Ensemble Video in the Classroom and Beyond at Buffalo State College

CASE STUDY

BUFFALO STATE
The State University of New York

At a Glance

Institution Name
SUNY Buffalo State

Challenges
• Need scalable video platform to replace outmoded homegrown media server
• Need stringent security measures to lock down academic content, comply with copyright
• Need closed captioning features to satisfy accessibility guidelines

Benefits
• Empowered faculty to independently manage their own content
• Integrated with campus LMS for streamlined service
• Eliminated time-consuming manual workflows with one unified system

Summary

Known for its distinctive curriculum, hands-on learning opportunities, and diverse educational environment, SUNY Buffalo State is the largest comprehensive college in the nation’s foremost system of public education, the State University of New York (SUNY).

Nestled within one of the most vibrant cultural districts in Buffalo NY, the urban campus serves approximately 11,000 undergraduate and graduate students, enrolled in more than 200-degree programs.

A leader in undergraduate research and other active, experiential learning opportunities, Buffalo State receives more grants and research support than all SUNY colleges combined, through the SUNY Research Foundation.

Buffalo State Director of Instructional Technology Melaine Kenyon heads the Instructional Resources Office, providing strategic leadership for the
development and integration of instructional technology into classrooms and other learning spaces throughout the institution’s 125-acre campus.

The Instructional Resources team facilitates instructional design services and oversees all classroom technology support, computer graphics, TV engineering services, online and hybrid learning, multimedia production, and photographic services.

**Challenge**

Prior to 2011, Buffalo State managed video and other rich media content in-house, using a homegrown media server. Time-consuming, manual transcoding and publishing processes weighed down the Instructional Resources staff, and prevented faculty from independently managing their content. “It was very cumbersome,” said Kenyon. “Not scalable, whatsoever.”

When faculty wanted to share a video with students via ANGEL (the institution’s learning management system, at the time) they hand-delivered the file to the Instructional Resources team, who transcoded content on a file-by-file basis, and then uploaded it to the homegrown server. Then, they created web links, and emailed them to the faculty, to copy and paste into ANGEL LMS. Securing content on the homegrown system, to ensure only authorized viewers had access to it, presented further issues. Once videos were locked down on the homegrown system, authenticated viewers were only able to access them on Windows devices.

Kenyon recognized the need for more agile media management, incorporating stringent security features to ensure compliance with copyright law, while also enabling access from a wide range of campus and personal devices. It was also important to simplify the publishing process, empowering faculty to take control of their own media, with minimal assistance.

A scalable closed captioning workflow would be necessary, to facilitate compliance with Buffalo State’s accessibility initiative, ensuring all academic content is made available to all users, of all abilities, at all times.

“It's something we're very proud of, and we take it very seriously,” said Kenyon. To accomplish this goal, she needed a more efficient alternative to the manual process of adding captions, one at a time.

**Search**

Kenyon began the search for an online video platform in early 2011, opening a dialogue with her colleagues and professional network.

How could they streamline the encoding process? How could they secure content without limiting viewers to particular devices?

How could they empower faculty to take control of their own media? How could they make closed captioning more efficient, to ensure access for users with disabilities?

A vendor recommended Kenyon explore Ensemble Video, a video content management and publishing platform built by a group of educators at Syracuse University, and adopted by hundreds of educational institutions across the country.

Kenyon contacted Michael Notarius, the chief information officer at the SUNY Information Technology Exchange Center (ITEC), who was already implementing the platform on his servers. After an initial round of testing, Kenyon felt Ensemble would be able to help them, and decided to move forward with a pilot implementation.
"I was very impressed from the start," said Kenyon. She recognized how Ensemble’s simple user interface and distributed administration structure would allow faculty greater autonomy, while maintaining all digital teaching materials in a secure, central repository.

Each faculty member or department could manage its own media library, upload audio and video files, add attachments and annotations, and publish single videos or dynamic video playlists to Blackboard Learn (the institution’s new learning management system), or to any content management system, blog, or webpage. Staff and students would be able to access Ensemble content anywhere with an Internet connection.

Ensemble would not confine faculty to any particular recording format or editing software. The system’s built-in Rhozet ProMedia Carbon transcoder would handle most audio and video file types, without proprietary restrictions.

Recognized for its suite of captioning features, developed with participation from higher education institutions across the country, Ensemble Video also offered an integration with CaptionSync, enabling a seamless, automated closed captioning workflow, and allowing Buffalo State to aggregate captioning volumes for greater discounts.

**Solution**

Buffalo State began a pilot with Ensemble Video in June 2011, and officially adopted the platform in 2012, to replace its aging homegrown system. In July 2013, SUNY closed a statewide deal with Ensemble, and Buffalo State was among the first institutions to join. SUNY ITEC hosts and supports Ensemble, allowing individual schools to buy in at a reduced price, and take advantage of shared services, while reducing duplicate efforts and investments.

Kenyon and her team are working to implement Ensemble across Buffalo State.

“We are still in adoption mode,” she said. “We have fairly high use of the system, and I’ve never promoted it. We’re pushing ahead, and it is going to be made available for everybody.”

So far, the institution has amassed close to 100 faculty media libraries, containing over 3,000 videos, with more than 50,000 views. Kenyon expects usage to double, by spring 2014, as the campus completes its migration from ANGEL LMS to Blackboard Learn.

With Ensemble, the Instructional Resources team can support faculty media management and uphold the institution’s accessibility initiative, all in a secure virtual environment that offers anytime, anywhere, any screen access.

“If someone gives a presentation on how to use a SMART Board, for example, they record it,” explained Kenyon. “They upload the files to Ensemble, and we run it through CaptionSync so it will be closed captioned.”
Ensemble Video in the Classroom and Beyond

Kenyon and the Instructional Resources team currently use Ensemble Video to support teaching, learning, and professional development, in a variety of ways.

The Center for Professional Development is using Ensemble to caption and publish videos highlighting academic tools and strategies, to support faculty, staff, leadership, and diversity training.

“If someone gives a presentation on how to use a SMART Board, for example, they record it,” explained Kenyon. “They upload the files to Ensemble, and we run it through CaptionSync so it will be closed captioned. And now the videos are going to be available on their website.”

Buffalo State is home to the oldest degree-granting program on creativity in the world, the International Center for Studies in Creativity (ICSC), offering graduate-level distance learning programs in creativity and change leadership.

“[ICSC] faculty started their program on VHS tapes, which we would mail,” remembers Kenyon. “Then, we graduated to DVDs. And now they’re able to watch them online.”

With Ensemble, faculty can now manage their own content, with very little assistance, from start to finish, and students can access from their laptop or mobile device, on their own schedule.

The Department of Music uses Ensemble to support distance and hybrid courses. “We’re excited the Master of Science in Music Education is moving online,” said Kenyon. The online degree is designed specifically for in-service music teachers, and focuses on courses that are critical to their ongoing professional development.

Down the road, the platform’s video Dropbox will provide an easy way for faculty to view student-created videos, and to assess their progress as music teachers, without having to juggle physical media or stress about file types and codecs. Then, faculty will be able to use Ensemble’s annotations feature to provide feedback to students, at specific points throughout the videos.

English Department Chair and Professor Dr. Lisa Berglund uses Ensemble to teach her Introduction to Shakespeare on Film course, to undergraduates. A traditional lecture version of the course uses recorded lectures as supplemental study materials. An online version of the course relies on the same videos, which Berglund annotates with relevant information.

Results

Buffalo State College Case Study
empowering faculty to independently manage their content in a secure online environment, and freeing the team to assist faculty in other ways. As a result, more media can be integrated into more courses, and accessed by more students, using more devices.

“It’s dramatically easier than our homegrown system,” said Kenyon. “I haven’t had to have my video staff touch [Ensemble], because the faculty are now empowered to oversee their own content.” Upwards of 80 faculty members are now creating and uploading content, with minimal assistance, and that number is growing every day.

“Faculty are thrilled they can use Ensemble on their own, any time, from any internet-capable computer, with no client-side software,” said Kenyon. “Our homegrown system involved shared drives, which you had to be on campus to access.”

Faculty can use Ensemble’s Blackboard Learn Building Block to access and share audio and video content in any Blackboard Learn course, in a variety of ways, without storing the content on Blackboard Learn servers. They can also publish single videos and dynamic playlists to any CMS, webpage, or blog, while the files remain within the secure, unified system.

“Students can easily access content, it’s secure, and it will play on a mobile device,” said Kenyon.

The system is accomplishing the needs of the institution, and offers a robust, scalable framework on which to grow.

“Our professors like the fact that it was developed at another higher education institution, specifically with faculty in mind,” said Kenyon. Each new update of the software provides additional education-focused features, developed in collaboration with institutions across North America and Europe.

Ensemble’s captioning tools help Kenyon meet the institution’s accessibility goals. Every day, more captioned academic content is available to the Buffalo State learning community.

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Future

Once fully implemented, Ensemble Video’s robust infrastructure will enable more than 10,000 students to stream content over a wide range of devices and connection speeds, anytime and anywhere.

Kenyon expects campus usage to double, as Buffalo State completes its migration to Blackboard Learn, in the spring. Faculty will take advantage of Ensemble’s Blackboard Building Block to easily browse and embed audio and video content from their Ensemble media libraries, and provide searchable, dynamic video playlists for their students. “We love the Blackboard Building Block,” said Kenyon. “We love how it works.”

Moving forward, Kenyon will be able to hand over Ensemble administration duties to her staff, enabling a more unified approach toward instructional design.

In the past, an instructional designer worked with faculty on the majority of course materials, while Kenyon assisted them separately with video. “Now, [video management and publishing] will be embedded with what the instructional designers work on with faculty,” she said.

The instructional designers will be working with faculty to leverage the video dropbox feature, to provide an easy way for students and other constituents to submit videos for instructional purposes.

“We love the Blackboard Building Block,” said Kenyon. “We love how it works.”

The music department, for example, will utilize this feature in their online music education courses, to observe and assess students’ music-teaching abilities.

Kenyon is working with ITEC to configure LDAP authentication with Ensemble. Currently, faculty authenticate via manually created Ensemble Video accounts. This change will enable constituents to use their Buffalo State username and password to configure their own media libraries, and immediately begin taking advantage of the Ensemble system, with very little intervention.

She is currently working with the Office of Disability Services to create a policy determining priority levels for captioning content. “We absolutely love the CaptionSync integration,” she said. With Ensemble, Buffalo State has an efficient and scalable tool, to ensure campus media is available for everyone.