courtroom simulation proceedings took on the added dimension provided by external participants who brought to this a separate disciplinary dimension. A discussion ensued about the value of viewing the experience through the eyes of another disciplinary perspective, as well as how disciplinary perspective has some influence as to how events are explained and interpreted. In addition, students discussed how a variety of other disciplines might perceive the events. At the conclusion of the MGT 441 course, several students mentioned that the cross-disciplinary activity in the class was one of the highlights of the course, and it had been one of their best challenges of the semester.

Although not done in this instance, the debriefing of this activity could be handled by having the classes meet together to discuss the process and the learning involved. Additionally, each instructor for the courses involved could visit the other's class to give an overview of his or her class' operational procedure and goals for the activity.

The courtroom simulation is an activity that can easily be adapted to a variety of disciplines. Beyond courtroom simulations and reporters writing stories, faculty from all academic disciplines should be encouraged to search for and explore similar as well as other opportunities to provide cross-disciplinary experiences in the classroom. Joining MGT 441 and COM 312 classes combined two courses from two separate academic departments. Another opportunity to consider would be an exploration of multi-disciplinary activities where students from three or more separate academic disciplines interact in some coordinated classroom activity.

The number of students in the class as well as the length of a classroom session are variables affecting the implementation of the Mock Courtroom activity. Ideally, a trial accommodates up to 18 students. With larger class sizes, more than one trial can be conducted during the course. For the Mock Courtroom activity described in this paper, class sessions are 4 hours in length so a trial takes one entire class session. However, for classes meeting for shorter periods of time, a trial could be conducted over several class sessions. In these instances, the Judge would call a "recess" and, much like many real life trials that extend beyond one day, the proceedings can continue in subsequent class sessions until the trial has been completed.

Time allotted for trial preparation can be varied depending upon instructor preference and course time available for the Mock Courtroom activity. For the activity described in this paper, once MGT 441 students selected a trial topic, some amount of each subsequent class session was devoted to trial preparation. At first, short, half hour planning sessions were allowed. Closer to the trial date, students spent an hour of class time in planning, and then the week prior to the trial, students were allowed up to one half of the class session to prepare. Because students

## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 28, 2001

typically become very involved and invested in this activity, they usually spend time together outside of class preparing for the activity. This out-of-class preparation occurs despite the fact that the instructor neither requires nor even suggests it.

Because every aspect of the Mock Courtroom activity is pertinent to classroom learning objectives, debriefing this activity is very important. Again however, the exact amount of time devoted to debriefing is dependent upon instructor preference as well as available class time. A minimum of one hour is suggested.

The Mock Courtroom activity can have several drawbacks limiting its use that should be noted. While it can be modified to shorter class sessions, classes meeting for less than one hour at a time are not best suited to this activity. The interdisciplinary aspect of the activity can also create problems. Scheduling or other difficulties can occur, and consequently, arrangements cannot be made for some classes that would be advantageously combined for the interdisciplinary nature of this experience.

### CONCLUSION

Students preparing for their lives in the complex, globally oriented 21st century need to think outside their narrow disciplines to identify the nature of a problem, then figure out what information they need and where to get it in order to craft a solution. To accomplish this, students must be exposed to activities in the classroom that encourage integration of knowledge from a breadth of disciplines in addition to their specific major area of study. In the complex world of today, people must be able to identify contributions of widely different disciplines by exposure to multiple perspectives that cross-disciplinary exposure helps create.

### REFERENCES

- Bassin, M. (1996). From Teams to Partnerships. *HRMagazine*, January, 84-92.
- Coppola, B. & Daniels, D. (1998), *Science and Education*, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 7, 31-48.
- Ettinger, Judith (1982), "Courtroom Simulation as an Approach to Teaching Organizational Behavior", *Exchange: The Organizational Behavior Teaching Journal*, Vol. VII, No. 3, pp 33-36.
- Hancock, Terence (July/August, 1998), "The New MBA: Flies in the Paradigm", *Business Horizons*, pp. 41-44.
- Hart, E. (1996). Top Teams. *Management Review*, February, 43-47.
- Kotter, J. (1999). What Effective General Managers Really Do. *Harvard Business Review*, March-April, 145-157.
- Leavitt, H. & Lipman-Blumen, J. (1995). *Harvard Business Review*, July-August, 109-116.
- Linden, R., Wayne, S. & Bradway, L. (1996). Connections Make the Difference. *HRMagazine*, February, 73-79.

- Luthans, F. & Larsen, J.K. (1986). How Managers Really Communicate. *Human Relations*, 39, 161-178.
- Milner, Richard and John Stinson (1995), "Educating Leaders for the New Competitive Environment", in *Educational Innovation in Economics and Business Administration*, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, Chapter 4, p. 30-38.
- Nahavandi, A. & Aranda, E. (1994). Restructuring Teams for the Re-Engineered Organization. *Academy\_of Management Executive*. 8, 4, 58-68.
- Porter, L. and L. McKibbin (1988), *Management Education and Development: Drift or Thrust into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Stinson, John, (1994) "Improving the Quality of Thinking in a Changing World", a paper presented at the Sixth International Conference on Thinking, MIT, July.

APPENDIX A

THE CASE OF:

Trial Date:

**Charges:** (Brought and believed by the Prosecution)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

**NOTE:** What should be central to any issue discussion is the acknowledgement or acceptance of the notion that other viewpoints exist and that the holders of those other viewpoints have undergone a thought process that lends credence to the position they hold.

# Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 28, 2001

## DEFENSE

Attorney \_\_\_\_\_  
Attorney \_\_\_\_\_

Witness 1. \_\_\_\_\_

Role \_\_\_\_\_

Witness 2. \_\_\_\_\_

Role \_\_\_\_\_

Witness 3. \_\_\_\_\_

Role \_\_\_\_\_

Etc...

## PROSECUTION

Attorney \_\_\_\_\_  
Attorney \_\_\_\_\_

Witness 1. \_\_\_\_\_

Role \_\_\_\_\_

Witness 2. \_\_\_\_\_

Role \_\_\_\_\_

Witness 3. \_\_\_\_\_

Role \_\_\_\_\_

### **Process**

1. Opening remarks by Judge.
2. Opening remarks by Prosecution attorney 1. then Defense attorney 1. (\_\_ minutes each).
3. Examination and cross-examination of each witness (alternating: Prosecution witness 1. examined then cross-examined; Defense witness 1. examined and cross-examined etc.) **Each witness will be on the stand a maximum of \_\_ minutes (with examination not to exceed \_\_ minutes).**
4. Closing statement by Prosecution attorney 2. then Defense attorney 2. (No longer than \_\_ minutes each).
5. Jury vote.

**NOTE:** This courtroom activity is a forum of inquiry to gather information on an important OD issue, and is **not** designed to be argumentative, harassing or contentious. In keeping with this design, cross-examination will be done in the spirit to understand, **not** to embarrass, harass or otherwise humiliate or intimidate.

APPENDIX B

THE CASE OF: TECHNOLOGY AND CORPORATE CULTURE

**Charges:** (Brought and believed by the Prosecution)

1. Corporate culture brings meaning and focus to organizational life. This culture is created, in part, by the richness of the in-person, interpersonal interaction of the people who work within the organization. A lack of this in-person contact, brought on by such technology as e-mail and fax machines, is detrimental to organizational cultural identity.
2. Communication via many of today's common technologies is somewhat two-dimensional in that it lacks all of the nonverbal nuances provided in face-to-face, in-person interaction. Even the use of cameras does not mitigate this dimensional issue. In the absence of these subtleties, people do not have the opportunity to interact in ways that help establish corporate culture norms.
3. Various technologies enable a certain amount of anonymity and human interaction is distorted accordingly. This distortion has an adverse impact on corporate culture.
4. "A corporate culture must achieve goals as well as satisfy the needs of members in order for the organization to be effective. Culture influences how managers and employees approach problems, serve customers, react to competitors and carry out activities." (Harvey/Brown, 1996, p. 69). Being social creatures, human beings have affiliation needs. To the extent that technology interferes with these affiliation needs, as well as discourages the growth and development of in-person interpersonal skills, the corporate culture is adversely affected, resulting in reduced effectiveness in approaching problems, serving customers, reacting to competitors and carrying out activities.

**NOTE:** What should be central to any issue discussion is the acknowledgement or acceptance of the notion that other viewpoints exist and that the holders of those other viewpoints have undergone a thought process that lends credence to the position they hold

## Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 28, 2001

	<u>DEFENSE</u>		<u>PROSECUTION</u>
Attorney	<u>Student's Name</u>	Attorney	<u>Student's Name</u>
Attorney	<u>Student's Name</u>	Attorney	<u>Student's Name</u>
Witness 1.	<u>Student's Name</u>	Witness 1.	<u>Student's Name</u>
Role	<u>Bill Gates, CEO</u>	Role	<u>Terrence Deal, Author</u>
Witness 2.	<u>Student's Name</u>	Witness 2.	<u>Student's Name</u>
Role	<u>VP of I.T. Dept</u>	Role	<u>Herb Kelleher, CEO</u>
Witness 3.	<u>Student's Name</u>	Witness 3.	<u>Student's Name</u>
Role	<u>Michael Dell, CEO</u>	Role	<u>Head of HR Dept.</u>
Etc...			

### Process

1. Opening remarks by Judge.
2. Opening remarks by Prosecution attorney then Defense attorney (3 minutes each).
3. Examination and cross-examination of each witness (alternating: Defense witness 1. examined then cross-examined; Prosecution witness 1. examined and cross-examined etc.) **Each witness will be on the stand a maximum of 15 minutes (with examination not to exceed 9 minutes).**
4. Closing statement by Prosecution attorney then Defense attorney (No longer than 3 minutes each).
5. Jury vote.

**NOTE:** This courtroom activity is a forum of inquiry to gather information on an important OD issue, and is **not** designed to be argumentative, harassing or contentious. In keeping with this design, cross-examination will be done in the spirit to understand, **not** to embarrass, harass or otherwise humiliate or intimidate.