A Tidebreak Case Study: Winona State University

TIDEBREAK DRAMATICALLY TRANSFORMS LEARNING AND POSITIONS CAMPUS FOR FUTURE GROWTH

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– Ken Graetz, director of Teaching, Learning, and Technology Services

Winona State University (WSU) students, like most across the country, typically arrive on campus having used computers, laptops, mobile phones and tablets for many years and are considered technology-savvy by today's standards. Just like in the business community, where the bring-your-own-device (BYOD) phenomenon has taken root, students now arrive expecting to have modern technology available throughout the campus.

While technology continues to evolve, many universities do not have the most advanced systems in use – often due to budget constraints – despite the fact that many faculty members and IT leaders see the benefits of incorporating new forms of technology into the classroom setting. As a growing university that strives to serve the needs of its student body, WSU sees adopting new forms of technology as imperative for its future advancement.

"At Winona State University we feel very strongly that technology can help transform the educational experience and help prepare our students for life after graduation," said Ken Graetz,

director of Teaching, Learning and Technology Services at WSU. "Each student is given a laptop and tablet when they enroll because we feel it helps strengthen the learning process. Fortunately, our faculty members understand the benefits of having technology in the classroom."

Harnessing the Potential of the "Flipped Classroom"

Graetz is a technology enthusiast and is always eager to explore new forms of technology that can help improve student performance. In looking closely at the IT infrastructure at WSU, he realized that a change was occurring within the university which was transforming the landscape for the faculty.

"There's been a shift in the classroom at WSU over the past few years which involves flipped learning," said Graetz. "In many cases students can go online to watch video of their professors lecturing and what used to be considered homework is now done in class with the instructor offering more personalized guidance and interaction with students. With so much classroom content available online, we began to see changes in the way faculty members led their classes. We asked ourselves, 'how can we improve the classroom environment' and 'how can we set things up so that students will work together and be more collaborative?'"

While there was no specific moment that initiated a change, Graetz began to explore different technologies that he thought could improve the classroom experience. He had learned about Tidebreak™ years before and realized that this form of technology could help address WSU's needs.

"What's important to understand is that we had a vision of improving the way faculty would work with the student body," said Graetz. "The idea was to develop a system where faculty members could come out from behind the podium and work hands-on with the students. At the same time, we wanted to create an environment where the students could work in small teams to attack problems in a group setting rather than as individuals. We wanted to incorporate technology that could enhance our investment in laptops and tablets."

Moving from Lecture to Active Engagement

WSU was originally built in 1858 and so the classrooms were designed with a traditional podium at the front of each room, anticipating that instructors would lecture to the students. In addition, the classrooms were not built with modern wiring or Ethernet jacks in mind. Unfortunately funding for making these types of improvements was very limited.

Fortunately, Graetz and the IT team found Tidebreak to be a partner that offered technology for creating collaborative learning environments at a price they felt was very cost-effective. Starting with one classroom WSU implemented ClassSpot PBL™ software, which is designed to combine interactive capabilities with small team collaboration. In place of the traditional layout, the room was configured with multiple team tables, each with a large flat-panel display at the end of the table. These displays each had a dedicated computer connected to provide a shared desktop. A large "main" display was also installed at the front of the room, with its own dedicated computer attached. No extensive video cabling infrastructure was needed and the computers were simply connected to the standard campus network.

The ClassSpot PBL software, which was deployed on all the installed computers, allows students and faculty to move effortlessly between "teaching" from the front of the room and "teaming" at each of the group tables. Students and faculty can work across a collection of "personal" devices

Founded in 1858, Winona State University is a comprehensive public university with close to 8,800 students.

Enrollment:	8,753
Undergraduate Programs:	65
Graduate Programs:	12
Doctorate Programs:	1
Average Class Size:	26
Student to Faculty Ratio:	20:1

(laptops and mobile devices) and shared "public" screens at the end of each team table and at the front of the room (these form the shared collaborative workspaces.)

Almost immediately students can begin working together, develop deliverables in response to group tasks, and share their insights with the entire class on the classroom's main display. Throughout this process a faculty member can actively work with the teams by walking around the classroom with a mobile device instead of lecturing from the front of the room.

Once ClassSPot PBL was in place, the question on Graetz's mind was how would Tidebreak impact the in-class experience for students and faculty?

"In my 20 years as a teacher this is the most significant change I've seen. I'll never teach the old way again," said Graetz. "Students used to sit in their desks and wait for the teacher to lecture and, with any luck, stay focused during class. Now we have an environment where students and teachers actively work together to solve problems and master the curriculum. The students are much more engaged in the learning process and the faculty members are more like guides who help students master the material. ClassSpot PBL is altering the way the faculty members lead their classes to take advantage of the new interactive environment."

Enthusiastic Response Leaves Them Wanting More

One of the benefits of driving this type of change in the classroom is that word-of-mouth spreads quickly through a university. Students who use the Tidebreak-equipped classroom are constantly trying to sign-up for additional open lab time to take advantage of ClassSpot PBL. As Graetz commented, "Between class time and open lab time, that classroom is booked 100 percent of the time. We're trying to figure out how to adjust the schedule so that the room is available more often, which is a good problem to have."

Happily for the faculty ClassSpot PBL was designed to help support all instructors and students regardless of their technology capability. "It's easy to use and easy to deploy which is important in our university," said Graetz. "It's very intuitive to use which means that training our staff is quick

and easy. There's not a lot of wiring or configuration needed and it runs on our existing network. But what I find most amazing is that we've redesigned how classes are being taught and it didn't take a monumental overhaul of the university's infrastructure or faculty to accomplish this change."

And moving forward?

Graetz indicated that other campus leaders, including department leaders and faculty members, have observed ClassSpot PBL in action and see it as a way to change the teaching process and give the students a competitive advantage when they graduate.

"Seeing how ClassSpot PBL has had such a positive impact on our university, I'd like to expand beyond the classroom to more informal settings, like the student union or the library," said Graetz. "Using ClassSpot PBL has changed the way our faculty members teach, improved the way that our students learn, and opened us up to a world of possibilities since it's so easy to use and cost-effective. As an educator, I find it fascinating to watch how enthusiastic the students are to come to class."

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