

American University Washington College of Law

## Digital Commons @ American University Washington College of Law

---

Articles in Law Reviews & Other Academic Journals

Scholarship & Research

---

2018

### Best Practices for Teaching Advanced Legal Research Asynchronously Online

Khelani Clay

Shannon M. Roddy

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/facsch\\_lawrev](https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/facsch_lawrev)



Part of the [Legal Education Commons](#), and the [Legal Writing and Research Commons](#)

---

# Best Practices for Teaching Advanced Legal Research Asynchronously Online

***Khelani Clay***

*Access Services Librarian, American University Washington College of Law  
kclay@wcl.american.edu*

***Shannon Roddy***

*Student Services Librarian, American University Washington College of Law  
roddy@wcl.american.edu*

For the past six summers, reference librarians at American University Washington College of Law (AUWCL) have taught an advanced legal research course online in an asynchronous format. Our class was the first online offering in the J.D. program at AUWCL. As the course has evolved, we have developed a set of best practices for teaching an asynchronous online research course that may be useful to others planning similar courses.

## **Background**

In 2012, AUWCL created the Office of Online Education to develop the law school's online program. Ultimately, the office adopted Desire2Learn (D2L) as the learning management system (LMS) for all online courses. Similar platforms that serve higher education include Blackboard and Sakai and open source options Moodle and Canvas. All of the platforms offer numerous bells and whistles, some of which are

useful in an advanced legal research course and many of which are not. Some functions we found particularly useful include timed quizzes with automatic grading; rubrics; discussion forums with multiple setup options; release conditions; import, export, and copy components; calendar; and a dropbox for submitting assignments.

Because of the law school's prior online education policy, we were required to offer the course in a hybrid format for the first few summers, e.g., at least nine hours of instruction time had to be in-person. At the beginning of the semester, we held an all-day Saturday boot camp, where we introduced the students to the LMS, went over the syllabus, refreshed their Lexis/Westlaw/Bloomberg skills, and reintroduced them to legal research. Recently, the law school amended the online education policy and removed the hybrid format requirement, so this past summer we were able to offer the course entirely online.



## Best Practices

### Consistent Organization/Clear Expectations

While it seems obvious that a course should be well-organized and expectations clearly defined, it's especially important in an online environment. Because so many of our students were working full-time or out of the area/country during the summer, we never met most of them face-to-face. Any clarifications regarding the syllabus or assignments were done over email or other electronic means, which can be less effective than making a quick announcement at the start of an in-person class. Err on the side of providing more detail in your syllabus and instructions than you would in a traditional course.

### Weekly Modules

Following the theme of clear and consistent organization, we found weekly modules to be particularly useful.

The summer session at AUWCL is nine weeks, which we divide into nine weekly themes:

1. Re-introduction to Legal Research
2. Case Law Research
3. Statutory Research
4. Legislative History Research
5. Administrative Law Research
6. Secondary Sources
7. Low-Cost & Free Resources
8. International & Foreign Law Research
9. Prepare to Practice

Each module consisted of the same type of materials, organized in the same way (more on the organization in the next paragraph).

### ABA Standard 310

Standard 310 mandates the amount of instruction time and out-of-class work a course must offer. It applies equally to in-person and distance education courses. For a two-credit course like ours held over nine weeks, that equals 2.6 hours per week on "in-class" work and 6.67 hours per week on "out-of-class" work. To meet the standard for an asynchronous online course, where all activities are technically "out-of-class," we categorized the activities as follows:

- ▶ In-Class Time: recorded lectures, database tutorials, and discussion questions
- ▶ Out-of-Class Time: reading, short research assignments, quizzes

**"While it seems obvious that a course should be well-organized and expectations clearly defined, it's especially important in an online environment .... Err on the side of providing more detail in your syllabus and instructions than you would in a traditional course."**

### Formative Assessment

LMSs are designed for formative assessments. Take advantage of their tools! In addition to weekly



quizzes, we gave weekly research assignments that built off the same fact pattern and focused on the weekly theme (e.g., case law research, statutory research, etc.).

### Use Rubrics

Formative assessment is great for students but can be a lot of work for instructors. Rubrics help standardize grading and save time in the long run. They can be time-consuming to create but streamline the grading process. We also used the automatic feedback function for quizzes (multiple choice, matching, T/F options) so that students saw their grades and explanations as soon as they completed the weekly quiz.

**"Break up the lecture into 15- or 20-minute increments based on subtopics. That way, busy students can listen to a portion during their commute or whenever they have a short break between activities. They won't have to figure out where they left off in a long lecture."**

### Discussion Posts

It's probably the hope of all instructors that students will be so engaged with the material that they willingly engage in thoughtful discussions about it. Alas, that's often not the case. If you're

going to use discussion posts in your online class, you must monitor and contribute to the forums regularly to encourage student participation. Make substantive participation mandatory.

### Instructor/Student Interaction

Decide how you will interact with your students and provide that information in the syllabus. Will you require any face-to-face meetings? Are phone calls acceptable? Would you prefer all interactions to be done over email?

### Short Videos

Break up the lecture into 15- or 20-minute increments based on subtopics. That way, busy students can listen to a portion during their commute or whenever they have a short break between activities. They won't have to figure out where they left off in a long lecture.

### Beware the Subscription Database Tutorial

Many of the legal research providers have created online tutorials (Lexis Learn, Westlaw tutorials, etc.). They do not, however, always keep them updated. And sometimes they're just not that good.

### Beware Multiple Platforms

One summer, we attempted to use a matter management system in addition to the LMS. We wanted to mimic a law firm environment, but using multiple platforms was redundant and confusing. Some experiments are better left to in-person classes, where students aren't already contending with an LMS.

Do you have questions or comments for us regarding online courses? We'd love to hear from you. ■

