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Watch, Listen, and Learn

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Watch, Listen, and Learn

BY PROFESSOR KATHLEEN
ELLIOTT VINSON

IT'S SIX IN THE MORNING, and a student is walking her dog before beginning a full day of law classes. Across town a few hours later, a classmate rushes onto a crowded subway train, forced to stand sandwiched between strangers during his commute to school. That afternoon, an evening student sits in rush hour traffic, hoping to make it into the city in time for class. Later that night, a student jogs on a treadmill at the gym after a long day of school.

What do all of these students have in common? They're studying.

In 2008, the Legal Practice Skills Program unveiled a new podcasting project designed to help students enhance their learning outside of the classroom. The podcasts, created by LPS faculty members, are available free of charge and, once uploaded, can be listened to via computer, CD, iPod, or MP3 player. The podcasts supplement students' in-class learning with weekly writing tips, legal research refreshers, and advice for first-year law students about to begin their first summer jobs. Some professors even provide students with personal podcasts, orally cri-

tiquing their memos instead of providing traditional handwritten or typed comments.

This project provides students with an opportunity to get advice and instruction from faculty outside of the time and space constraints of the classroom—in other words, to decide when, where, and how they will learn. Students can stop and rewind, fast-forward, or repeat the podcast as necessary. They can listen and learn when they are ready to comprehend or use the information—for example, when they are sitting down to draft a first memo assignment, or when they have a few free moments to spare during a dog walk or on a long commute.

Podcasts are just one example of the cutting-edge technology currently being employed by the Suffolk Law community. Real-time polling devices, or clickers, are being used in classrooms to get students engaged in content and to ensure that that content is “clicking.” The use of clickers enables both the students and the professor to get immediate feedback on students' understanding of the concepts covered. The results can lead to further class discussion on a complicated concept.

Suffolk Law's use of technology as a teaching tool can serve as an example to law schools across the nation. Many of today's students grew up in an on-demand world, and technology had an indelible influence on the way they learned. Suffolk Law's cutting-edge approaches remain true to the school's mission while simultaneously connecting with students and enhancing their legal education experiences. Future technological possibilities on the horizon include the use of wikis, blogs, online videos, and virtual worlds, to name just a few.

To be clear: technology is not a replacement for good teaching. Talented, engaging, and accessible professors are indispensable, and the improper use or abuse of technology can hinder a student's learning. But technology can help professors communicate with Generations X and Y in ways they can process, accept, and understand. If my students listen to the LPS writing podcasts with the same frequency and enthusiasm with which they listen to their music playlists, or respond to the clickers as enthusiastically as they do the latest iPhone, then I have used a familiar method of communication to help students understand important concepts of legal writing and analysis. ☺

Professor Vinson's article “Teaching Through Technology: The Power of Podcasts” will appear in a forthcoming law review.

Illustration by Alex Nabaum