



Different Departments at Drexel University Satisfy their Different Collaborative Needs with Wimba

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-Michael Scheuermann, Director of Online Learning, Drexel University

While it is common knowledge that different schools have different needs, some tend to forget that different departments within a single school often have different needs as well. While an arts school like the Rhode Island School of Design specializes in one field of study, most schools have more diverse course offerings, many of which have their own nuances and needs. Drexel University is one such institution.

On the west side of downtown Philadelphia, Drexel University is widely known for its Engineering, Technology, and Business programs, but its curriculum serves countless other disciplines as well. From Arts & Sciences to Education, to Nursing, like many schools, Drexel offers many courses across a wide spectrum of academic disciplines – face-to-face, via a hybrid approach, or online. While it is straightforward for faculty to teach these subjects in the face-to-face mode as they always have, when it comes to teaching online, or incorporating technology in the teaching and learning environment, many subjects require unique pedagogical constructs. For example, to properly teach Engineering online, it is important

to show complex equations, whereas teaching a language online requires the use of voice. However, for many schools that use a single online instructional tool, they often find that they could not satisfy all of these different needs. But now, thanks to the diversity available within the Wimba Collaboration Suite, different departments are finding easy answers to their unique needs.

Michael Scheuermann, Director of Online Learning, in Drexel's Information Resources & Technology (IRT) department, leads a nine-member team that supports 30,000 end-users at Drexel and five partner schools. They support technologies such as Wimba, Blackboard Vista, their school's standard course management system, and myriad others. His Online Learning Team is tasked with implementing these technologies across the university, training faculty and staff, and responding to myriad end-user needs.



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WIMBA PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- Wimba Classroom
- Wimba Voice

KEY BENEFITS

- Nearly 90% of remote students felt more involved via live instruction
- Satisfy Engineering and Nursing needs for live instruction
- Satisfy language needs for speaking and listening exercises online

Michael Scheuermann
*Director of Online Learning,
Drexel University*





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WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

"The advantage of the Wimba Voice Boards is that not only does everyone hear their classmates' spoken mistakes, but they also get to identify the good speaking,

*-Reese M. Heitner, ESL Instructor,
Drexel University*

Until 2005, Drexel predominantly relied on Blackboard Vista to be the hub of its online courses, but it realized that its different departments had special needs that Bb Vista could not satisfy by itself. For instance, students in its English As A Second Language courses need to practice speaking and listening to English, while remote students in Engineering and Nursing classes needed enhanced, real-time interaction with their instructors – needs that Bb Vista could not satisfy. Thus, Wimba was quickly adopted.

Scheuermann not only leads his OLT, but he is also an adjunct professor of graduate-level Business, Engineering Management, and Education courses. He utilizes many of Drexel's and IRT's technologies in his online courses, uniquely positioning him in a first-hand end-user experience. He has used Wimba since Drexel adopted it in 2005 and never turned back, adopting many of the newest features in the Wimba Collaboration Suite whenever they became available. Most recently, Scheuermann has been teaching an Engineering Management graduate course online – EGMT 581: Problems in Human Relations – to students throughout the country with international students in the mix, from time to time. He utilizes asynchronous and synchronous elements in this course, relying heavily on a combination of threaded discussions via Blackboard Vista and live online chats via Wimba Classroom – actively using the synchronous audio and video features. He finds that this pedagogical construct markedly increases interaction among his students.

"I have found a positive and statistically significant correlation between the number of posts that the facilitator makes and the number of posts that course participants make," Scheuermann says, having tracked and studied the asynchronous elements for years.

On the synchronous side, he schedules four live chats via Wimba Classroom each term during which he will have approximately 10 students logged in at once. He has found that having 7-14 students per room is optimal for his subject matter. These live conversations allow him to review material covered in class as well as provide in-depth feedback to points raised in the Wimba Classroom or previously in the course's asynchronous threaded discussion areas.

"Live chats build learning community and serve to enhance and integrate the learning, while I gain an additional dimension with which to judge student performance - all while diminishing my administrative role," Scheuermann says, when speaking of the advantages of synchronous course elements specifically.

At the end of a recent term he asked for anonymous feedback from his students. Out of 30 student responses, 26 recommended that he continue to incorporate the live chats in his future course offerings. One student said, "No, do not eliminate the [live] chats. I found these to be the best part of the course. The asynchronous threaded discussions can get exhausting reading through all of them. Having live people on the line and the speed at which we discuss the topics in the chats was great." Scheuermann reflected on that student contribution and feels that "When we are able to get to the point where the students begin to see the value of an integrated learning approach; educators have enabled powerful academic achievement indeed."

Reese M. Heitner teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) at Drexel to students from across the globe who grew up speaking countless languages other than English. Heitner prepares his students for the TOEFL exam, a national test which



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"We regularly use application sharing simply to show our students how to access internal resources. We show them our own internal [online learning] website so we can show them all the software they can get."

-Mary Gallagher-Gordon, MSN, RN, CNE, instructor of Nursing Informatics in Drexel University's College of Nursing & Health Professions

ultimately verifies a student's proficiency in English speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills. The speaking component of the test requires students to spontaneously produce speech samples in response to a series of computer-prompted questions. Students are understandably nervous: they are being recorded and timed by a conversational partner with the compassion and character of a computer. For years, Heitner was frustrated because he relied on audio cassette tapes to review their speaking. "I started off with audio tapes which were neither convenient to record, review, nor share," Heitner says. "Then we moved on to mp3 digital voice files. They were easier to record, review and share, but even mp3 recordings could not simulate the strictly timed testing conditions of the Internet-based speaking version of the TOEFL taken via computer."

Working closely with Julie Allmayer of Drexel's IRT department, the duo came up with a solution – via Wimba – to solve this problem.

By using Wimba Voice, and more specifically, Wimba Voice Boards, Heitner's students are able to directly simulate the TOEFL test environment by posting their speech samples in pre-defined 1-minute recording windows which automatically close when the built-in timer runs out – just like the TOEFL test. "The power of the Wimba Voice Board is not only that we have all the advantages of digital recording, sharing, and reviewing, but that we have an Internet-based interface that closely simulates the strictly timed testing conditions of the actual TOEFL test. This is crucial for test preparation." In addition, then, to practicing and internalizing the criteria the TOEFL judges use under real exam conditions through a "stop-and-go" review of grammar, vocabulary, and fluency, Heitner's students experience being timed by an unforgiving recording window. "This way

they know exactly what's expected of them and can concentrate on their performance, not their fears. Speaking in a nonnative language under unnaturally timed conditions requires both strategy and practice. Wimba allows us to maximize our test preparation in a unique way."

With Wimba Voice, Heitner and his students can easily focus on grammar, pronunciation, fluency, and organization. And most importantly, since Wimba Voice only contains a handful of buttons and is integrated into Blackboard Vista, Heitner, who is the first to admit he's no tech whiz, has an easy time. "I am no Wimba expert, but that's a good thing [about Wimba's ease-of-use] because I could set it up, and my students can use it, so easily."

Now that he is mastering Wimba Voice, his instruction is getting more creative and innovative. To get beyond 'typical' and 'basic' questions such as 'Where did you grow up?,' Heitner has his students listen to mp3 files from NPR radio shows about the Sahara Desert and the future of new cell phone technology. Students learn to sharpen their listening and comprehension skills and how to prepare spoken summaries regarding more sophisticated academic questions. He feels this enriches their ability to listen to, think, and speak in English.

If learning a language online before Wimba was a challenge, so was teaching nursing. Nursing contains complex ideas and terminology and becomes difficult to teach well when students are isolated and on their own. Again, this is where the lively nature of Wimba comes in.

Fran Cornelius, PhD, MSN, RN, CNE, CIN and Mary Gallagher-Gordon, MSN, RN, CNE both teach Nursing Informatics in Drexel's College of Nursing



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ABOUT WIMBA

Wimba develops web-based collaboration software designed for online education, language learning and live interactive communications. Our collaborative applications enable learning professionals to fully embrace the new wave of teaching and learning opportunities afforded by the Internet; regardless of geographic location, bandwidth or operating system. Our classroom collaboration solutions enable educators to conduct live, online classes, meetings, office hours and other collaborations, and our language learning tools add oral interaction directly into course content, webpages, study groups and assessments. With simplicity and power, Wimba adds new dimensions to online, accessible education, enhancing the learning experience for both students and instructors.

& Health Professions (CNHP) to working nurses enrolled in the RN-BSN completion or Masters Programs. While many of their students are located throughout the United States, their course roster boasts students from Lebanon, China, and several European countries. Although Cornelius and Gordon utilize Blackboard to present course content and assignments, they rely heavily on Wimba Classroom to offer real-time instruction.

For example, in one class they post a webpage from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and then give their students a “virtual scavenger hunt” during which they give their students 10 minutes to navigate the CDC website to find resources they’ll need in their nursing careers. After 10 minutes they bring everyone back to the main class to discuss CDC. It is this lively, instructor-led interaction which proves so valuable for their geographically dispersed students.

In addition to meeting live to discuss class and nursing resources, they regularly use application sharing simply to show their students how to access internal resources at Drexel. “We show them our own internal IRT website so we can show them all the software they can get,” says Gallagher-Gordon. “We also give them a virtual tour of our Health Sciences library. Because some of our students are far away, we want to show them the opportunities they have in our library. We show them how to do searches and how to find other resources in the library that are beneficial to them. We take them on virtual excursions.”

Further, besides formal live online class time and school resource sessions, at the end of each term they’ll give their students presenter access so they present their final group projects to the rest of their classmates. “They enjoy it, they have control of that situation at that time and they give

their final presentations,” says Gallagher-Gordon. Each presentation is conducted virtually.

Since they have 40 to 60 students from different sections in a given term, they also schedule additional time to meeting online via Wimba Classroom. “I found that Wimba works very well for virtual office hours,” Cornelius says. “We meet three times per term live but I’m available during the week for regularly scheduled ‘virtual’ office hours as well, just like I would be if I was on-campus.” To accommodate multiple course sections, Cornelius will set up guest links to one meeting room and place these in the other course sections. “This way, all students can enter one ‘virtual office’ to meet with me. This works very well and the students are very appreciative of the additional opportunity to ‘connect’ with faculty” They’ll even archive each office hour so students who were unable to attend can listen to the archive and benefit from the Q & A and demonstrations that clarify class assignments.

Cory Schmitt of the School of Education at Drexel is an authority on video production and likes to push Wimba Classroom to the limits. He and his team create high-end video presentations which they stream live via Wimba Classroom. From interviews with authors, to conference panels and fireside chats with the Dean, Schmitt feels that video should be utilized more often to bring the Drexel community closer together.

During these high-end video pieces he’ll have an instructor or moderator monitor the chat box in Wimba Classroom in order to pass audience questions along to the interviewee. He has used his multi-camera video techniques in scores of classes online to geographically dispersed students. “Our big question is, how do we engage our students online to create a sense of community?”