



Using Internet-based Guest Interviews as a Classroom Activity

Introduction

I typically host guest speakers in my undergraduate Agribusiness Law course. While students report enjoying the activity, using guest speakers can be a challenging administrative task. Difficulties include finding speakers who have time to prepare a presentation and travel to campus, scheduling speakers, and engaging students in guest speaker sessions. To combat these challenges, I used an online video conferencing tool to bring guest speakers into the classroom. Rather than asking guests to give a presentation, I had students interview the guests. My expectation was that video conferencing would reduce the time commitment for speakers and ease scheduling problems, while the interview approach would increase student learning and engagement.

Procedure

I scheduled the activity at the beginning of the semester to introduce students to agricultural law and the roles attorneys play in the agricultural arena. Six attorneys accepted my invitation, each representing a different legal career such as working in small and large private practice, non-governmental organizations, academia, and private corporations. After sharing names and job titles of each guest, I allowed students to choose a guest to interview and organized students into groups according to guest selected. Groups met during class to prepare for the interviews, which were conducted on a separate day. I provided each group with information about its guest and encouraged the groups to conduct additional research on the guest and the guest's employer. At the end of the group meeting, each student had to submit a question to ask the guest. One student in each group volunteered or was chosen as the group leader and was responsible for compiling the questions and later conducting the guest interview.

Because I had familiarity with the platform, I used Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>) for the guest interviews. Zoom is an internet-based videoconferencing tool that allows linked parties to see and hear one another. Paid subscription plans are available, but I was able to use a no-cost plan, which allows unlimited one-to-one videoconferencing. Each guest had a computer with internet access, a camera and a microphone, all required for the Zoom application. An Information Technology staff member taught me how to use Zoom with the classroom equipment and helped me run a practice test with each guest. We conducted the practice tests without incident.

On interview day, I connected by internet to each guest for a 15-minute interview at a specified time. The students viewed the guest on a large projection screen and the guest could see the students on the guest's computer screen. I introduced each guest to the designated student interviewer, who conducted a 10-minute interview using the group members' questions. Other students had the opportunity to ask additional questions in the remaining time.

At the end of class, I conducted a "minute paper" assignment that required students to write about "one new or unexpected thing you learned about agricultural law or agricultural attorneys as a result of the guest interviews." I led a discussion on the same topic to conclude the class session, and also asked students to share immediate reactions to the activity. Each group leader submitted the group's interview questions with each student's contribution noted. The minute paper and interview question counted toward a student's final grade.

Assessment

I observed a moderate level of student excitement about the interviews. Student evaluations supported my observation. In response to an evaluation question asking students to explain three of the most beneficial class activities, 43 of 64 students (67%) noted the guest interviews. Explanations for their choices included:

- “Liked getting to see the real world.”
- “Very cool to talk to someone in Washington, DC.”
- “A nice switch from lectures.”
- “Made me more interested in the class.”
- “I like that we got to ask questions instead of them do[ing] all the talking.”
- “Great not to look at more PowerPoint.”
- “All professors should do this to give us a break from lectures.”

In response to the “minute paper” assignment, students offered the following:

- “I didn’t even know there were agricultural lawyers.”
- “I had no idea big farms have attorneys.”
- “It made me see that being an attorney is more than doing trials like on TV.”
- “Some of them were even funny, which I didn’t expect.”
- “They really can make a difference in what happens to farms.”
- “I didn’t know they had to go to school so long.”
- “Agricultural law is really diverse.”

Managing the interviews was more challenging than I expected, not due to the technology but because I scheduled interviews back-to-back and was not entirely graceful in juggling multiple connections. In my follow up with guests, each reported the technology as easy to use, liked being able to see the class and appreciated simply interacting with the students without any preparation.

I noted several improvements to classroom instruction. Using the internet allowed me to expand my speaker base and bring in guests from across the country. Many of the comments suggested that students gained a greater appreciation for law and attorneys, an unanticipated result. I observed a much higher level of student participation in comparison to a live guest speaker with a prepared presentation, a difference I attribute to the student-driven interview approach and the use of active group work. Despite these strategies, a handful of students did not appear to engage in the group work and did not submit interview questions. One reason for this result may have been the large size of the groups, which averaged around ten students.

The internet-based guest interviews will remain on my course syllabus, with a few minor changes. I’ll continue to use the Zoom application for the interviews but will schedule breaks between consecutive interviews to avoid complications with technology management. To broaden learning impact, I’ll conduct guest interviews throughout the semester rather than compressing them into one class and I’ll select guests with specific content expertise to coincide with topics studied later in the semester. Offering more interviews will also allow me to reduce the group size, which could enhance student participation.

Submitted by:

Peggy Kirk Hall
The Ohio State University