

Case Study

Lecture 2.0: Suffolk University Implements Focus to Enrich Traditional and Virtual Classroom Experience



Suffolk University At a Glance

Location:
Boston, Mass.

Type:
Private University

Total Enrollment:
8,883

Schools:
College of Arts and Sciences,
Sawyer Business School and
Law School

Online Programs Offered:
Yes

Web Site:
www.suffolk.edu

Praneeth Machettira knows the classroom experience is about more than just the notes on the blackboard. At Suffolk University Sawyer Business School in Boston, Machettira has spent more than eight years creating an information technology (IT) infrastructure that helps students master new concepts, research critical ideas and access vital course material, all without ever leaving their desks.

His perceptive understanding of the link between technology and learning has led him to introduce many new technologies ahead of the curve, making the Sawyer Business School, one of the top drivers for technology adoption throughout the Suffolk University network.

So, in early 2008 when the Sawyer Business School planned to expand its online MBA program to include undergraduate programs, as director of technology, Machettira knew he needed an innovative technology solution that would support Suffolk's growing virtual student body, enrich the experience of on-campus students and integrate seamlessly with the university's existing technology infrastructure.

Exploring the Prerequisites

With a new roster of online courses scheduled for the fall 2009 semester, Machettira began evaluating new lecture capture solutions in early 2008 to ensure the IT team was ready to meet the evolving needs of faculty and students. One of his main goals was to find a lecture capture solution that would not only benefit online students, but also would cater to Suffolk's increasingly web-savvy campus.

The explosion of BlackBoard years earlier already had opened the doors to an increased reliance on online services by the Suffolk community. Professors now used BlackBoard regularly to post lecture PowerPoint slides, provide links to supplementary materials and create forums to spark classroom discussion. A new university green initiative also was fueling this web migration, as professors opted to post more materials online to avoid wasting paper on handouts. Yet, professors still were struggling with how to share recorded lectures with their students. According to Machettira, the university had various multimedia recording solutions available,

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dating back to 1999 when the Sawyer Business School first introduced its online MBA program. And while these solutions did meet basic functionality requirements, they also limited professors’ control over the recording process.

For example, the current solutions required faculty members to make appointments at a university recording studio and record lectures months in advance to ensure there was adequate time for the IT staff to record the session, digitally code the file and upload it to BlackBoard. These solutions also lacked advanced editing tools, meaning professors had to recreate videos each time they updated a lecture’s content.

Being part of a leading, globally focused education program with a dynamic curriculum, professors found these restrictions to be problematic as material quickly became outdated and new information could not be added to previously taped lectures. They also noted that studio-recorded lectures lacked question and answer sessions and other student comments that were part of the interactive lecture experience.

According to Machettira, “We got complaints from faculty that the process of recording multimedia was not easy, was there not a better way to do this, and that it was taking too long. These were all correct perspectives.”

Acknowledging these limitations, Machettira’s team set out to find a complementary solution that would empower professors to manage the whole recording process, while also integrating easily with existing technologies such as BlackBoard.

Yet, finding a solution that fit the university’s IT budget proved difficult as many lecture capture programs required costly hardware implementations and licenses for each recording site. Knowing that Suffolk could not afford to purchase the hundreds of licenses and hardware implementations necessary to outfit its entire faculty, Machettira quickly realized he needed another option.

Hitting the Mark

After searching for alternative solutions, Machettira came across Panopto Focus, a web-based lecture capture solution that could digitally record audio, video and PowerPoint slides outside of a recording studio – freeing professors from their dependence on the IT department.

With Focus, professors could bring lecture capture technology into the classroom by using hard-wired classroom cameras as well as web cams to create virtual sessions. Professors also could create videos in their offices at their convenience, without having to film them months in advance.

“The software resides on a computer, either in the classroom, office, or at home. You are the one that initiates the recording and you are the one that stops the recording,” said Machettira. “The opportunity to allow people to record anytime, anywhere with standardized technology in higher education, is a big one.”

The Focus solution also delivered completed files in an MP3/ MP4 format that could be posted to any Web site, blog or forum instantly. This allowed professors to post content they recorded on the same day they created it, instead of waiting weeks for the IT staff to code and upload the files. Focus also was integrated directly to BlackBoard, enabling professors to include videos with their other course documents with just the click of a few buttons.



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Another huge selling point was Panopto's Socrates Program, which provides Focus software to educational institutions free of charge. With the Socrates Program, Suffolk University did not need to pay a single license fee – the only investment required was hardware and optional support agreements.

And since Focus is a client-server software solution that can run off standard Windows 2003/2008 servers, there was very little hardware necessary for a campus-wide deployment. Focus already recognized existing classroom video cameras, and its use of web cams was a cost-effective option for out of the classroom recording.

“Cost is a big factor for many organizations. I cannot afford to give out high quality video cameras to every faculty member to carry around. But now, we have the ability to provide fairly inexpensive web cams to faculty members. And that's what we are doing. We're rolling out web cams to every desktop on campus.”

Focus also hit high marks with the university's green initiative, as it could be installed on Suffolk's virtual servers, which the Business School implemented in 2005 to help reduce power consumption and consolidate machinery.

Head of the Class

Machettira began beta testing Focus in late 2008 with a core group of interested Sawyer Business School faculty members and staff. He also introduced Focus to colleagues from the other Suffolk University schools to increase the university's overall buy-in.

Initial feedback to Focus was extremely positive as users appreciated the flexibility to record video sessions instantly, without visiting a recording studio or relying on assistance from the IT department – one of Machettira's main goals.

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Machettira also added that beta testers liked the easy-to-use Web interface for recording, editing and viewing video clips, as it empowered non-technical faculty users to create content without having to rely on technologists assisting them all the time.

As demand for multimedia recording grows across campus, Machettira is implementing a plan to make Focus generally available to all Business School faculty, staff and students, both on and off campus, for the beginning of the Fall 2009 semester. In addition, this service will also be available to all users across the Suffolk University network of schools.

As the fall 2009 semester approaches, Machettira is confident that Focus will continue to enrich Suffolk University's lecture capture process – blurring the line between the on-campus and online classroom, and helping all students gain access to a richer and more fulfilling learning experience.



Contact us at sales@panopto.com
or visit panopto.com for more information.