

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

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American Bar Association  Division for Public Education

The Role of the Resource Person in Law-Related Education

by Katie Fraser

Teaching Law-Related Education

One of the aims of law-related education (LRE) is to equip young people with the skills they need to become good citizens. This does not just mean teaching students about the law by bombarding them with information from civics and government texts, hoping that they will somehow see the big picture of the role of law in society. LRE seeks to educate students for citizenship in a constitutional democracy by bringing law to life in the classroom. Good citizens need to be able to resolve disputes, discuss and analyze public issues, and think critically. Active learning experiences in LRE can help students gain these skills as they learn about the legal system. LRE can also foster students' interest in society and their will to participate actively in their community.

Why Are Resource People Important in Teaching LRE?

Since its inception in the 1960s, LRE has emphasized the use of expert resource people—including lawyers, judges and law enforcement officers—in the classroom. In the early 1980s, researchers established that the use of resource people drawn from the community was one of the factors that defined LRE programs that had a demonstrably positive impact on students. This kind of contact is particularly important for several reasons.

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For one thing, most students are unlikely to be exposed directly to the law and legal concepts during their everyday lives. Often their only direct contact with the law is gained through negative contact with police officers or through sensationalized or inaccurate television. Bringing students into contact with people who actually work in the legal profession can help remedy some common misconceptions, help students think actively about the positive aspects of the law, and put a human face on the legal system.

Resource people can also be of huge assistance in teaching content. Students need to learn a lot of information to understand how the legal system works, and it can be a dry area. Resource people can help students understand the nuts and bolts of the legal process in an interesting context, which enhances student learning. Lawyers, judges and police officers

What is LRE?

According to the Law-Related Education Act of 1978, LRE is “education to equip nonlawyers with the knowledge and skills pertaining to the law, the legal process, and the legal system, and fundamental principles and values on which these are based.” The U.S. Department of Education regulations supporting the act add that LRE helps students “respond effectively to the law and legal issues in our complex and changing society.”

can also help students understand substantive areas of the law. For example, a lawyer could explain to students the nature of their right to freedom of expression in school and discuss the 1969 case of *Tinker v. Des Moines*. Resource people can also give students some idea of what work in the legal world is really like. Through participatory teaching activities, resource people can help students learn that work in the real world involves hard decisions.

The involvement of community resource people in classrooms can help students to develop respect for authority and a sense of personal responsibility. Some research in the area of service learning has shown that exposure to role models in the community is beneficial to students (Westheimer and Kahne, 2000). A 1981 national study sponsored by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention found not only that law-related education can reduce delinquent behavior but also that the factor most critical to the success of LRE as a deterrent to juvenile delinquency was the use of outside resource people, especially police officers, in the classroom. Hunter and Johnson (1986) note, "Correlational analysis between practices and outcomes show the appropriate use of visitors (outside resource persons) in LRE classrooms to be more strongly associated with increased student attachment to teacher and school and with shifts from delinquent to non-delinquent peer associations than any other classroom practice or event."



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School Resource Persons and School Resource Officers

Not all school resource persons are school resource officers. Confused? Well, the term "school resource person" includes all those legal professionals who go into classrooms, including judges, lawyers and police officers. School resource officers, or SROs, are police officers. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence defines an SRO as "a certified law enforcement officer who is permanently assigned to provide coverage to a school or a set of schools. The SRO is specifically trained to perform three roles: law enforcement officer; law-related counselor; and law-related education teacher." Surveys have suggested that the primary role of SROs in elementary and middle schools is law-related education; in high schools their primary role is law enforcement (McDaniel, 2001).

Finally, an LRE class that never moved outside the four walls of the classroom might manage to teach students valuable information about the workings of a democracy, and perhaps even some skills in analysis and research, but even the best teacher in the world cannot transmit the will to participate in a community to students. Recent quantitative studies in Europe have shown that participation experiences (including participation in student government, extracurricular drama and music classes, and voluntary work) are a good predictor of political engagement during adult life (Menezes, 2003). School resource people and participatory learning can increase students' bonding to their school, their community, and the nation. And students who feel that they are part of a larger social group, with a connection to social and legal systems, are more likely to participate as citizens.

Between 1987 and 1997, LRE courses grew faster nationally than any other area of social studies. The success of LRE is due, at least in part, to the participation of lawyers, judges, police officers, and other professionals. These people help hook students and maintain their interest in legal education. However, despite the success of resource people in LRE courses, recent evaluations show that teachers who have been involved in law-related education for several years tend to use resource people less frequently than teachers who are new to LRE. One possible reason for this phenomenon is that, as teachers become more familiar and comfortable with the content of LRE, they feel less need for outside resources (Zimmer, 1994). Another possible reason is that, in the shadow of standards, teachers feel that they just don't have the class time to spare.

How Do Educators Use Resource People?

Virtually all LRE programs make use of expert resource people in diverse interactions with students, inside and outside the classroom. There are three main models of interaction, outlined below.

The Limited Interaction Model

The limited interaction model is defined by one-time visits by a lawyer, judge or police officer to the classroom in order to discuss a specific legal issue. For example, the State Bar of Nevada's speakers' bureau matches volunteer lawyers with schools, community groups, and civic organizations in order to speak about topics recommended by the Bar. Topics include law as a career, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, the courts, the jury system, and what students should know about the law when they turn eighteen. The State Bar of South Dakota's Young Lawyers Section conducts a program called Citizenship in Our Schools, which pairs volunteer young lawyers with classes to discuss rights and responsibilities, juvenile court, sexual harassment, drunk driving, and other issues of importance to students.

The Extended Interaction Model

The extended interaction model is defined by multiple visits by a resource person as part of an integrated experience within an ongoing civic education curriculum. For example, the Florida Law-Related Education Association has one of the most extensive programs promoting extended interactions of lawyers and judges with civic education programs. Volunteer attorneys teach a variety of topics, including the role of lawyers in society, the Constitution, and threats to the American justice system. Many lawyers also participate in extended, time-intensive experiences like coaching a mock-trial team or volunteering to assist with a youth court.

The On-site Model

The on-site model involves a good old-fashioned field trip to a law-related site, such as court buildings, correctional facilities, police departments, and government agencies. More than one visit may be made to the same location—for example, students might sit in on a civil trial, a criminal trial, and a small claims court, all in the same building. For example, the Connecticut Bar Association works in partnership with the Connecticut Consortium for Law and Citizenship Education, the Connecticut Judicial Branch, Connecticut Judges Association, and Connecticut Department of Education to coordinate the Connecticut Court Visitation Program, which offers attorney-guided court tours for students in grades 7–12. During tours, students have the opportunity to observe an arraignment, visit the jail where persons are held prior to their hearings, and, in some instances, attend a trial. Since the early 1980s, the program has served more than 57,000 students.

Making the Most of Resource People

Many resource people who are asked to visit a classroom rely on self-preparation in advance of their visits, with varying results. Others are given training by a state bar or other LRE organization—which might be anything from an hour to several days long. Some lawyers, judges and police officers are natural teachers and can talk to students about complex issues at a simple, age-appropriate level. Others tend to lecture students about law, an approach that is usually less successful. In short, the preparation and teaching methods of resource people vary widely.

Resource people in the classroom can be most helpful in educating students, reducing delinquency, and fostering citizenship skills when their teaching is integrated into the curriculum. The following outline contains some tips on how resource people, teachers, and students can get the most out of the experience. It focuses on the limited interaction model as an example, but precisely the same principles apply to the extended interaction and on-site models.

Preparing a Resource Person

Resource people can give a real-life perspective on something students have already learned about or add detail to a broad brush-stroke picture of the legal system. Resource people are so valuable because they are experts in a legal field and can answer detailed questions at length. The challenge is to get resource people to share what they know at an appropriate level for students in a way that will bring the law to life. There are many places a motivated resource person can go to find guidance on what, and how, to teach. The ABA provides some publications with lessons, tips and ideas for lawyers and judges going into classrooms (check out the resources section on page 6.) State bar associations and other LRE-sponsoring organizations also provide materials to resource people. The sidebar on page 5 contains one lawyer's tips on making the most of classroom presentations. It's a good idea to share this with new community resource people.

It is not only important to make the law lively and interesting; resource people can be most interesting, enlightening, and beneficial to students when their contribution is integrated into the curriculum. This is important to maximize student learning. For example, a civics class studying the civil rights movement will not benefit greatly from a visiting trial lawyer talking about trial procedure and the right to silence; they will get much more out of the class if that trial lawyer brings his expertise to bear on a discussion of the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. The match between the resource person's visit and the curriculum is even more important in the age of standards, when teachers need to identify with precision what standards student instruction meets. To accomplish these goals, it is vital for teachers to prepare resource people before a visit. Teachers can answer a number of questions: What are the goals and

objectives of the unit being taught? What topic areas have been covered so far? What concepts and vocabulary are students familiar with? What follow-up activities will take place after the resource person's visit? Ideally, outside expertise should immediately correlate with classroom coursework.

Of course, sometimes it isn't possible to slot a resource person's visit into the curriculum at exactly the right moment. Visitors must usually fit their appearances into a busy work schedule. But teachers and resource people can work together to come up with a lesson that will work for students and connect to other material in their course. It might mean focusing on a single case or a single aspect of the legal system that the class has just covered. Or the class might come up with questions based on their class studies that they would like the resource person to explain.

The other important step is for teachers to talk to resource people about what kinds of learning strategies are likely to be most appropriate for the classroom. Resource people want their contribution to student learning to be meaningful and effective. Visitors need to know that a straight lecture format is unlikely to hold students' attention for an entire class. Resource people usually welcome suggestions for participatory approaches they might take—from something as simple as a question-and-answer session to a roundtable discussion, some role-playing, or a brainstorming session.

Teachers and resource people also need to cooperate when it comes to the style of the presentation. Students are likely to be most receptive to resource people who present a balanced point of view on the legal system. For example, students will give most credibility to a picture that acknowledges that the system is not infallible, but which does not unduly emphasize the horror stories.

Preparing Students

Students also need to be prepared for a resource person's visit, again with the goal of integrating the visit into what students have learned and what students will learn after the visit.

Preparing Resource People

Imagine you are going into a classroom to teach for the very first time. How would you feel? A little nervous? Unsure whether you would be able to talk to kids on their level? Worried you might not be able to establish discipline in the class? Lawyers, judges and police officers often feel the same way. Teachers need to give resource people some basic information before a visit, such as how many students there are, how old they are, what their ability levels are, and how long the class is. Teachers should let visitors know that they will be in the classroom during the visit and will take care of class discipline.

Teachers need to explain who the resource person is, the nature of his or her job, and his or her area of expertise. Teachers can help students understand how the resource person will supplement what they have learned about the legal system and give students ideas about how the resource person could illuminate certain abstract concepts. For example, a judge might be able to talk about how judicial independence has an impact on what she does every day, and lawyers can bring dull court procedure to life. Teachers can also encourage students to form some general topical questions, to encourage them to think about what they want to get from the resource person's visit. To make sure students have a vested interest in paying attention and getting involved, teachers may also want to ask students to complete a class exercise based on the visit—perhaps a personal journal record or a research exercise into an issue mentioned by the resource person.

Debriefing After a Visit

Debriefing students after a resource person's visit is another important way in which the resource person's visit can be integrated into the class curriculum. What were the major issues discussed by the resource person? How did the resource person's lesson add to what students had learned? Did students see things from a different perspective after the class? What further questions do they have after the resource person's visit?

If the resource person advocated a particular point of view, it is important to bring in the other side in the debriefing discussion. Teachers might want to ask students if they thought the resource person had any particular biases. It might be a good idea to bring in another speaker with a different perspective the next time.

Evaluating the Class

Sometimes visits by resource people are a wild success and contribute substantially to student learning; sometimes they are not so successful, and students are left wondering why they had to sit through something that they see as irrelevant. It is important to replicate the successes and avoid the failures, and evaluations are vital in identifying what went right or wrong. Teachers should ask their students to evaluate the visit, formally or informally. Was it relevant? Was it interesting? Did it give students a new or different perspective on what they had learned in class? Teachers should summarize student feedback, add any of their own thoughts, and send this evaluation to the resource person with a letter of thanks. Resource people should also take time to evaluate the success of the visit. Did the students respond? Was discipline a problem? Was the lesson well prepared? Was the activity too long or too short? Did participatory learning experiences work well? What could be done to make the experience more effective next time?

Twelve Hints for Lawyers

by Leslie A. Williamson, Jr.

During the past several years, I have addressed several hundred Connecticut public school students on student rights and responsibilities. My discussions with these students have been an educational experience for me and, I trust, for the students.

Based upon my “hit and run” classroom experiences, I was asked to prepare some hints for members of the Connecticut Bar on talking to public school students. The following, not in any particular order, are my suggestions.

1. Know your subject.

This is an obvious hint but nonetheless an extremely important one. Spend some time reviewing material prior to addressing students. Don't underestimate the breadth of their knowledge, their awareness of the law and their interest in the law.

2. Have a plan but be prepared to vary from it.

Before you walk into the classroom, you should know what you want to say and how you are going to say it. Establish a presentation outline. However, the more interest you generate, the more probable it is that you will get “off track.” Don't be afraid of this, but don't put yourself in the position where you are unable to get back on track.

3. Stress responsibilities as well as rights.

You are a guest of the local board of education. The role of your host is to provide students with an education. Your discussion will be integrated within the general goal of the board. Therefore, remember that you are in the school as a lawyer-educator, not as a student advocate. Your presentation should stress responsibilities as well as rights. Don't forget to highlight the responsibilities of a board of education.

4. Control the classroom.

Don't expect a teacher to control the classroom for you. When you are in front of the class, you will be tested, both on your knowledge of the subject and your management of the students. If a student misbehaves, do something—don't ignore the situation. Don't wait for the teacher to act, because oftentimes the teacher won't.

5. Talk with the students, not at them.

Most students are interested in the law. They will engage in meaningful discussion if given the opportunity. Give them that opportunity! While you may want to spend the entire period lecturing, it is strongly recommended that you don't.

6. Don't act like a lawyer.

Certainly you should not take this hint too seriously. However, remember you are not addressing a judge but rather a group of students. Talk with them in words they can understand and take time to explain words or concepts that might not be readily known to your audience. Integrate concepts.

7. Don't “BS” the students.

If you know the answer to a question, answer it. If you don't, tell the students that you don't. If you try to “BS” the students, they will know it very quickly and your credibility will be lost.

8. Use hypotheticals.

Use examples to illustrate points you are trying to make. Develop hypotheticals from your imagination or from recent court decisions.

9. Watch your time.

As interesting as you will be, most of the students' attention span will parallel the class schedule. When the bell rings, they want out! Know when the class is over and time your presentation accordingly.

10. Work the class and work with the teacher.

I never lecture, nor do I stand in one place. Move around, interact with students, get each one involved. Talk with the teacher before class to determine which material should be emphasized, the background of the students, and what will be done with the subject matter after you leave.

11. Don't accept what “is”—discuss why it “is.”

Students will often base answers on personal experiences or school policy. What “is” may not be correct. Challenge students to determine why something “is” and ask whether what “is” is appropriate.

12. Don't get caught in the middle of a school controversy.

Students will often ask you to determine whether actions by a teacher or administrator are appropriate. Don't get placed in the position of making a judgment on the appropriateness of action taken by an educator or on a pending issue. Try to articulate both sides of the issue.

Final Thoughts

In the shadow of *No Child Left Behind*, teachers are under ever-increasing pressure to focus on the basics—reading, writing and arithmetic. The resulting time crunch has prompted many teachers to cut back on some activities, including visits by resource people. But this is a mistake. Research suggests that resource people can become positive role models for children and help deter juvenile delinquency. And well prepared, well briefed resource people can teach students content, skills, and awaken the impulse to participate in democracy.

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Further Resources

- Lawyers, judges, and other volunteers teaching LRE in the classroom can find tips, resources, sample programs and personal stories at the website of the Division for Public Education at <http://www.abanet.org/publiced/volunteer/home.html>.
- You can find a good summary of tips for resource persons in the Youth for Justice manual “LRE in Juvenile Justice Settings”, which is available at www.crfc.org/pdf/lrejj.pdf.
- The Constitutional Rights Foundation is currently piloting a program called “Courtroom to Classroom,” as a part of which a judge and two attorneys visit a classroom three times per year. For more information about the program and materials, contact Keri Doggett at (213) 316-2115 or at keri@crf-usa.org.
- Street Law provides a curriculum for police officers who work in schools, called “Street Law for School Resource Officers,” at <http://www.streetlaw.org/content.asp?ContentId=179>.
- School resource officers can find more information at the website of the Center for Prevention of School Violence at <http://www.ncdjdp.org/cpsv/sro.htm>.
- The National Association of School Resource Officers provides information on conferences and training for school resource officers at <http://www.nasro.org/home.asp>.



Youth for Justice

To learn more about Youth for Justice, the national coordinated law-related education program, its efforts to incorporate effective delinquency prevention strategies in LRE programs, and its work with law enforcement personnel as resource persons, contact individual consortium member listed below.

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