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LAW PROFESSORS TEACH BEYOND THE CLASSROOM WALLS, WIN NATIONAL AWARDS FOR INNOVATION

DAYTON, Ohio — It’s not hard for law students at the University of Dayton to find Lori Shaw. When she’s not in class, their professor is usually lurking in a virtual classroom she developed to teach aspiring attorneys how to draft pleadings, interview clients and learn other lawyering skills.

For her creative use of an Internet-based legal education service called TWEN (The West Education Network), she has won the TWEN Award for Innovations in Teaching, a national award sponsored by the West Group. Vernellia Randall, professor of law at the University of Dayton, was named runner-up in the competition for using the Web-based technology to “guide students’ learning 24 hours a day, seven days a week” in courses in race and racism in American law and American health care law.

More than 100 law schools across the nation use TWEN, which allows professors to publish course materials, create discussion forums and link to Westlaw, an online legal research service with more than 10,000 databases. Law professors say it’s a technology that’s dramatically changing the way law is taught.

“By using TWEN in my Legal Profession course, I was able to provide first-year law students with unprecedented access to their course materials, their classmates and their teacher,” said Shaw, a lecturer in the University of Dayton’s School of Law. “In essence, it created a second classroom.”

Shaw posted several hundred pages of readings, exercises and assignments on a Web site, which students could access for free. If students were required to read a particular case for class, with the click of a mouse they could jump directly from the syllabus to that case in Westlaw. When drafting complaints, students followed a study guide with links to statutes and cases that could help them gather facts. The technology allowed law students in two classes to argue opposing sides of a case, while keeping confidential client materials secret.

Shaw also used the technology to create several forums. In one, students conducted follow-up client interviews. For two weeks, Shaw checked the forum daily and responded to questions. “Everyone had access to the same factual record, and students were permitted to use the replies to formulate an affidavit in support of their motion,” she said. “By the end of the interview period, my students had a much more complete vision of their client’s situation, a
vision they had a hand in creating.

Shaw also maintained a notice board, a high-tech bulletin board that included the week’s schedule of events, and devoted a forum to “afterthoughts” — a continuation of class discussions. In addition, she used an electronic discussion forum to schedule student conferences and answer questions.

“First-year law students often feel like visitors to a strange land with an unfamiliar language and peculiar customs. In order to acclimate themselves, they must ask questions,” Shaw noted. “Unfortunately, these questions seldom arise at opportune times. Students tend to work on assignments during the wee hours and on weekends.”

Shaw encouraged students to submit questions at any time of the day or night. During peak times during the semester, she checked the site before going to bed and when she got up in the morning and posted responses. Since the electronic questions were anonymous, students were more prone to actually ask questions, instead of “relying on a fourth-hand account, almost always inaccurate, of how I responded to another student’s question in class,” Shaw said.

One student described the value of the technology as unbelievable. “The use of TWEN in my first-year Legal Pro classes gave me the ability to electronically discuss any thoughts, concerns and questions both to other law students and to Professor Shaw at any time of the day or night,” Katie Zemens said. “I very frequently would put a question out and always could get a response from Professor Shaw within less than 24 hours. This was wonderful.”

The technology has turned Shaw into an on-call professor and eased the minds of stressed law students. “At the beginning of class this morning, I mentioned that the law school faculty would be taking part in a retreat this weekend,” she said. “Before I had finished speaking, a hand shot up and a student exclaimed, ‘You’ll have access to a computer there, won’t you?’”

For media interviews, contact Lori Shaw at (937) 229-2218 or via e-mail at shaw@odo.law.udayton.edu and Vernellia Randall at (937) 229-3378 or via e-mail at randall@odo.law.udayton.edu. The West Group can be found online at http://www.westpub.com.