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Staying Connected: The Use of Synchronous Video in Higher Education

As the pace of life races to greater speeds, it is increasingly important to stay connected. Successful professionals and businesses know that it is imperative to have constant access to the affairs of their respective field on a global scale. As businesses, especially educational institutions, expand to include a larger consumer base, they must also find a way to increase communication within their own institution or company. Clearly, the sun has virtually set on the era of letter writing, as well as the comparably quick age of chat rooms. A new era has taken over: video communication. Even in the early years of the Twenty-first century, video communication was being utilized, mostly in relation to video conferencing or other small-scale video chats. Although the technology of that period was primitive and cumbersome, it opened the doors to endless possibilities. Products like Skype (the equivalent of making video phone calls to anywhere in the world) soon spread like wild fire throughout the world. What is most impressive, though, is the evolution and current state of distance video education. In the past decade, the technology used for video education has become more sophisticated and is gaining in popularity in many of our nation's most prestigious institutions. It provides the ability to connect schools, not only to their various satellite campuses, but also to universities around the world. To illustrate the growth of distance video education, this paper describes various case studies from the year 2001 until 2010, ending with a focus on Penn State Law School's experience with video education.

Because this technology is quite new and not necessarily common knowledge, it is important to understand exactly what distance video education is. First, there are two different types of video education: synchronous and asynchronous. Asynchronous video education does not occur in real time and is not interactive. This type of instruction can be delivered in many different ways. One “old-school” example of this is when a professor pre-records a lecture for a day when he or she must miss a class, thus leaving instructions for a student or teaching assistant to play in lieu of a live lecture. Modern equivalents include podcasts, videos posted to YouTube, streaming video on course web pages or institutional intranets, and even mobile applications. The other type of video education is synchronous and is like a much more sophisticated form of Skype or other video chat software. The feed exists in real time (it is live) and is interactive. This is the form of distance video education that I will be discussed in this paper. Of course, the details of synchronous video instruction, some of which will be discussed throughout this paper, are quite complex and vary from case to case and institution to institution.

In 2001, Washburn University Law School of Topeka, Kansas, joined forces with Shepard Broad Law School of Nova Southeastern University in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, to facilitate an early version of a distance video education seminar. Their goal was to “stimulate an exchange of ideas that was not possible in the traditional classroom” (Smith 178). This experimental seminar used very sophisticated technology—for that time period; the mode of transmission was compressed video technology, which sent the signal through phone lines, recorded the sessions on a VCR, and utilized two monitors displaying the distant classroom. Although the technology in this area was quite advanced in 2001, it was still primitive enough to involve a consistent lag time (Smith 182-3). Not surprisingly, current technology has advanced much further than what was used in this instance, so lag time is no longer a significant issue; yet there

are different sorts of exigencies that still need refining. Thus, it is necessary to mention that until this sort of technology becomes as omnipresent as a basic DVD player (which still has its issues), faculty and students utilizing distance video education must remain open to its still-evolving potential.

Even with the technological issues of this 2001 experience, the overall results were positive and the students, faculty, and the researcher found that the use of synchronous video added “value” to the seminar. But, in order for the course to run smoothly, the instructors found it necessary to update their pedagogical practices. Thus, Smith quite logically concludes that the focus should be placed on student participation and interaction. She states that “the single most important skill all distance educators must develop is a method to make their students active participants” (Smith 186). She notes further that the instructors actively engaged the students and that they were more than willing to participate and that frequently there were “spirited exchanges” between students at the remote and live sites. Furthermore, this article points out that in both this case and in other studies, it has been proven that distance education does not negatively impact students’ learning capacity (Smith 184-6). Smith also offers an optimistic approach to the added workload of the instructors of such courses, noting that it allows for pedagogical creativity and close contact with professors at different universities. Therefore, it appears that the open-minded exchange that existed between students and professors worked to ensure that, technological glitches aside, the seminar was both successful and enjoyable for all. Once again, one must keep in mind that this study was conducted in 2001, when technology was not nearly as advanced as it is today.

Approximately four years after Charlene Smith's Washburn-Shepard study, Ellen S. Podgor, Associate Dean of Faculty Development and Distance Education at Stetson Law, documented her own experiences teaching a synchronous video class. In her article, she reveals many of the issues that must be addressed when a school considers distance video education. Like Smith's seminar, her's was a joint effort between two law schools: the Brandeis School of Law (in Louisville, KY) and Georgia State University College of Law. In order to prepare for the course, she created a 16-item "Course Planning Checklist." The list covered issues such as, but not limited to: registration at different schools, grading methods, time zone differences and calendar conflicts, office hours, technological issues, providing ability for students with disabilities, access to a syllabus, and exam proctoring (Podgor 266).

The need for a refined pedagogical plan is also a point of focus in Podgor's article. In particular, she comments on the adjustments required to teach such a course:

It requires a level of multi-tasking above that needed when teaching a typical law school class. Depending on the technology being used, it may require looking at students both in the classroom and also at the other location who are on a screen. Even when fortunate enough to have the students at the other location on a screen at the back of a room, the loss of immediate eye contact, the ability to look up at the two groups at once, and the ability to call on students stretches the normal approach used in a classroom. (270)

Eventually, she concludes that she would teach a distance course again, but only with the ability to make specific changes. She notes that it is critical to have IT support on a standby basis at both/all class locations, which is prudent advice that, as will be shown later, future

cases (like Penn State Law School) adhere to. She also suggests that it would be wise to offer video distance education in upper-level courses only, to limit the number of students in the remote location, and to facilitate a meeting between the professor and the students at the remote location, either at the beginning of the course or more frequently throughout its duration (Podgor 271). Her concluding statement refers to the growing field of distance learning and how “important [it is] to make decisions that focus on what is best for the students” (Podgor 272). Although her course was taught as recently 2005, making it a bit dated, her experience and subsequent advice are valuable and have been heeded by other institutions using this technology.

An example of a more recent utilization of synchronous video education is that employed by Penn State University’s Dickinson School of Law, which has been experimenting with this technology since 2006. Today, it is “the only completely unified two-location law school in the United States. The ABA also designated [the] law school as the national pilot project for reassessing all ABA standards pertaining to ‘distance education’” (McConaughay, Global Legal Education). It’s reports on the subject of synchronous video education are extensive and honest; for, although it lists several issues with the system, it concludes that this type of education has an overall positive effect on both the students and the university (McConaughay, Global Legal Education).

As mentioned earlier, this technology is still relatively new, and schools using it must go through a continual process of trial and refinement. For example, due to the limited “cone of vision” of the remote location camera, at Penn State Law School, there has been a cap placed on class size (no more than thirty-five students) and color-coated seating implemented in

video-equipped classrooms so that every student may be seen on the screen. However, even if a student sits outside the camera's range of vision, if a student presses the designated microphone button on his/her desk (used for individual student input), the camera automatically focuses on the speaker (McConnaughay, Letter). Also, through the years, some professors have mentioned the lack of clarity of the monitors impedes a critical instructional element—it is essential for the instructor be able to clearly see the facial expressions of his or her remote students. To deal with concern, the Law School, after the completion of construction at its original campus site (Carlisle, PA) and at the main campus location (University Park, PA), installed jumbo high definition screens in all of its video-equipped classrooms (McConnaughay, Letter). As a result, faculty feedback has indicated the following:

The increased size of projection screens at the rear of each classroom to up to 120", measured diagonally, has proven a prudent decision since professors are better able to distinguish their students. This coupled with high-definition video has essentially provided a "virtual" extension in size of the classroom space, effectively bringing the remote section into the originating space with remarkable clarity. (McConnaughay, Global Legal Education)

What has been noted in earlier case studies as a drawback of distance video education is its inability to truly simulate the live classroom experience; yet with the advancement of technology, this issue has been resolved and an extended "virtual" classroom can, indeed, be created.

So, it appears that the issues Penn State Law School faces when dealing with video education are not technology related. Rather, they are related to the "scope" of synchronous

video education or AV Telecommunication Technology Program, as Penn State Law School calls it, to satisfy the needs of all students and faculty. This is so because, apparently, there is “still a perception among students and applicants that remote participation is less desirable than in-person participation and among faculty that teaching with a remote AV telecomm section is less desirable than teaching without one” (McConnaughay, Letter). Although the school is currently unsure how to completely resolve the issues of personal preference and individual learning needs, it is important that it has recognized this problem and plan to address it until a solution has been reached. This element of video education, in fact, is probably one of the reasons why its use is still in such a state of flux.

Regardless of its slight instability, the program has massive benefits for its students. The software used automatically records the classes and sends them to an intranet database so that an absent student can access the video recording of the missed class from anywhere in the world. Penn State Law School has also implemented technology that allows data and PC images (like power point presentations) to be displayed simultaneously with the live video feed of the classroom (McConnaughay, Global Legal Education). The Law School requires that AV telecomm classes only be offered to upper-level students, allowing the first-year law students to be integrated into the community in a traditional and comfortable manner. Faculty training is an element as continual as the upgrading of technological material, so that professors always feel comfortable with the technology and are up-to-date with any advancements. As well as training, there is much emphasis placed on faculty-student interaction. Many professors frequently travel between the two locations and make themselves available before and after classes, by email, and even check in regularly by phone (McConnaughay, Letter). Furthermore,

in order to know precisely how to refine the system, each class is given a targeted survey, which is meticulously reviewed and considered in each update of the system (McConnaughay, Global Legal Education).

The pervasive use of video telecommunications allows the campus to expand physically (it exists in two locations), while remaining connected and gives students the opportunity to strengthen their interaction with their peers from another campus. Furthermore, the connection potential ranges outside of the university and even outside of the nation as the Dean of the Law School points out: “our system has enabled us to simultaneously include in several of our classes students and faculty from top law schools in South Africa, Canada, Europe and Australia” (McConnaughay, Global Legal Education).

As a type of global communication, the greatest benefit of synchronous video education is its ability to connect students, some of whom are otherwise unable to study abroad, to those in other countries throughout the world. This technology is an innovative and effective way of encouraging students from very different cultural backgrounds to interact with one another and to move beyond the stereotypes that constantly serve as barriers of understanding between people of various cultures. It is through such technology that humankind is rapidly becoming a seamlessly interconnected global community, thus it is imperative for higher education to reflect this in its various curricula. For students to thrive in a “connected” world, communication skills, knowledge of cultural diversity, and global awareness are critical components that must be practiced and refined in the microcosm of an educational environment before students are thrust into the larger global community.

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