Distance Learning Innovations in Legal Education


Summary: Legal education will, in short order, need to adapt institutionally and pedagogically to changes brought on by rapidly advancing video conferencing and distance learning technologies. Even now, the use of these technologies is rapidly increasing in various programs of legal education. This project will assess these developments by reporting on innovative video conferencing and distance learning developments at the Dickinson School of Law at Penn State University and at North Carolina Central Law School. In addition, the collaborative group will oversee the implementation of four legal education-based distance learning experiments that explore the extent to which a fundamental set of legal skills can be effectively taught using distance methods. Two of these experiments will be completed by April, 2011; the other two will take place during fall semester 2011 and completed by early December, 2011. Consistent with the likely impact of these emerging technologies, this project brings together contributions from skills instructors, clinical faculty, educational technologists, IT specialists, and legal practitioners located in diverse locations and at a number of different law schools.

Point Person: Larry C. Farmer

Participants:

- Larry Farmer, Marion G. Romney Professor of Law, BYU J. Reuben Clark Law School
- Allison Rice, Duke Law School, Senior Lecturing Fellow
- Grace D’Alto, Practicing Lawyer and Adjunct Interviewing & Counseling instructor at Dickinson School of Law, Carlisle campus, Penn State University
- Matt Gardner, Penn State Dickinson School of Law, Assistant Dean for Technology Policies
- Wayne Miller, Duke Law School, Assistant Dean for Academic Technologies
- Greg Clinton, North Carolina Central Law School, Director of Information Technology
- Will Monroe, LSU Paul M. Herbert Law Center, Head of Instructional Technology
- Megan Welch, Practicing Lawyer & Adjunct Legal Interviewing & Counseling Instructor at the Houston Law Center
- Hervé Depow, University of Ottawa Law School, Interviewing & Counseling Instructor
- Ellen Zweibel, University of Ottawa Law School, Professor of Law and Vice-Dean English Program
- Bob Seibel, Visiting Professor of Law, California Western School of Law
- Vance Everett, Media Services Director, BYU J. Reuben Clark Law School

Action Items:

- Prepare a report by April, 2011 on the pervasive use of video conferencing and distance learning methods to thoroughly integrate the University Park and Carlisle campuses of Dickinson Law School, Pennsylvania State University.
• Prepare a report by April, 2011 on the rapidly increasing use of virtual classroom technology at North Carolina Center Law School. The virtual classroom provides richly interactive courses to students who connect to the virtual courses from diverse locations.

• Prepare a report by April, 2011 on an experimental Legal Interviewing and Counseling course that will be jointly taught using distance methods at the BYU and Duke Law Schools spring semester, 2011. This course will be taught using a distance format that connects the BYU and Duke classrooms. Additionally, all student exercises will be done using video conferencing methods. Legal practitioners will participate as virtual reviewers of video recorded student exercises.

• Prepare a report by April, 2011 on an experimental virtual Legal Interviewing and Counseling course that will be taught during spring semester, 2011, to students from up to 10 different law schools. This course will be taught using a virtual classroom format that connects the students in an online classroom for instruction. Additionally, all student exercises will be done using video conferencing methods. Legal practitioners will participate as virtual reviewers of video recorded student exercises.

• Prepare a report by January, 2012 on an experimental Legal Interviewing and Counseling course that will be jointly taught using distance methods at the BYU and Penn State Law Schools spring semester, 2011. This course will be taught using a distance format that connects the BYU and Penn State classrooms. Additionally, all student exercises will be done using video conferencing methods. Legal practitioners will participate as virtual reviewers of video recorded student exercises.

• Prepare a report by January, 2012 on a second experimental virtual Legal Interviewing and Counseling course that will be taught during fall semester, 2011, to students from up to 10 different law schools. This course will be taught using a virtual classroom format that connects the students in an online classroom for instruction. Additionally, all student exercises will be done using video conferencing methods. Legal practitioners will participate as virtual reviewers of video recorded student exercises.

• Prepare a summary report by April 2012, that assesses the overall experience and compares the four experimental distance courses to a live version of the same course taught fall, 2010 and spring semester, 2012.

Significance for the future of legal education:

Video conferencing and distance education developments are likely to profoundly impact the institutions and methods of legal education in unprecedented ways in the next decade or two. This project is designed to assess the impact of current state-of-the-art developments and to project the implications of these findings for the future of legal education.
Innovations at Penn State & North Carolina Central Law Schools

Dickinson School of Law, Pennsylvania State University

Penn State Law School, which functions from two interconnected campuses, has thoroughly integrated the two campuses using video conferencing and distance learning technologies. Classroom, courtrooms, seminar rooms, and conference rooms have been outfitted with state of the art distance learning and video conferencing technology. The net result is that the two campuses function as a single integrated law school. Virtually all courses are taught jointly with students attending on either campus. This remarkable arrangement serves as a natural laboratory that can inform legal educators about these emerging technologies and the pedagogical developments that accompany them.

Penn State’s Lewis Katz Building in University Park and Lewis Katz Hall in Carlisle, PA, are equipped with advanced high definition digital audiovisual telecommunications capacity that enables the real-time delivery of classes, meetings, and programs between the law school’s campuses and other collaborative projects and programs with schools and institutions worldwide.

Audio, video, and projected data in all classrooms and seminar rooms are routed through a local control room, which allows the broadcast of any activity throughout the building and to connect via audio visual telecommunications to anywhere in the world. All rooms are likewise equipped with the capability to record audio, video, and data and to be streamed worldwide.

The larger classrooms and seminar rooms employ push-to-talk microphones at each seat to enable one-on-one interaction between instructor and student, facilitating use of the traditional Socratic method, as well as interactive communication between students.

North Carolina University Central School of Law

North Carolina Central University School of Law unveiled its new Virtual Classroom in a brief ceremony on August 3, 2010. The Virtual Classroom, allows for a range of synchronous learning activities. Synchronous learning is real-time or live-distance learning from remote or separate locations.

Students can connect to the virtual classroom and interact in real time through the internet from any location using a computer equipped with a camera, microphone. The synchronous classes are a real-time interaction between the professor and other classmates while they are at home, work or elsewhere. The distance education course has allowed students who may not have otherwise been able to take summer school classes and earn school credit.

The Virtual Classroom has a brick-and-mortar component — the teaching space. Located in the lower level of the law school building, this space is custom-designed with two 54” high-definition plasma
screens, a cherry table that can accommodate the professor in a seated or standing position, a Smart Technology Symposium that is used as an electronic white board, and ambiance to make for a familiar teaching environment. The Virtual Classroom connects students using Polycom’s Desktop Video Conferencing Solution. This solution allows the law school to connect up to 32 students at 32 different endpoints, 16 on each screen. The professor sees all 32 students, the students see their classmates 16 at a time and everyone sees whoever is speaking.

Virtualizing Legal Interviewing and Counseling Instruction

The Legal Interviewing and Counseling course that will be the focal point of the experimental distance and virtual courses represents a decade long effort to construct a new, more rigorous instructional approach for teach counseling skills. The ongoing experiment has been to (a) see if deliberate practice methods could be used to provide more effective skill development in interviewing and counseling courses, (b) if the course could be scaled thorough the contributions of virtually connected legal practitioners to support class sizes much larger than is traditionally possible with skills courses, and (c) to incorporate the use of video conferencing and distance learning methods to effectively extend the course to students in other law schools.

Point Person Contact Information

Larry C. Farmer
Marion G. Romney Professor of Law
J. Reuben Clark Law School
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602
farmer@law.byu.edu
(801) 422-2423