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Using Visuals to Enhance Student Learning

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Using Visuals to Enhance Student Learning

By Karin Mika

It is no secret that we are a visual society. That's not to say that we have become a visual society. We have always been one. That's why movies have always been popular, why television easily replaced radio as the entertainment medium of choice, and why we prefer to attend the symphony as opposed to merely listening to a recording. Despite the fact that we are so visually focused, almost every legal textbook in existence has no pictures in it, and, to the extent that there are pictures, those pictures might be of a



judge, a party, or a line drawing of how an accident might have taken place. I can't think of any pictures I have ever seen in a doctrinal coursebook that weren't in black and white.

Many Legal Research texts have been better about including pictures, but these pictures are just informational and typically depict no more than a screen shot of a particular source—appropriate and effective given the task to be learned, but not very interesting reading.

I think that most law professors have been told that they need to incorporate more visuals and multimedia in their presentations for purposes of engaging their students, but, for many, that goal means they put notes on a document camera, or write on a smart board, or put key points into a PowerPoint presentation. These efforts may help to keep the attention of the students better than a lecture with chalkboard accompaniment, but they really add little to the depth of learning that is possible.

One of the things that we tend to take for granted as law professors is that students have a base of universal knowledge similar to our own. It is the unavoidable generation gap that becomes greater the longer we teach and the younger our students get. What we

may have thought was a relevant and clever allusion at the starts of our careers is archaic in the minds of those we are teaching.

Moreover, to understand basic concepts included in most legal textbooks, students must read cases about, among other historical features, cranks shafts, horse drawn buggies, train platforms, and cow catchers. Frankly, the law is often developed through a world that current students do not recognize—a world where women were not entitled to play sports in high school, where trains, rather than airplanes, were the most prevalent form of travel, where we regarded the employer/employee relationship as Master and Servant, and where there was no global economy or internet. Thus, almost all of the cases that are studied in our textbooks are somewhat foreign to our students, and many of the cases that students must invariably find in research involve mystical references to concepts that no longer have any application in our day-to-day lives. Despite this limitation, students are expected to not only understand the concepts, but to understand how the cases apply to modern factual situations.

Thus, to better educate our students, it is not just important to use visuals to engage our students in the classroom experience, but to educate them about relevant context. This mandate is especially critical for many of our non-American students, who are unfamiliar not only with all of American History, but also with various contemporary cultural references and American idioms.

Ralph Brill of Chicago-Kent is a master at incorporating visuals into classroom presentations and exams. As a Torts Professor, Brill provides a visual context

for the cases he teaches. Rather than explain what a railroad turntable is, Brill provides a video demonstrating how it is used. He also uses pictures of the places

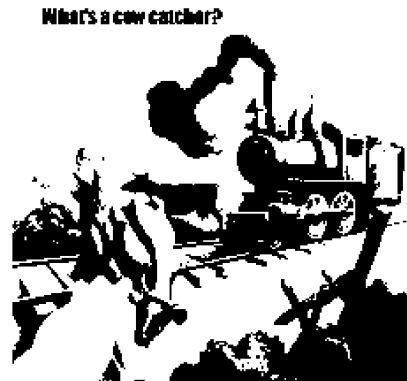
where torts occurred and even uses Google Earth to show the exact layout of the geographic area so that students can better connect to the scenario they are reading about.

His use of visuals is not limited to explaining concepts that are no longer common. He also uses visuals to

give context and to enable students to visualize certain situations. This effort is especially important on an exam, and Ralph uses pictures to demonstrate concepts and to bring his hypotheticals to life.

I have also employed visuals for many years in teaching Legal Writing and Legal Research. I attempt to engage the students in the classroom experience by incorporating videos and PowerPoint slides. For supplemental study, I have made great use of video tutorials already available and have filmed a few of my own. But I also incorporate visuals so that the students are able to connect better to the cases. I have also used visuals and other video clips to replace the “canned” fact situation that is typical in setting out hypotheticals. On various occasions, I have used video news clips and have used an episode of *House* for the basis of an informed consent factual scenario. Last year, I assigned a trademark infringement issue as the basis for a motion and used visuals to demonstrate just what the marks at issue looked like. The students also used visuals in their motions and actually made arguments that incorporated pictures of disputed trademarks.

This year, in an effort to stay away from



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giving students a canned fact scenario, I strung together a couple of videos of ski mishaps and asked the students to pull from those videos the essential information leading to the cause of action. Without a doubt, the students have been paying closer attention to what happened, and they are even studying the videos to ensure that they are including all necessary facts.

Anyone who has ever watched a major trial on television understands the importance of the visuals that go along with the presentation. A trial attorney's job is to have the jury both see and feel what happened. Difficult concepts must be simplified, and, quite often, a simple

picture is worth so much more than a complicated verbal explanation.

There is no reason that law schools should be any different. Visuals not only explain concepts that some of us assume our students already understand, but they immerse the student in the entirety of what otherwise might seem like a distant and non-relevant experience. In all, the use of visuals has made the legal learning experience more enjoyable and more relevant for my students.

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