A Rich Synthesis--Synchronous and Asynchronous Applications in the Web Environment

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Introduction

Busy persons in many walks of life have found distance learning to be of great benefit in enhancing their professional development. For the most part, internet based courses have utilized either synchronous or asynchronous tools. Synchronous tools transmit information to learners simultaneously while asynchronous methods allow each learner to access the material at anytime. The National Judicial College in Reno, Nevada USA has spent the last decade perfecting web-based classes for judges that use both asynchronous and synchronous methods. I have had the good fortune to be a distance faculty member for much of that time. The following paper gives a few of my own perspectives on the process and should not be read as a statement by the College.

Since its inception, the National Judicial College (NJC) has sought to provide judicial education of the highest caliber in formats that require the least amount of time away from the bench. Web-based courses have achieved both goals. Never intended to replace the physical class room experience in Reno and other locations, the internet allows the College to extend both its curriculum and audience. More specialized courses can be offered and taken by judges who are not able to travel due to crowded dockets or limited finances.

NJC courses result from the cooperative efforts of NJC staff and volunteer faculty (primarily sitting and retired judges). In the area of distance education, the College is most fortunate to have on its staff Joseph Sawyer. Mr. Sawyer is an unique individual who combines extraordinary technical gifts with a deep understanding of the principles of adult education. He has been crucial to the ongoing development and delivery of web-based courses.

From the beginning, the NJC approach to internet education combined asynchronous and synchronous components. The product used for the asynchronous materials is WebCt, while Webex is used for the synchronous portions

Asynchronous learning tools—benefits and challenges

The benefits of presenting judicial education in an asynchronous fashion are many. As mentioned above, busy judges can do course work at any time of the day. Course materials can be accessed from the office or home. Each learning session can be as lengthy or brief as the judge's schedule allows. The learners can return to course content as often as they choose. For example, quizzes can be retaken if the judge feels this would increase mastery of the material.

Asynchronous tools allow for the inclusion of a vast array of resources to supplement the required readings. Links to helpful websites enrich the asynchronous portion of NJC courses. Whole cases may be linked for the learner who wishes to do additional research in specific areas. Tutorials are included to assist the learners in navigating the technical aspects of the course or for specialized learning. The tutorials allow learners to answer their own questions and gain a greater sense of competency without direct assistance from staff or faculty.

Although asynchronous learning has great advantages, there are some significant drawbacks to a course relying exclusively on this type of tool. The learning environment can easily be perceived as cold or uninviting. While asynchronous learning can be quite interactive, it takes a great deal of effort to achieve the atmosphere of a spontaneous classroom. Asynchronous exchanges take time and are open to misinterpretations. Dialogue loses much of its sparkle when transmitted over a period of hours or days. Messages meant to be humorous can be seriously misunderstood. In a live classroom, the faculty are constantly taking cues from the learners and directing the flow of the session accordingly. In an asynchronous environment, class comments may come too late for redirection of the material.

Synchronous tools—a different set of challenges

On the other hand synchronous or real time learning, retains much of the spontaneity of the live classroom. Judges can exchange comments in a relaxed and candid fashion. Faculty draw on the class comments to determine the areas that have been mastered and the ones that require additional coverage. Any confusion about the meaning of comments can easily be remedied. There is a benefit in the fact that all class members are receiving the same material simultaneously. Certain exercises such as ones involving planning by the group are best done in this environment.

However, synchronous learning has several limiting factors especially for judicial education. It is very difficult to schedule a time to accommodate the schedules of judges. The focus of each session must be very limited. As the size of the class grows, the ability of each class member to participate is reduced in the real time setting as opposed to an asynchronous one. The faculty must use great care in order that the session not disintegrate into trivial chatting or be dominated by one or two persons. Generally, synchronous sessions are more suited to a limited number of participants if the goal is in depth discussion.

For the most part, the benefits and drawbacks of asynchronous learning are the inverse of those of synchronous learning and vice versa. Therefore, utilizing both methods has the greatest potential for increasing the overall value of the final product. Moreover, the use of both allows for the creation of quality adult education. The principles developed by Kolb for "teaching around the circle" can be integrated very effectively.

Structure of courses

The first NJC course to use these learning tools was developed in 2001 on the subject matter of small claims. Over the years the structure of NJC web-bases courses has evolved into one that includes the following elements:

Six week course on a specific area of judicial practice (with one week in the middle for "spring break" –a week with no assigned course work)

In the *asynchronous* environment

> Weekly modules containing materials created by subject expert faculty with the assistance of Mr. Sawyer

> Introduction to the technological aspects of the class to allow class members to have a level of comfort before commencing class work. These tutorials are conducted by Mr. Sawyer.

> Quizzes with correct answers and links for additional readings to assist the learners in assessing their own level of subject matter competency

> A discussion board on which learners can post answers to questions posed by faculty or responses to postings by other class members

> Additional optional readings, checklists, websites, etc.

> A calendar with dates for assignments and schedule for the synchronous sessions

> A syllabus outlining the entire course and dates of course significance

In the *synchronous* environment one hour weekly meetings are scheduled that include:

> A faculty presentation (usually in PowerPoint) which the learners view from their own computers while listening via telephone

> The synchronous tool allows the learners hear and respond to each other's comments, to send messages to the group or to individuals via a chat tool, to answer questions anonymously with a polling tool

> A picture of each class member can be shown as that person is speaking. This gives a feeling of a live classroom to the session

The synchronous tool also offers the faculty a number of other options which they may choose to use. The faculty can give learners the ability to write short answers on the presentation itself, display a continuum of responses and even allow class members to take over the role of presenter to demonstrate their own PowerPoint presentations

Some personal teaching experiences with synchronous/asynchronous learning

Using the above principles and tools, Judge Amy Karan of Miami, Florida and I developed a course on the topic of criminal evidence with the most able assistance of Joseph Sawyer. It was the second web-based course offered by the National Judicial College. Criminal Evidence has been part of the NJC's curriculum since 2002. More recently, Judge Robert McBeth (ret) of Seattle, Washington has joined the faculty of this course.

Judges from many geographically far flung jurisdictions have taken Criminal Evidence over the years. All regions of the United States have been represented including Alaska and Hawaii. We have had judges from the armed services stationed overseas participating most effectively. A Nigerian judge brought very valuable insights to a recent class.

In 2005, Judges Stephen Bradbury, Douglas Harkin and I created a course designed for rural judges. Again, Joseph Sawyer provided tremendous help both in technical aspects and more importantly by reminding us of sound adult learning principles. Judges from a variety of small rural jurisdictions have found this class a very helpful forum for discussing issues and concerns that do not occur for their city counterparts. Judges participating in this class also have come from all parts of the United States.

It is a challenge to bring a sense of connection to class members who have never met and are unlikely to do so given the great geographical distances involved. We have used a number of techniques to develop those connections. Early in each course, it is very beneficial to have each class member interact directly with one fellow class member. One way to accomplish this is to assign groups of two to introduce each other to the whole class. They can obtain the biographical material needed by telephone calls, emails or the private portion of the class discussion board. Then the introductions are posted to the discussion board for the entire class to view.

Another useful method is to have class members post their own introductions in response to specific questions—how they decided to become a judge, favorite hobbies, what prompted them to take the course, etc. The class is assigned the task of reading all the introductions prior to the first live synchronous session. Then at the first Webex conference we conduct a treasure hunt. A PowerPoint presentation (available at the email address below upon request) poses questions about the class members. The person who has the most correct answers wins an amusing prize.

Another technique for introducing class members to one another while enhancing their competency with the interactive portion of the synchronous tool is playing "Two Truths and One Lie". First introductions are posted on the asynchronous discussion board. Then during the first Webex live session, each person states 3 things about themselves—2 that are true and 1 untrue. The other class members guess which is the lie based on the written introductions. The person who makes the most

correct guesses and the person who is the most successful deceiver are declared the winners. Again, trivial and amusing prizes are awarded.

Both of the above exercises are enhanced by photographs of each class member being on the screen as each person speaks. This is done with great expertise by Joseph Sawyer. By the end of the initial session, the judges have become accustomed to the use of the synchronous tool and begun to recognize the voices of fellow class members. This paves the path for more relaxed and productive sessions on substantive materials.

One of the great advantages of an internet course for judges is the opportunity to use the collective knowledge of the group to solve real life problems as they occur. During each offering of Criminal Evidence, we have had judges conducting actual trials. They have had serious evidentiary issues which have served as the basis of very fruitful class discussions, both during the weekly synchronous conferences and via the asynchronous discussion board. Taking the course in their home office setting, has a great reinforcing effect for the judge. Practical applications of the course components are immediate. Material which is merely theoretical when presented in the class room becomes concrete when learned in chambers.

Thus, it is vital that a web-based course be designed to take advantage of this "real life" element. The faculty members need to remain flexible and open to new directions suggested by comments on the discussion board and during the weekly live sessions.

Equally important is the ability of learners to have flexible and frequent contact with the faculty members. Several methods have been useful. We have posted office hours for each teacher—a weekly hour when faculty may be reached by telephone or email. Another useful practice is to have a section of the discussion board set aside for class members' private questions to faculty. Additionally, a separate area is dedicated to technical issues and solutions. It is important to be very responsive to learners who encounter problems navigating the course.

Faculty need to remain involved in the course by responding to general postings on the discussion board. However, care must be taken that the comments do not curtail the free flow of discussion between the learners.

We have found that a team approach to the weekly synchronous session is essential to its success. One of the faculty acts as lead for each session is responsible for preparing the substantive material. This normally includes a PowerPoint presentation with imbedded exercises to engage the learners.

Other faculty members assist by reviewing the material prior to presentation and helping with the flow of discussion during the synchronous session. They can use the synchronous chat tool in various ways to improve the session. One way is to send a private message to lead faculty to advise them of class members who have not had a chance to participate in the discussion. While presenting a session, it is easy for the lead faculty member to lose track of which learners have participated in the discussion. Such private chat messages prompt the presenter to call on those students who have not had a chance to speak.

It is also very important to have a technically astute person, other than the lead faculty, managing the synchronous tool during the session. It is extremely difficult for one person to be lead a session and address any technical issues at the same time. Having a technically savvy person such as Mr. Sawyer creates a quality learning session. As mentioned above, Mr. Sawyer is able to project the picture of each learner as they speak, which gives much greater depth to the experience. Having someone else in charge of physical presentation leaves lead faculty free to focus on the substance and effectively direct group discussion.

The National Judicial College's experience with utilizing asynchronous and synchronous learning tools in the web environment has been an exciting and evolving process which has opened judicial education to those who due to geographic distance or the press of court business would not have otherwise had the opportunity to participate. The above observations only skim the surface the asynchronous/synchronous learning process. I would be most happy to discuss this subject in greater depth with those having questions. Please feel free to contact me at the address below.

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