Instructor, students learn how to ‘Collaborate’

Kurt Spilker, a resident paralegal faculty member at the Mohave Community College campus in Dolan City, opened discussions in Tuesday’s property law class by asking for the meaning of five absolute terms.

A handful of students raised their hand before Spilker called on Ralph to give his thoughts. Spilker realized quickly that Ralph’s response wasn’t quite what he was looking for.

“Ralph, don’t give me the answer out of the book,” Spilker said. “I’d like you to tell me in your own words what that means.”

Ralph’s next attempt was much better.

“You, Ralph. The key word in that phrase is absolute,” Spilker said. “Few simple absolute is the most profound way you can ever a piece of property. There are no restrictions whatsoever.”

This kind of interaction between instructor and student is not uncommon. However, future students might be interested to know that Spilker was alone in his office at the time, and his students were scattered throughout Mohave County, in front of their own personal computers.

Prior to this semester, the academic chair at MCC’s Distance Education campus asked Spilker to pilot software known as Blackboard Collaborate, which provides live classroom interaction through a combination of video conferencing, instant messaging and other features. With his desk closed and his head-set on, Spilker is using Blackboard Collaborate to teach classes in property law, torts law and corporation law.

The classes are only a few weeks old, but Spilker said Blackboard Collaborate has already exceeded his expectations. One of his monitors is used for content, and the other is used for classroom management.

“I’ve been simply blown away,” Spilker said. “In some ways, it can be even better than teaching in a live classroom.”

By using the software, Spilker can give lectures, answer questions and provide feedback. And unlike many normal classroom settings, he is able to check for understanding immediately. If a student is unsure about a particular topic, he or she can check “canned” questions in the message box, and Spilker knows right away if the students are getting it, they simply click the check box.

“I knew right away if they’re starting to get lost,” Spilker said. “Then I say, ‘Ok, let’s stop and regroup.’

The software is receiving even better reviews from his students, who can participate in class from the comfort of their own home without having to worry about absences like childcare, travel expenses and loss of work.

“One night, I had a student attending class at McDonald’s,” Spilker said.

Another one of Spilker’s students is Marianne Darrow, who manages a beer and wine store in Colorado City. She is also a wife, mother, grandmother, cosmetologist/barber, children’s coach and a board member on a local educational foundation.

“Having Collaborate offered by MCC is a tremendous benefit to my busy schedule,” Darrow said. “This allows me to sit in my office or home and pursue my degree, where before I may not have been able to do so.

“It is incredible to have the instructor sit in his office 279 miles away with the Grand Canyon between us. I can attend class with the rest of the students as though I am right in the same room with everyone. I have no complaints.”

Spilker currently has about 25 students taking classes with the help of Blackboard Collaborate. He won’t be surprised if that number grows by leaps and bounds over the next few years.

“IT’s not ideal for some courses, especially those that require a lot of hands-on learning,” he said. “But I definitely think this could be the wave of the future.”

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Comment policy: Your comments are welcome; respect and civility are expected.

Name *

Email *

Website

Comment

Post Comment