

A New Spin on Synchronous Learning: F2F Meets the 21st Century

Brenda Recchia Jeffers, MCN

Stefanie L. McAllister, EAF

Patricia H. Klass, EAF

Lisa M. Marinelli, MCN

Neil E. Sappington, EAF

Norman D. Durflinger, EAF

Sandra D. Burke, MCN

Illinois State University

2008 Teaching & Learning Symposium

January 9, 2008

A New Spin on Synchronous Learning: F2F Meets the 21st Century

Synchronous learning is nothing more than a learning environment where the instructor and the student interact in real time to facilitate learning. While the traditional F2F classroom is the original method for creating a synchronous learning environment, the availability and increasing sophistication of the web-based learning tools takes traditional or classic F2F synchronous learning into the 21st century. This panel presentation is an overview of an interdisciplinary collaboration between an experience web-based synchronous learning provider, the COE and a new adopter of the technology, MCN. Presenters will outline the perspectives of these two colleges in the areas of instruction, tech support, and the role for the department/college in ensuring that web-based synchronous learning is successful. They will also reflect on the pros and cons of the experience from the perspectives of both an experienced and a new user.

Faculty Perspective

Over the past two decades the programs that prepare future public school administrators have evolved to meet the changing populations that they serve. No longer do students make long commutes to the college or university campus for all classes and learning experiences. As the populations of students who are studying to become school administrators have become more diverse, the delivery of instruction has also diversified meet their needs. These changes include: off-campus cohorts, weekend-long class sessions, and web-blended or web-enhanced courses.

Illuminate Live!, a webconferencing tool, has proven to be effective in meeting the needs of the changing student population. The professors have used this tool for classroom instructions and have made use of various features, including student led discussions, student group work, and making presentations.

As professors who value a traditional face-to-face classroom, the use of web based classroom collaboration in the last year or so has been met with many positive and a few negative situations.

With web-based collaboration, the class feels more connected. Students write questions in the Chat area, they can raise their hands or use emoticons to indicate what emotions they are feeling at any time. Classes can write on whiteboards, share work, do group work, and if students miss a class, they can view the class recording. Further, many of our students have taken advantage of the print and save features, which allow students to save whiteboards and chat messaging. Because of the chat for written communication, the ability for students to freely write on the whiteboard, for students to raise hands and ask questions in their own voice and with the use of emotions to indicate student emotions, some classes are more engaged than F2F classes.

We have found that this tool encourages class participation and communication. We have had students create PowerPoint presentations and lead discussions based upon their work. In breakout small groups, students talk and collaborate in real time and write papers using the application share feature. We have found that the chat feature is beneficial, especially for those students who are 'shy' as this feature allows them another avenue to participate.

Challenges with web-based collaboration are that technology sometimes fails and there is the inevitable learning curve that comes with technology. The main type of technical failure we personally have encountered is related to audio issues. The proactive response of our department was to hire a technical support person for our classes. Another challenge with this type of learning is that this technology relies on electrical power and the Internet. Last spring, we had students who were in the middle of a tornado and had to log out of class- but safely returned later!

There is also more preparation work for the virtual classes than F2F. Organized classes with firm, yet flexible, agendas work the best from our experience. Our students have indicated their preference for agendas and timelines, which is something we did not do for our traditional F2F. Further, there is an extra time component in consulting with our tech person before and after classes, including training.

Even though there are video capabilities, with the varying bandwidth issues of our students, we are not able to see our students. This is our greatest complaint, as we love to “see their eyes.” Yet, as discussed earlier, with our changing student population, hearing their voices, reading their notes, and hearing them laugh and talk in class, certainly makes for an excellent ‘second’ best learning environment.

Technology Support Perspective

When incorporating Elluminate Live! with video conferencing, MCN followed EAF’s technology support model – one-on-one training of faculty and students and class tech support for every class. MCN tech support received personal training from EAF tech support and attended numerous online training/workshops sessions provided by Elluminate. Tech support then facilitated a hands-on Elluminate orientation session for faculty and students at MCN computer lab prior to class. The session allowed faculty and students to becoming comfortable with the Elluminate features in a controlled environment. In addition, the session gave distance students the ability to meet faculty member, students, tech support and doctoral staff face-to-face.

One of the difficulties of incorporating two technologies into a classroom is logistics. MCN tech support consulted with Classroom Technology Support Services to develop the best way to view two separate technologies at once. MCN re-configured a classroom to incorporate two side-by-side LCD’s which allowed videoconferencing and Elluminate to be viewed simultaneously.

MCN tech support worked closely with the distance students to ensure a smooth transition. Currently, all distance students are located at one site that has their own video conferencing system. Distance students viewed Elluminate on laptops. Tech support conducted mock classes using both Elluminate and video conferencing simultaneously to determine the best position for video conferencing system, laptops and students. One of the hurdles we faced at the distance site was trying to connect to Elluminate through wireless connection which can be unreliable. We were fortunate to have a strong working relationship with the distance site’s tech support that assisted in the process.

One of the benefits of using two technologies was the ability for students and faculty to have two methods to communicate with each other. For example, if we lose the video conferencing connection, students and faculty members could inform MCN tech support of the problem through Elluminate’s text chat feature and then continue with class discussion through Elluminate until video conferencing was restored.

Another benefit of using Elluminate was incorporating its whiteboard feature into the course. By utilizing whiteboard, faculty members, guest presenters and students had the ability to display PowerPoint slides in real time to all participants. This provided distance students the ability to feel a part of the presentation and not an observer.

MCN tech support attended every class and served as support for faculty and students. MCN strongly believes that adding technology to a course should not be a burden for faculty or students. By having a tech support available, faculty and students could focus learning and not worry about tech issue and how to solve them.

Technology should never interfere with a professor’s instruction or student learning. Our proactive stance to ensure the best possible online classroom environment includes the personal training of faculty and

class tech support for each and every class. EAF Tech Support [or Ed Tech Learning Strategist] person has received, and continues to receive online training through accredited programs. Faculty then receive one-on-one Elluminate training sessions. The role of EAF Tech Support includes attending to the technical and training aspects of online learning, as well as, collaborating with faculty about each online class and their course in general as it relates to the method of instructional delivery and design. One analogy that describes the relationship between a synchronous EAF instructor and the EAF Support is that of producer.

Our standards are high, and unfortunately, not always achieved.

The biggest problem we encounter is the timeliness of attending to the configuration of machines. Most often, students wait until the last minute to ensure that their internet connection, audio setup, and machines are configured to work properly. Despite this, most of the issues are resolved during the class time. Other problems are related to audio issues. Students sometimes forget or do not arrange to have a working headphone/microphone, or they use their laptop microphones which are not always high quality. Another audio issue is related to plug-ins. Elluminate Live uses the plug-in Java, and there have been issues related to Java and audio quality.

The positives far outweigh the negatives. In an informal poll of 11 doctoral students last semester, they were asked if given the choice, would they A: prefer a face to face class on campus; B: prefer an all Elluminate class; or C: a combination of F2F and Elluminate. Eight students chose B and 3 chose C. The students indicated that if their schedules would not allow for them to drive to campus- some 1.5 hours away – and they would not be able to take the class.

Students have also commented on the value of the recorded links. Often times, our graduate level students will miss F2F classes entirely due to work related issues. With Elluminate, many of these students will attend class from work, leave for an hour or so to attend to work matters, and return to class. Further, they can view the recorded course and that specific segment of class missed later in the week.

Another positive is the unique relationship between the faculty and the technical support staff. Faculty is encouraged by administrators to work closely with technical support for training. Support staff attends each class and serves as support for the faculty during class, and for those faculty who desire, has a debriefing session with faculty immediately following the class or very soon thereafter. As faculty become more comfortable with the idea of teaching and learning online, the natural consequence of that comfort is the willingness to try different approaches with their instruction that works better in an online environment. This is the crux of the process, where faculty and support collaborate on how to present material more effectively using the web collaboration tools. Online learning and traditional teaching infuse through the collaboration of ideas, and produces a stronger foundation of online pedagogy for future classes.

Administrative Perspective

The goal of the two administrative units was to provide the resources necessary for successful instruction for working adult students in off-campus cohorts. In the past, either students drove after work or on weekends to classes or faculty drove to off-campus sites to reach these students. Both Elluminate Live! and videoconferencing helped support live synchronous instruction and removed the time, effort, and expense of travel for both students and faculty.

The administrative units first needed to assess available technologies. A variety of resources were consulted including campus personnel. The Classroom Technology Support personnel provided excellent support and guidance for videoconferencing technology purchases and installation. The primary

consideration was selecting technology that would support teaching and learning. Clearly, cost, availability, compatibility with Illinois State systems, and realistic assessment of the program's capabilities were some of the related factors. Once selected, the equipment (hardware, software, accessories) needed to be purchased, installed, and tested. Although much time and consideration was spent on the hardware and software expenses, the most important consideration was and still is technology support.

Both units hired technology support personnel to assist faculty and students in using these teaching and learning tools. Without technology support staff to help faculty plan, deliver, and modify classes and to assist students with technology at their end, the implementation would not have been as successful as it has been. Not only do faculty benefit from staff development, but the field changes so fast that the technology support staff must also be provided professional development opportunities. Funds were made available for training and texts to support faculty and staff.

Faculty needed to be recognized for adopting new technologies into their teaching. The units also needed to support the learning curve time to integrate this form of technology into instruction. In addition, encouraging faculty to explore different appropriate uses proved beneficial. The faculty have found several other beneficial applications:

- Use Elluminate for “drop in” office hours or review sessions with off-campus students and colleagues.
- Use Elluminate for individual meetings with students to review research papers.
- Videoconferencing and Elluminate both have been used allow guest presenters to “come to” class.
- Recorded sessions have become general tutorials on the web.
- Instructors have created a “student only” space where groups can convene to work on group projects.
- Committees have held sessions with Elluminate when some people could not be on campus for the meeting.

The last responsibility of the administrative units is to provide support for assessment and evaluation. The traditional class evaluation forms do not adequately measure the unique nature of these classes, so both units are working on addressing this issue. In the meantime, faculty have incorporated their own formative assessments during the semester. The assessment process assures that student views and experiences are considered and addressed. One of the most powerful forms of assessment comes with the presence of the technology support person in class. The technology support staff are like co-instructors who provide peer review and feedback. Faculty meet with technology support personnel before, during, and after class providing a rich opportunity for reflection on teaching and learning. Based upon faculty comments in this year's ASPT documents, one should not underestimate the positive impact the technology support person has on instruction.

As more research is conducted in the area of asynchronous F2F Internet instruction, we will learn more about effective teaching, learning, and assessment models. Our initial experiences have been positive, and we look forward to the opportunities and challenges of exploring new teaching and learning tools in the 21st Century.

Selected References

Elluminate Live! website; <http://www.illuminate.com/>

Chen, N., Ko, H., & Lin, T. (2005). A model for synchronous learning using the Internet. Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 42,(2) ,181-194.

Conrad, R., & Donaldson, J. (2004). Engaging the online learner: Activities and resources for creative instruction. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Finkelstein, J. (2006). Learning in real time: Synchronous teaching and learning online. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.

Learning in Real Time companion website: <http://www.learninginrealtime.com/index.html>

Paloff, R., & Pratt, K. (2005). Collaborating online: Learning together in community. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.