The Extended Classroom: Providing on-campus and off-campus students with a comparable and rich learning experience

Bentley College has been extending its physical campus classrooms into cyberspace since 2001. Through the use of Saba Centra’s virtual classroom web collaboration software, students attend classes synchronously, in class and via the web. In the extended classroom, off-campus students, on-campus students, and faculty all have the same ability to see, hear, and collaborate with each other in real-time. The extended classroom is not just for the benefit of off-campus students. Over the years, the line between students sitting in the classroom seats and students sitting in front of a monitor off campus has blurred. Students who would miss on-campus classes due to work, travel, illness, or family issues attend the class online or play back the recorded session. To help our faculty manage these two groups of students, Bentley has developed a “smart” classroom with a custom-built audio system and implemented additional technologies and devices such as Blackboard LMS, Wacom tablet monitors, the MimioXi capture devices, and video cameras. This combination of technologies helps the faculty preserve familiar, comfortable teaching methods while providing both groups of students with comparable learning experiences. Student course evaluations have been extremely positive.

Initially, this hybrid-web design was developed and implemented by Bentley’s Academic Technology Center for the purpose of providing flexibility to help off campus students pursue M.S. degrees in Taxation and Financial Planning. Plans are underway to have this hybrid-web learning environment serve as a platform in providing flexibility to all our MBA students and other M.S. majors, regardless of whether they attend all or almost no classes on campus. In this session, we will discuss the strategies, present the challenges and solutions, demonstrate techniques and technologies, and share our experiences in creating Bentley’s online “extended classroom” culture. In addition, we will report on the benefits that have accrued to both faculty and students in teaching and learning in this hybrid learning environment, and share our plans for extending the advantages of this web collaboration to the entire campus.