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Breaking Linguistic Barriers: Establishing and Advocating Competitive Communication Skills through a Mock Trial

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Breaking Linguistic Barriers

Establishing and Advocating Competitive Communication Skills through a Mock Trial

Big iDeas Proposal

January 31, 2008

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Statement of Problem

Look at any trade magazine, vocational training guide, or job description and “good communication skills” is sure to be among the most desired traits by employers. According to a 2002 article in *Business Communication Quarterly*, the top five skills sought are: “1. communication (oral and written); 2. computer literacy; 3. interpersonal/social; 4. critical thinking/leadership (tied); and 5. teamwork.”¹ But do not think that the attractiveness of these skills is limited to corporate offices; even technical based business sectors value these same skills. According to a *Computerworld* survey published in 2007, writing ability, an understanding of business-process mapping, and an aptitude for public speak are the three most important soft skills information-technology employers desire.² Furthermore, according to more than 300 administrative professionals and 400 human resources managers polled by HR.com, OfficeTeam, and the International Association of Administrative Professionals (IAAP), sixty-seven percent say they would “hire an applicant with strong soft skills whose technical abilities were lacking; [however,] only [nine] percent would hire someone who had strong technical expertise but weak interpersonal skills.” The report also found that eighty-one percent of respondents listed “verbal communication” as “in demand” at their respective companies.³ Clearly, no matter the job or industry, two of the top skills employers are looking for in job candidates are to write and speak effectively.

But unfortunately, many job-hunters largely lack the communication skills they need to be competitive in a global labor market. According to a report released just last year by PrincewaterhouseCoopers, one of the world’s largest accounting and consultant firms, there is a “talent crisis in the western world.”⁴ Consequently, employers’ rising dissatisfaction with the quality of the labor force is applying pressure on traditional institutions of job preparation, especially public education. Like most other state legislatures, Texas law makers have responded to this demand for a better educated workforce by creating strict systems of accountability. School districts are closely

¹ Janette Moody, et al., “Showcasing the Skilled Business Graduate: Expanding the Tool Kit,” *Business Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (March 2002), 21-36.

² Thomas Hoffman, “Are You the Complete Package,” *Computerworld*, Vol. 41, No. 46 (November 12, 2007), 48-50.

³ Margery Weinstein, “You Softie,” *Training*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (June 2007), 18.

⁴ “Untitled,” *Utility Week*, Vol. 27, No. 30 (November 23, 2007), 32.

monitored in their performance on the state-wide TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) test and poor results potentially mean dire consequences, including state or funding cuts. In fact, a school district's score on the TAKS test is largely viewed as the sole criterion in assessing its instructional ability, imposing enormous pressure on teachers and administrators to prepare their students according to the TAKS test's parameters. Furthermore, all juniors in Texas public schools must pass the four subject areas (Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Mathematics) of the exit level exam in order to graduate from high school, giving teachers and students little choice but to pour most of their efforts into mastering these subjects.

Clearly, the introduction of standardized testing has irreversibly influenced public education, but have the strict standards and stringent system of accountability achieved its goal?—are students getting the “communication skills” employers desire? These are complex and multifaceted questions which scholars will continue to grapple with forever, but it is the aim of this energetic Big iDeas Team to propose a creative solution to at least one perceived shortcoming of the Texas educational system—the almost completely neglected skill of oral communication.

As already noted, employers are equally interested in oral communication skills as they are written ones. While writing proficiency is monitored by standardized testing in the fourth, seventh, tenth, and eleventh grades, the TAKS test does not gauge oral communication at all. Furthermore, Texas educational statutes are almost completely tacit when it comes to developing verbal communication skills. According to Texas Administrative Code (TAC), Title 19, Part II, Chapter 74, the minimum graduating requirements for a high school student is half a credit (or one semester) in speech. Even the Advanced and Recommended plans, which are designed to offer motivated students a more rigorous academic track through high school, are no better; they suggest only half a credit in speech as well.⁵

While it would be provincial to suggest a student could not garner oral communication skills outside a course dedicated to their specific development, in an age of Scantron and multiple-choice tests, it seems doubtful that significant time could be afforded their

⁵ Texas Administrative Code (TAC), Title 19, Part II, Chapter 74. Curriculum Requirements, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter074/index.html>, January 29, 2008.

progress. Undoubtedly, courses in the Language Arts, Social Studies, Sciences, and even Mathematics afford excellent opportunities for students to hone their verbal communication skills through class discussion and debate. Yet, when one considers the ubiquitous and compulsory challenge of mastering the multiple-choice, knowledge-based TAKS tests in these four different subject areas, the challenge of finding classroom time to develop verbal proficiency seems even greater. While some extracurricular debate/speech programs do exist, they are not prolific throughout Texas and serve only a very small student population.

Thus, it is the gap between the expectations of employers and the reality of public education curriculum—specifically, the missing component of verbal communication skills development—that this Big iDeas project attempts to single-out and correct.

Statement of Methodology

As already alluded, the pressures on public education in Texas are enormous. Conventional attempts to enter the debate of education reform are often met with mixed results—simply put, there are too many competing voices, too many entrenched interests, and too much red tape to act quickly and meaningfully at the political level to influence policy on the articulated problem (although we do hope to eventually involve state and local law makers). Instead, it is the belief of this energized student team that a proactive, creative, and direct solution is the best course of action: we will tackle the issue first-hand and develop oral communication skills in current Dallas ISD high school students through an after-school Mock Trial program at two locations : Woodrow Wilson High School and Hillcrest High School.

Mock Trial programs take a completely fictional case and challenge students to advocate one side or the other as if they were lawyers in a real courtroom. Using witness statements, pieces of evidence, criminal or civil statutes, and the Federal Rules of Evidence, students are forced to analyze texts, formulate sophisticated arguments, but most importantly, communicate those positions verbally in an often intense and stressful environment. Students learn about the judicial system, common methods of persuasion, and techniques to communicate ideas clearly and effectively. Hand motions, body language, theme development, voice volume, demonstrative aids—all these things are essential to a persuasive presentation and the mastery all of these skills are invaluable to job-seekers.

After vigorous recruitment and publicity work at both high school campuses, the Big iDeas Team will hold biweekly meetings to educate participant students in the skills necessary to try the case. With a combined thirteen years of Mock Trial experience, the Bid iDeas team is more than ready to take on this challenge. As members of SMU Mock Trial, we have prepared, led, and competed with teams at the highest levels of competition. The Big iDeas Team is confident in the energy, enthusiasm, experience, and skill it brings to this project and can not wait to begin.

The fictional case used for this program will be a previous case of the American Mock Trial Association (AMTA). One high school campus will be designated as the defense, the other as the prosecution/plaintiff. After about a month and a half of instruction, the two campuses will argue their case strategies against one another in a real-to-life trial simulation.

We anticipate each high school campus team to consist of ten participants; however, if there is more student interest, arrangements can be made to increase that number to fit any number of students (e.g., each campus could have two teams of ten, instead of one). The mini tournament between the two campuses will be held in a courtroom at SMU's law school. This event will be open to parents, teachers, school administrators, and the community at large.

Anticipated Results

It is difficult to conjecture what the results of our program will be. The students may be able to rise to the challenge quickly, showing that if given the chance, they can promptly develop the oral communication skills they need to be successful. However, the students could experience severe difficulty in grasping the concepts of verbal persuasion. Nevertheless, in either scenario, there appears to be a valid and strong case for there to be greater attention given to oral communication skills in school, and that is this project's ultimate goal. Though the project itself may only impact several families directly, its greater purpose is to use the experience as evidence for the need to provide students with this type of training.

In order to communicate this message effectively, a full report of the Big iDeas Team's experience and observations will be manifested through two mediums. First, every moment of this project will be videoed so that a multimedia presentation or documentary can be created. This media show will be presented in several different venues: the Big iDeas Progress Symposium in September, a DISD School Board meeting, and a meeting of the Dallas City Council. Second, we will produce a full written report of our experiences and observations, one that can be disseminated to local media outlets or modified to create formal petitions to state representatives and local lawmakers. Both mediums will use individual story lines (i.e., the personal narratives of the students we have helped) to powerfully emphasize the importance of equipping students the skills they need to succeed: communication skills. The goal of the Big iDeas Team is to generate awareness, in as many public forums as possible, for the need to integrate verbal communication skills into the high school curriculum.

Proposed Timeline

- Stage 1: *Publicity/Recruitment* February 22 – March 28
- During this stage, Big iDeas Team members will visit both high schools and work with teachers and school administrators to generate awareness of the program and recruit students. If permitted by the schools, presentations will be made during class periods, signs will be posted in hall ways, and two or three after school recruitment events (offering food, of course) will be held. Big iDeas Team members will also reach out to parents at PTA meetings during this time.
- Stage 2: *Instruction/Development* March 31 – May 12
- During this stage, the Big iDeas Team will meet twice a week with students at both campuses to help them prepare their oral arguments. Big iDeas Team members will provide instruction in how to create opening statements, direct examinations, cross examinations, closing arguments, etc.
- Stage 3: *Mock Trial Presentation* May 12 – May 15
- One day during this week, the student teams will present their arguments before their peers, family, and teachers. These arguments will be adjudicated by three local attorneys from the Dallas area. There will be a reception to follow the end of the tournament with an a small awards ceremony.
- Stage 4: *Creation of Message* May 15 – June 25
- After the mock trial simulation has taken place, the Big iDeas Team will begin and finish work in creating a full report through the two mediums explained above.
- Stage 5: *Project Presentation* June 26 – September

After the multimedia presentation and full written report are completed, the Big iDeas Team will begin sharing its findings with the Dallas community. On June 26th, we hope to share our observations with the Dallas School Board. On August 13th, we will present to the Dallas City Council, and in September, we hope to share our presentation at the Big iDeas Progress Symposium. During this same time we would send our findings to local media companies and state law makers.

Anticipated Budget

(assuming 22 students participate)

Binders (26 x \$3.39 ⁶)	\$ 88.14
Case Materials Printing (108pgs x 26 @ \$.10 per pg.)	\$ 280.80
Highlighters (2 x pack of 12 @ \$9.99)	\$ 19.98
Catalog Cases (2 x \$36.99)	\$ 73.98
Legal pads (4 x pack of 8 @ \$7.99)	\$ 31.96
Markers (3 x pack of 12 @ \$7.79)	\$ 23.37
Poster board (25 x \$0.30)	\$ 7.50
Report Covers (50 x \$1.49)	\$ 74.50
Custom Demonstrative Boards (4 x ~\$50)	\$ 100.00
Gas Money (16 trips to W. Wilson HS x 4.48 mi. @ \$.50 per mile ⁷)	\$ 35.84
(16 trips to Hillcrest HS x 3.03 mi. @ \$.50 per mile)	\$ 24.24
Video Camera Battery (1 x \$89.95)	\$ 89.95
Video Tripod (1 x \$24.99)	\$ 24.99
MiniDVD Tapes (2 x pack of 5 @ \$11.20)	\$ 22.40
Food for Recruitment and Some Meetings	\$ 300.00
Prizes for Winner of Mock Trial Simulation	\$ 120.00
Thank-you Gifts for Judges	\$ 100.00
Miscellaneous	\$ 100.00
TOTAL:	\$ 1,517.65

⁶ All office supplies according to OfficeDepot.com

⁷ According to the IRS Standard Mileage Rate, <http://www.irs.gov/formspubs/article/0,,id=178004,00.html>