



Order in court

Mock trials help aspiring barristers to develop their skills. By encouraging the appraisal of different viewpoints, could they also help students with DSE preparation?

STANDING in the courtroom dock, Jan Wilson starts sweating. He stands accused of murdering his own employee after an argument, and Wilson knows the case against him is strong. His own defence lawyers think his chances are slim at best. But the worst part is that after the trial is over, he will have to do it all over again – but next time, as the prosecuting lawyer.

What is going here? After all, Hong Kong courtrooms do not retry cases on a whim, and defendants certainly do not switch sides. But in a mock trial courtroom, such situations happen all the time. At a mock trial, the aim is not for

judges to determine who is guilty, but rather for students to practise their own advocacy skills.

What is a mock trial?

AT a mock trial, students act as barristers and witnesses in a fictional courtroom. Before trial, teams are given the case problem, and must scrutinise witness statements, photographs, maps, and documents to identify key evidence, author examinations, and build a convincing case. When the trial begins, barristers must question opposing witnesses and make speeches to the jury, while witnesses must become their characters and answer tough questions.

Learning more than just law

WHY would busy Hong Kong students accept such a tough challenge? Some students look to mock trials as a teaser for a law career, a way to see if their skills and interests might match. Others are simply looking for a challenge. But more and more students are realising that mock trials are not solely for pre-law or debate students. They can be valuable training for the difficult DSE exams.

Examining both sides of the issue

In a mock trial, teams must prepare to argue either side of the case: prosecution – arguing to convict, or defence – arguing to set the accused free. In some cases, teams might not even know which side they are on until only a few minutes before the trial. To succeed under such conditions, students must learn to see all sides of an argument and adjust their thinking accordingly. When Liberal Studies exams ask students to think and respond critically to questions about both sides of the immigration debate, or wealth inequality in Hong Kong,

mock trial competitors will thus be well-prepared to respond.

Impromptu advocacy

Real-life barristers must constantly think on their feet. They must be able to force a witness to answer difficult questions, argue over evidence with the opposing team and respond to questions and demands from a judge, all in a convincing and courteous manner. Mock trials train students to think and speak at the same time, adjusting their questions and responses to suit the situation at hand. These skills are critical for the DSE English oral exam, and especially the impromptu section.

Identifying and analysing key evidence

Mock trial cases require students to examine charts, reports, legal documents, and written statements from eyewitnesses, experts, and accused criminals. Sorting through all of this is a challenge and takes careful work. Eventually, students can quickly identify key evidence on their own – everything from hidden costs in a financial statement to a few biased words in a police report – and integrate them into examinations and statements. This training helps students develop the same skills needed for the Liberal Studies essay, which requires students to identify and select data that supports their views.

Awareness of social problems

Mock trial cases take place in Hong Kong and often feature the same social issues from the front pages of newspapers, with past cases touching upon everything from urban development to gambling addiction. It forces them to think about how real people are affected by social problems and crime.