

TLC Distance Learning Tips & Tricks

Ch (Lt Col) Jeff Williams, CAP

You were wondering about our TLC infrastructure, and how we could leverage it for other courses. I'm doing nothing fancy, nor are we spending great gobs of cash to make this work.

There are really only two pieces of software I am using, an open source Learning Management System (maybe Classroom Management System is the better term), and a conferencing system. Let's look at both elements and how they come in to play.

The Learning Management System is Manhattan Virtual Classroom, an older project from a school in New Hampshire. I use this software as the repository for class handouts and to replace the "tell me about yourself" portion of the class. I also ask the students to upload their certificates for the two portions of TLC Basic which are taken from the CAP Learning Management System. Manhattan Virtual Classroom can be used to assign teams and capture quasi-real time conversations, so we could use it for exercises where we need interaction. Students can upload papers and other artifacts, if needed, either to their team or the whole class. We can track assignments and do other management tasks as necessary. Manhattan Virtual Classroom has been very helpful.

The other piece is the conferencing system. We began by using WebEX which was provided by a local community college in Leadville. The system worked pretty well, but seeing our courses typically were on Saturday (we made a couple of exceptions to that), we ran in to conflicts with system maintenance. Either WebEX or the school would occasionally kill the system. That is when I broke down and purchased the \$100 subscription for Zoom.US. We have had minimal problems with Zoom, our problems being caused by power hits and lower bandwidth in rural locations.

My team, Major Keith Christian and Captain Jessica Parsons, have determined that using the screen sharing for presentations works well. We also keep the chat window open for ongoing comments. By having one of the team monitoring chat while another teaches, we can answer questions in real time. By the way, I cannot say enough good about this primary team, which will be a topic a bit later in this missive.

We also have found that using Zoom allows us to bring up the national website which enhances a number of our sessions. For example, the QCUA presentation, which is pretty outdated, is supplemented with the latest from CAPMEMBERS.COM and real time access to the Commander's Dashboard in e-services.

During the course we prefer to keep the students' microphones muted, and we turn off their web cameras to preserve bandwidth. Although I now have a better internet provider than I had in Leadville, we want to optimize the use of bandwidth for all our participants. This is why having and monitoring the chat window is so important.

Why did I decide to use Zoom.US rather than Skype? Two reasons. First, the free version of Skype only allows for nine participants. The second, Zoom.US is less expensive, and this project is self-

funded and self-hosted. The free conferencing services such as GoToMeeting, tend to use screen scrapers to obtain personal information. They have to make money somehow, so by selling email addresses, etc., they fund their services. More power to them, but not with my students.

What makes this whole project work is the faculty and staff. Keith, who is a unit commander in Colorado, is an Information Technology professional in his day job. He truly understands the use of this infrastructure. Jessica brings her wealth of knowledge from the cadet program, and I, for the life of me, can't remember her Spaatz number. She is working on a degree in web design, so she, too, understands this infrastructure. She is also employed by her school to evaluate online courses, so she brings a unique perspective to this project.

We typically open registration for the course a month before our meeting. I wrote a registration system which is adequate, but I really need to update it. This is the weakest link in the chain. A week before the session is when I open the Manhattan Virtual Classroom course module for people to introduce themselves, upload their CAP LMS certificates, and the like. We also populate the handouts section of the classroom with the basic materials, including the latest SuperChart, CAPR 60-1, and the like. The day of the class, we open the Zoom.US session about 30 minutes early so people can test their connections and get comfortable with the technology.

Because our students are at home and can take a quick break to grab snacks, we tend to work through lunch. They get at least ten minutes between modules where we switch instructors, answer questions, and get our own refreshments. Each group of students may decide to take a 30 minute lunch or work through that time. Every session so far has skipped lunch.

Although most of our sessions have been on Saturday, Jessica has directed a couple of Sunday sessions. Her team includes Captain Tara Cowles (Wyoming) and Captain Sylvia Small (South Dakota). Keith and I will assist with the afternoon portion of the Sunday classes after we get home from church.

Alabama Wing used the Manhattan Virtual Classroom and their own conferencing software for a session. That is the only other entity to use this format.

Where are we going with this? One of our biggest requests is for TLC Intermediate. Because of my schedule, I have not yet taken this course, so I certainly can't teach it. I believe that Keith was finally able to get TLC Intermediate credit at the Colorado Wing Conference last October. If you have instructors who would want to use this infrastructure, I would be overjoyed. Indeed, I don't know if Keith, Jessica, and I can do more than the quarterly TLC Basic which are already scheduled, plus the two Sunday sessions we try to present each year.

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