Teaching Software in an Online Course: Drawing on Lessons Learned from Teaching SmartDraw

The courtroom of the 21st century has moved beyond flip charts, posters and static displays to include a variety of interactive and dynamic presentation media.

From demonstrations to scene reconstructions, the adage that "a picture is worth a thousand words" certainly translates into making a compelling and clearly understood argument during a trial.

This pedagogy was reinforced with a combination of tutorials from the textbook in conjunction with assignments where students were asked to construct detailed floor plans, vehicular accident reconstructions based on photographic evidence and scene reconstruction of a slip-and-fall dispute.

Real-world homework assignments and projects were devised so that student could experience using the software as they would in a work setting.

As part of the legal informatics curriculum, the instructors teach a course called Litigation Support Systems and Courtroom Presentations. This is an online course that is taught during Summer I semester. Teaching SmartDraw software in a six-week online course presented a number of pedagogical and logistical challenges. First, the course attracted a diverse student body, including students with significant skills in graphics design and other software, but who lacked knowledge of legal terminology and the rules related to evidence, legal ethics and courtroom procedures. Other students were much less comfortable with software, especially graphic design software, but had more substantial legal background. Interestingly, the instructors discovered that students in non-credit programs at IUPUI do not have access to PowerPoint and other software packages that for-credit students enjoy. Another technical difficulty is that SmartDraw is a Windows-based program.

Also included were opportunities for students to reflect on the ethical issues related to courtroom presentations, including color theory, acceptable asset alteration rules and how perceptions can be influenced by changes to visual and audio materials.

The course included weekly Discussion Forums and extensive feedback on assignments as a way to promote student engagement in the course.