Humanizing online synchronous classes to minimize transactional distance

Since 2001, Bentley College has been increasing the number of graduate courses it offers online. Bentley uses Saba’s web collaboration software, Centra© Live to create a “real time” virtual classroom that joins the web students and the classroom students. In this synchronous hybrid-web format, also called “the extended classroom”, professors teach both on campus and online students simultaneously. Even though the online students are provided with a high quality experience in a simulated classroom, they are separated geographically from in class students and the instructor. According to Moore (1991) the physical separation leads to a psychological and communication gap, creating transactional distance. “Transactional distance” is a cognitive space between the learners, the instructor, and the content. Moore insists that dialog and structure are the two key factors that determine transactional distance and affect independent student learning. The relationship between the two is the following: as dialog increases, the structure decreases, therefore the transactional distance between the educator and learner is minimized.

In this session, we will discuss transactional distance theory, its assumptions, and the way we at Bentley balance the dialog and structure in “extended classrooms” to minimize this distance for online learners. We will share our experience in utilizing synchronous communication tools inherent in the Centra© Live software such as video, two-way audio, text chat, interactive whiteboards, and virtual break out rooms. We will demonstrate the use of asynchronous technologies such as blogs, wikis, and discussion boards accessible from the Blackboard course management system.

Reference: