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Talking In The Dark: Using Technology For Basic Academic Support

Ian Gallacherⁱ

The problem is familiar: a student emails you at some inconceivable hour of the night asking what seems to you to be a basic question. You answer when you get the email, but that's often hours later and the chance to deliver information exactly at the time the student needs it is gone.

Maintaining a discussion forum is one way of solving this problem. These forums allow students to post their questions and speak with each other about the issues while you monitor the discussion, stepping in to correct any misunderstanding. And if many students share the same problem, you need only reply once to address the question.

But discussion forums have significant drawbacks. Unless you're maintaining the same anti-social hours as your students, you won't be able to address immediately that 2:00 am question and the time lag means lost learning time. Discussion forums also tend to be a little impersonal, and do nothing to help the student who is too shy, or too afraid of exposing ignorance, to post a question.

What's needed is a way to talk directly to any student – the shy ones as well as the assertive ones – at the time they have a question, without giving them your home phone number, a mistake I made in my first year of teaching and never made again.ⁱⁱ And technology offers a way to do exactly that. With a small investment of time and money, you can be instantly accessible to all your students at any time without being sleep-deprived.

1. Podcasts

The simplest way of speaking to your students by remote is through the podcast. To record one, all you need is a computer, some simple recording software (Audacity is free, works with both Macs and PCs, and has more bells and whistles than you will ever need),ⁱⁱⁱ and a microphone. If your computer has a built-in microphone, that will probably be sufficient for a simple podcast but even a cheap standalone microphone will improve the sound substantially.

Before you start recording, you should give some thought to your podcast's function. Will it be a summary of last week's classes? Will it be a general commentary on the role your subject plays in society? A musing on the law or life in general? Whatever role you want your podcast to perform, it's best to have a clear idea of it before you start talking. You might also want to think about how detailed you want your planning to be. Because I want my podcasts to last only about five minutes, I write out a script and stick fairly closely to it when I record. For me, the

loss of spontaneity is more than offset by the curb it puts on my tendency to ramble aimlessly.

And podcast length is important. This form of technology gives you a wonderful opportunity to talk directly to your students in your own voice, but you will only hold their attention for a limited amount of time; somewhere between five and ten minutes is the most you can hope for. If you want to talk about a complex subject, better to break your podcast into multiple segments. A series of podcasts on one topic, each one clearly labeled so your students can listen and re-listen to those sessions of particular interest to them, is an extraordinarily helpful way of clarifying subjects that might not come across as clearly in the give-and-take of the classroom.

At Syracuse, we use podcasts in the legal writing program to remind students of some administrative aspects of the program and to reinforce some fundamental concepts of composition and research; things the students heard in class but might have forgotten over the course of the semester. We release a podcast a week, trying to anticipate when the students will have questions about particular topics, and releasing a podcast that's narrowly focused on those topics. I record all the podcasts before the semester starts and load them onto Blackboard to be released at the same time each week; if something happens during the semester to make a new podcast necessary, I can always record one and release it at the appropriate time. But recording the podcasts during the relatively quiet time before the semester begins means that there's one less thing to worry about once the pace of the semester picks up.

Recording podcasts can be a lonely experience. You sit at your desk and talk into the air, and it can be difficult to keep up the level of animation and flow in your voice necessary to keep a listener's attention; there's nothing more boring than listening to someone droning on interminably about something you didn't understand the first time you heard it, so energy is important. And there can be the slightly disturbing feeling that you're talking to yourself, especially if you don't get immediate student feedback. But you never know: this spring, a student I knew, but who was not in any of my classes, stopped me just before he graduated to tell me that he really enjoyed the podcasts when he was a 1L. He would download them from Blackboard, load them onto his MP3 player, and listen to them on the bus on his way in to school in the morning, using them as a way to prepare himself for the week ahead and remind himself of things he might otherwise have forgotten. Delayed gratification is still gratification.

2. Video Tutorials

If podcasts are radio, technology also offers us the chance to produce and appear on television. Video is a little more involved than just sound, of course, both in terms of preparation and equipment, but the result is well worth the investment.

If you decide to record video, you should set aside all thoughts of modesty or self-consciousness. Video – and especially the high-definition video you’ll be shooting in – will expose and magnify every appearance flaw you believe yourself to have. Those flaws might or might not be evident to others who watch your recordings, but you will see nothing but them. If it bothers you to let everyone see those “flaws,” this experience is not for you.^{iv}

Once past the self-conscious stage, you need to make some equipment decisions. For basic quality, a simple webcam – some computers have them built in – will record video and sound and the software doubtless bundled with your computer will let you save and post the recording. The picture and sound quality will not be especially good, however, and the entire presentation will look poor to students who are sophisticated consumers of video images. Putting a little more effort into production values will substantially improve the final result and will enhance your credibility with your students.

At base, you need a video camera capable of recording in high-definition (don’t worry about designations like “1080p”: if the camera says “high definition,” it’s good enough), a tripod, a lavalier microphone (the kind that clips onto your clothes), a mirror – honest, you really need a mirror, – and a basic set of lights. If your law school or university has any sort of audio-visual department, they will almost certainly have more than enough equipment to get you going. If you have to buy this equipment yourself, Amazon.com or EBay will have many options for you and none of it is prohibitively expensive (and in any case, might this equipment not be a good subject for a teaching development grant?).

You also need a quiet room that has little if any natural light and has a plain, uncluttered, wall in a neutral color. We’re used to seeing news reports with lawyers interviewed in libraries, with a backdrop of case reporters or statutes (sometimes I wonder if that’s the only use to which book-based research materials are being put these days), but a busy backdrop like that will offer too many chances for your students to let their attention wander and focus on the books behind you. If you can’t find a suitable wall, you might need to erect a simple backdrop (an unwrinkled sheet will do, at a pinch).

Setting up the lights can take some time and requires some creativity. The internet is filled with instructional videos showing you ways to arrange lights for video recording, and informed trial-and-error is probably the best approach. You

shouldn't rely on the room's lighting for your light source – it's usually too harsh and flat – and you should avoid natural light; that can change many times during the course of a day.

As for yourself, you should wear something that will be in style for the next few years; you don't want to go through this experience each year. Basic colors like blue or green are probably best. I wear a suit with a blue shirt and red tie, but I'm old and conservative. You know what would look best on you. If you prefer to stand up while being recorded, remember that the camera is fixed and try to stand on one spot. Personally, I prefer to sit down and have the camera only record me from mid-chest up. This allows the students to focus on what I'm saying, prevents me from succumbing to the temptation of gesticulating wildly, and eliminates at least some of those flaws about which I'm still painfully aware.

Once you've settled on your costume and your lighting, and you've decided how much of you is going to appear in the picture, then set up your video camera. The tripod is a crucial piece of equipment; no one can hold a camera still for long and no one will watch a video with a picture that jumps around erratically. That look might work in new-wave movies, but not for law school video tutorials.

The good news is that many schools have audio visual departments, or individuals, who can help you with the technical setup. And if you don't have that luxury, you will almost inevitably have a student or two who has some experience in video production of some sort and will be willing to help. If you need to involve yourself in post-production, and are lucky enough to have a Mac, iMovie is more than you'll need for editing and polishing your videos. For PCs, the free Windows Live Movie Maker will probably be enough for your needs.^v

A well-produced video is a powerful thing. Far more than posts on a discussion board, or even podcasts, a video gives you a real presence any time your students need you. Just as with podcasts, though, you want to be careful not to outstay your welcome. A series of five minute videos will be much more effective than one, long, recording. And because your students can see as well as hear you, you don't really have the option of reading a script unless you really go to town and invest in a teleprompter –something that's beyond the range of most budgets – so shorter is better.

3. Conclusion

No amount of technology can substitute for human contact, and it would be a mistake to think that podcasts or videos can substitute for quality in-class instruction or office hours. But for those times when your students have a pressing question and you're not around, one of these simple tools can provide basic academic

support to all your students – not just the ones who aren't afraid to raise their hands, post a question, or come to see you in your office.

ⁱ Professor of Law and Director, Legal Communication and Research Program, Syracuse University College of Law. Thanks to Dean Hannah Arterian, Joel Whitney, who really should be writing this article, and, as always, to Julie McKinstry.

ⁱⁱ Yes, someone really called me in the middle of the night with a Bluebook question.

ⁱⁱⁱ You can find Audacity at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>.

^{iv} This advice comes from someone who has more than his fair share of self-evident flaws. Trust me.

^v You can download this program at <http://windows.microsoft.com/en/US/windows-live/movie-maker-get-started>.