

Fostering strong oral communication skills for law student externs

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In a time and profession heavily dependent on written documents and electronic communication: email, texts and social media, it is especially important for law students -- most of whom grew up as "digital natives" -- to practice and improve their oral communication, conversational and presentation competencies. Many law schools require their students to be physically present in the field placement office for this reason. While in the office, they are able to observe daily workplace interactions and become better acclimated to a professional environment. For many students, the externship is their first exposure to a law office. For these reasons, externship directors encourage field supervisors to bring students to strategy meetings, listen in on conference calls and invite students to continuing education and networking events.



Provide a Variety of Opportunities

Depending on the type of law practice, every day offers students multiple to hone their oral communication skills. For example, in a non-profit organization, students may interview prospective clients, talk with social workers, or participate in a community training or coalition meeting. A judicial extern can be discuss her observation of court proceedings or present her research to the judge. If students are working under a student certification rule, the chance to prepare for and appear in court as a student is invaluable.

Opportunities for oral communication may be in person, either one-on-one or with groups of people; they may be over the telephone, or take place through technology such as Zoom, webinars or podcasts. Each setting exposes externs to different forms of communication and provides fertile opportunities for students to "test drive" different approaches.

Field supervisors may wish to assign projects that vary in length, such as a longer formal presentation along with shorter projects. Likewise, it is useful to ask students to speak "on the fly," such as turning to them during a (low-stakes) meeting for their input. This "spur of the moment assignment" allows them to speak extemporaneously, which can push students outside their "comfort zone" and therefore be a great educational opportunity.

Help Students Train and Prepare

When assigning a project that involves oral communication, give the student the chance to first observe the activity. For example, if the student will be interviewing a client, ask her to observe a client interview with an experienced practitioner before asking her to conduct one

on her own. Spend some time with the student afterwards to find out what she learned, and how she will use that information to prepare for her client interview. Here are some general questions to discuss to help the student prepare.

- What is the objective of the presentation? Convey information? Negotiate? Persuade?
- What is the preparation timeline? What are the interim steps and strategies? '
- Logistics: What visual aids do you need? How are you going to prepare and use those aids? What kind of technology are you using and are you comfortable using it? What is your backup plan if your technology fails?
- Moot the student. That will help them think about introductions and conclusions, tempo, when and how to handle questions, etc.

Encourage Self-Evaluation and Provide Feedback

Externships are designed to help students improve their ability to assess their own strengths, weaknesses, and progress rather than depend completely on a professor or work supervisor. Therefore, a helpful technique is to begin by asking the student for his own evaluation of his presentation or a conversation. Where did he think he did well and what could he have done better? What did he want his audience to learn?

Follow-up by sharing your observations. Let the student know what you think they did well and where they could improve. Provide supportive but constructive feedback on what they could consider doing differently next time.

Be Sensitive to Diversity

One benefit of a well-designed externship program is that it provides multiple opportunities for students to learn how to perform well in situations that are unfamiliar, or outside their "comfort zone." Those reasons differ from student to student. For example, it is considered "the norm" to have eye-to-eye contact in conversations in the United States, but in other countries and cultures, eye contact may be considered rude. Students who are introverts may prefer written over oral communication, even if oral proficiency is necessary to succeed in your workplace.

The law school externship faculty are eager to work with you on these issues or any other matters concerning the students.

Career Development: Networking and Interviewing

Many law students think networking is defined by awkward conversations around the appetizer table. However, being at ease (or appearing so) at professional events such as bar association meetings is important in many practice settings and a competency that you can

help the students practice. Take your interns to appropriate events, and introduce them. Help them prepare by explaining the purpose of the event and suggest questions they might ask. Observe them during the event. Afterwards, ask them about their experience and offer constructive feedback if appropriate.

Toward the end of the externship, ask the students to give a five-minute summary of their experience to you and other office colleagues. Preparing this short presentation will help them as they interview for other academic year and summer internships and post-graduate employment.
