

A Tidebreak Case Study: University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PREPARES LAW STUDENTS FOR THEIR PROFESSIONAL FUTURE

“*The School of Law prides itself on being a leader in innovation and was recently recognized as one of the 15 most innovative law schools by National Jurist magazine and one of the 25 most innovative law schools by preLaw magazine. . . This commitment also extends to the technology you’ll see around the law school, including our recently constructed collaborative technology classroom.*”

– University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law website

University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law

Students: 450

Faculty: 65

The University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law (UMKC) is a public law school founded in 1895 as the Kansas City School of Law. Now a part of the University of Missouri system, UMKC was chosen as a “Top 20” value in legal education in 2012. The school has about 65 full-time and part-time faculty on staff and has over 450 students. Known for good bar passage rates, strong job placement, and producing great trial attorneys and judges, the school focuses on such core areas as entrepreneurship, the law of family and children, urban law, and land use planning. With a keen interest in examining the uses of technology, the school has also expanded its emphasis on teaching intellectual property law and cyber-law. It has two modern, state of the art courtrooms and employs a variety of educational technologies in its classrooms.

Do We Need To Change How We Teach Law?

Most law schools share common philosophies about how to educate law students and prepare them for work in the legal industry. For example, many law schools base their teaching style on the “Socratic method” which emphasizes critical thinking and generating new ideas for spirited discussion. Another common practice among law schools is to teach students how to conduct legal research using LexisNexis and Thompson Reuters Westlaw databases. Yet another long held practice is to use ‘clinics’ to provide experiential learning opportunities and allow students to work with clients with legal problems in the context of the particular type of clinic under the supervision of a licensed attorney. All of these methodologies are designed to help teach students analytic, research and writing skills which are all a core part of working in the legal industry. And yet while these time-tested philosophies have been successfully training law students for decades, advances in technology are causing legal educators to question how they prepare their students to join the workforce.

While these practices – Socratic method, database research, and clinics – have a history of being very successful, they foster an environment where students work independently and compete against each other. In addition, they limit the interaction between the faculty and the students, instead opting for a one-way lecture where the faculty talks to the students instead of working together as a team. In addition, much of the technology that is being used in the classroom today often includes small monitors which promote individual study.

Faced with a changing legal industry and advances in use of technology, the faculty at UMKC realized that the overall teaching philosophy and the curriculum needed to be changed. The faculty believed that making these types of changes would help prepare their students to work and be successful in today’s legal industry. The leaders of UMKC’s School of Law decided to examine ways to teach with an emphasis on developing a collaborative environment which focused on developing team-building and problem-solving skills.

Establishing A Collaborative Environment

Fortunately a faculty member at UMKC had been at a trade show and had seen a demonstration by Tidebreak, a company that has been innovating in higher education for almost a decade. Tidebreak’s collaborative technology lets faculty move easily between ‘teaching’ mode and ‘teaming’ mode in the classroom, while embracing the bring-your-own-device culture that has become pervasive in learning environments and in the workplace in general. After seeing the demonstration of the technology, the faculty quickly realized that Tidebreak could help the School of Law achieve its goals.

Tidebreak’s ClassSpot PBL™ software provides students and faculty with a group workspace, a ‘teaching wall’ with interactive whiteboards and monitors, and the ability to lead interactive discussions and research activities. Rather than merely “mirroring” a student’s desktop to a large display, Tidebreak’s software promotes full-participation through shared control and advanced content sharing features.

Faculty use the classroom’s six 46-inch flat-screen monitors to serve as six independent workstations (each driven by its own computer) with groups of three to six students assigned to

each monitor. Students are able to work together on the large monitors by connecting with their laptops, tablets, or smartphones to directly control the shared desktop, transfer files and webpages, annotate on top of screen captures, or access an automated session archive. Faculty can send content to any or all six monitors to distribute assignments or other materials. They can also control any of the team monitors as they walk around the room, such that they can “jump in” along with the students in a team to help explore issues. The monitors thus become interactive workstations from which content can be developed and then copied and moved to the large ‘teaching wall’ screen at the front of the classroom where the class can then focus on the results from one or more teams’ work. Augmenting the digital displays, the classroom also boasts a floor-to-ceiling whiteboard that covers the wall at the front of the room.

Implementing Tidebreak’s software has helped modernize one entire section of the law library. The law library underwent a renovation that turned an old storage space into a state-of-the-art instructional and research center with a classroom specifically designed for using Tidebreak’s collaborative software. The space is divided into two areas—on one side is the information commons and on the other side is the new classroom which also has printers, storage areas and the academic strategies library.

Helping Faculty Embrace Collaborative Teaching Methods

One of the first things the faculty noticed after using ClassSpot PBL was how it changed their teaching style. In the past classes were organized in the traditional manner with the faculty at the front of the classroom lecturing from behind a podium. But using ClassSpot PBL has allowed the faculty to share documents with the students during class and organize the students into small groups to work on the assignments together. This has reduced the time it takes students to do their research, and has allowed the faculty to be more involved with the students.

ClassSpot PBL has also changed the way students work together for group presentations. In the past, faculty noticed that it was hard to get groups of students to do more than subdivide a topic into segments, with each student working independently. By changing the assignments to more narrowly focused research problems, students became much more engaged and interactive with each other and with the faculty.

What Does The Future Hold?

The feedback from the students and faculty has been incredibly positive. Students enjoy working with the technology and they thrive by solving real-world problems in a team environment. The faculty has also seen the confidence level rise in many of the students. Tidebreak has not only changed the way the faculty teach, it has transformed the way the students learn.

Other faculty members have expressed interest in learning how to use the Tidebreak software. One faculty member who teaches Health Law, Ann Marie Marciarille, blogged after the experience, “What is different about [Tidebreak’s] collaboration software, and using it in UMKC’s Tech Classroom, is that it is not teaching by demonstration as much as coaching my students through a collaborative exercise in learning by doing.”

The technology has also had an impact that goes beyond the School of Law. Local law firms have seen the difference in the capabilities of the graduating students and are intrigued at the prospect of incorporating Tidebreak into their offices for internal instruction. Local law firms are seeing the benefits of having their employees work together and how they can use cross-disciplinary teams to tackle complex problems. In addition, this type of training helps prepare law students to use more complex media and technology in their courtroom presentations.

The leaders of the School of Law are excited about the opportunities they see for other departments to use Tidebreak to help improve the learning experience for UMKC students. Several faculty members at the School of Law are planning to use ClassSpot PBL for courses during the 2013-14 academic year. In a parallel project, the UMKC business school is planning to deploy Tidebreak's software in its innovative new building when it opens in late 2013.

Read more case studies at www.tidebreak.com/casestudies.

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