

Designing Asynchronous Criminal Justice Education: A Community of Inquiry and Constructivist Approach

Deneil D. Christian, PhD | East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA

Contact: christiand25@ecu.edu

Abstract

Asynchronous online learning is now central in higher education, including criminal justice, a field long rooted in face-to-face, experiential instruction. This article offers a practice-informed, design-based analysis of fully asynchronous criminal justice teaching, grounded in constructivist learning theory and the Community of Inquiry framework. Drawing on sustained teaching across institutions and degree levels, it synthesizes scholarship with reflective practice to show how cognitive, social, and teaching presence can be cultivated online. It distills design principles, scaffolds discussion, aligns assessment, supports case-based learning, and fosters a visible instructor presence that supports engagement, critical thinking, and professional identity formation. The article also considers institutional conditions shaping quality, including faculty workload, instructional design support, and digital equity. These insights contribute to SoTL and provide transferable strategies for applied, discussion-driven disciplines such as criminal justice.

Keywords: Asynchronous learning, criminal justice education, Community of Inquiry, constructivism, online pedagogy

Introduction

Online higher education has evolved from a peripheral innovation into a central mode of academic delivery, particularly in disciplines where professional access and flexible pathways are critical. Criminal justice, traditionally grounded in face-to-face instruction and experiential learning, has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades. Driven by technological advances, institutional competitiveness, and the learning preferences of digitally fluent students, programs have increasingly shifted to online and hybrid modalities (Hummer et al., 2010; Sitren & Smith, 2016). Institutions across the United States exemplify this shift, offering fully online criminal justice programs that mirror the rigor of traditional curricula. My teaching across these institutions demonstrates how asynchronous environments, once seen as supplemental, have become the backbone of digital justice education.

While synchronous models gained visibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, the asynchronous format has proven especially adaptable. It enables adult learners, working professionals, and international students to engage with justice-related material regardless of time zones or work schedules. Yet, this flexibility also introduces pedagogical and ethical complexities, such as fostering authentic discussion without immediacy, maintaining engagement across physical distance, and ensuring equity for students with varying levels of technological access (Zhang & Chen, 2023).

The present paper addresses these complexities through both theoretical grounding and practical reflection. It integrates the constructivist perspective (Allen, 2022; Kritt & Budwig, 2022) and the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 1999) to explore how cognitive, social, and teaching presence can be cultivated in an asynchronous setting. It also builds on prior criminal justice scholarship on online pedagogy, including faculty workload and design concerns (Hummer et al., 2010), student engagement and reflection (Bernat & Frailing, 2015; Jones, 2021), and technological mediation in learning communities (Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Smadi et al., 2021). In this article, I argue that asynchronous criminal justice education can support deep, reflective, and socially conscious learning when grounded in deliberate design and institutional support.

The Evolution of Online Criminal Justice Education

Online criminal justice programs have evolved from marginal experiments into comprehensive degree offerings, now housed in respected public and private universities. Hummer et al. (2010) documented this expansion as a convergence of technological innovation, market demand, and institutional strategy. Traditional institutions sought to remain competitive with for-profit universities by introducing online courses and programs, thereby increasing both student enrollment and revenue. This expansion was not merely economic; it was also demographic and pedagogical. Online modalities attracted nontraditional learners, military personnel, working adults, and caregivers, whom residential programs underserved. Hummer et al. (2010) identified multiple dynamics shaping this transformation, including expanded access for nontraditional learners, increased flexibility, and programmatic growth through online delivery.

Subsequent research supports the durability of these trends. Sitren and Smith (2016) observed that criminal justice faculty increasingly acknowledged the legitimacy of online learning, even as they voiced concerns about workload, assessment integrity, and the loss of spontaneous classroom dialogue. Online criminal justice education has moved beyond novelty to become an essential component of departmental offerings nationwide. More recently, Al-Freih (2022) used Ely's Conditions of Change framework to argue that successful online implementation requires both structural and cultural readiness. Institutions must invest in training, technology, and policy alignment to ensure that digital transformation supports, rather than burdens, faculty. This insight is especially relevant to the criminal justice field, where educators often balance teaching with professional or community-based engagement.

Literature Contribution

Research on online criminal justice education has grown steadily, yet much of the existing literature emphasizes modality comparisons, student satisfaction, or isolated course implementations (e.g., Hummer et al., 2010; Sitren & Smith, 2016). Less attention has been paid to how fully asynchronous criminal justice education functions across degree levels and institutional contexts when grounded explicitly in learning theory and intentional instructional design. This article addresses that gap by offering a practice-informed, theory-driven analysis of asynchronous pedagogy in criminal justice education.

This article makes three contributions to literature. First, it extends constructivist learning theory and the Community of Inquiry framework to fully asynchronous criminal justice education, showing how cognitive, social, and teaching presence can be intentionally cultivated without relying on synchronous instruction. Second, it synthesizes multi-institutional instructional experience into transferable pedagogical strategies that align theory, assessment, and engagement in online justice-focused courses. Third, it situates asynchronous criminal justice pedagogy within broader higher education conversations about faculty workload, institutional support, and equity, highlighting structural considerations that shape instructional effectiveness. By integrating theory, prior scholarship, and reflective instructional practice, this article contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education and offers a design-oriented framework for educators seeking to enhance asynchronous teaching in applied, discussion-driven disciplines such as criminal justice.

Research Approach

In this article, I use a practice-informed, design-based scholarly approach grounded in scholarship on teaching and learning. Rather than reporting outcomes from a single empirical study, I synthesize the existing literature and draw on sustained instructional experience across multiple asynchronous criminal justice courses and institutional contexts. These approaches are well established within higher education research, particularly in studies examining pedagogy, curriculum design, and instructional innovation, where the goal is theory-informed improvement of teaching practice rather than hypothesis testing. The analysis draws upon my experience teaching fully asynchronous criminal justice courses at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels across several institutions in the United States. Insights are derived from iterative course design, repeated instructional cycles, informal student feedback, and learning management

system analytics used formatively to refine instruction. These data sources are not treated as variables for statistical analysis but as reflective artifacts that inform pedagogical decision-making.

The conceptual analysis draws on constructivist learning theory and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which together provide an analytic lens for examining how cognitive, social, and teaching presence are cultivated in asynchronous environments (Allen, 2022; Garrison et al., 1999; Kritt & Budwig, 2022). These frameworks analyze course design features, instructional strategies, and assessment structures to identify patterns, challenges, and effective practices that support engagement, critical thinking, and professional identity formation in criminal justice education. This approach aligns with design-based and reflective practitioner methodologies that emphasize contextualized insight, principle transferability, and continuous pedagogical refinement. The purpose is to articulate theoretically grounded design principles and instructional strategies that may inform future empirical research and guide educators engaged in asynchronous justice education.

Theoretical Foundations: Constructivism and the Community of Inquiry

Constructivism in Digital Learning

Constructivism posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction, reflection, and contextualization. Allen (2022) emphasized that online learning environments are inherently suited to constructivist pedagogy because they require learners to engage autonomously with content, peers, and instructors. Rather than passive recipients of information, students in asynchronous courses become co-creators of knowledge, negotiating meaning through written discourse, case analysis, and applied reflection.

Kritt and Budwig (2022) further argued that the future of constructivist education depends on integrating humanistic and technological dimensions of learning. In justice-focused courses such as white-collar crime or restorative justice, constructivist design enables students to examine multiple perspectives, question assumptions, and develop ethical reasoning—capacities essential to professional judgment in criminal justice contexts. In asynchronous criminal justice courses, constructivism manifests through scaffolded assignments, problem-based learning, and reflective discussion forums. Students interpret cases, apply theory to practice, and engage in iterative feedback loops aligned with professional inquiry. These practices reflect what Bernat and Frailing (2015) describe as reflection, integration, and application—key stages in the progression from knowledge acquisition to professional competence.

The Community of Inquiry Framework

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model developed by Garrison et al. (1999) provides a foundational structure for analyzing and designing online learning experiences. CoI proposes that effective online education occurs at the intersection of three interdependent presences: cognitive, social, and teaching. Cognitive presence reflects learners' ability to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. Social presence captures the extent to which participants perceive one another as real and authentic. Teaching presence encompasses

instructional design, facilitation, and direct instruction, guiding coherence and direction within the learning community.

Subsequent research has validated the CoI framework across disciplines. Tu and McIsaac (2002) demonstrated that social presence directly influences interaction and student satisfaction, while Smadi et al. (2021) found that intentional support for CoI dimensions enhances engagement and learning outcomes when instructors receive adequate pedagogical preparation. More recent work suggests that video-based discussions can further strengthen social and teaching presence in flexible learning environments (Kormos et al., 2023). These findings parallel challenges criminal justice faculty commonly encounter when transitioning to asynchronous modalities.

In criminal justice education, CoI principles help bridge theoretical knowledge and professional practice. Teaching presence structures discussion prompts and case-based activities; social presence supports empathy and ethical reasoning; and cognitive presence emerges as students synthesize information and apply it to practical contexts, such as policy analysis or ethical decision-making in law enforcement. Together, constructivism and the Community of Inquiry framework provide a conceptual foundation for asynchronous justice education that emphasizes autonomy, collaboration, and reflective engagement. The following sections build on these frameworks to examine pedagogical strategies and institutional considerations that support rigor and engagement in digital classrooms.

Pedagogical Strategies for Asynchronous Justice Education

Building Engagement Through Structured Interaction

Engagement is a frequently cited challenge in asynchronous learning, particularly in justice-related courses where dialogue, ethical debate, and reflective reasoning are integral. Research on online learning emphasizes that effective interaction does not require real-time exchange but rather intentional design that fosters cognitive and social presence (Garrison et al., 1999; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Structured discussion forums are a versatile tool for achieving this balance. When properly scaffolded, they enable students to construct meaning collectively, challenge assumptions, and apply theory to lived experience. In criminal justice courses, these forums can simulate professional dialogue by prompting analysis of case studies, evaluation of policy decisions, or critique of media portrayals of crime. Bernat and Frailing (2015) observed that graduate criminal justice students benefit particularly from reflection, integration, and application activities that mirror professional practice. These principles apply equally to undergraduate learning when discussions move beyond opinion-sharing toward evidence-based reasoning.

Scaffolding Assessments to Support Critical Thinking

Assessment design plays a crucial role in cultivating higher-order learning outcomes. Asynchronous courses rely heavily on scaffolded assignments that gradually develop analytical, research, and writing skills. Marshall (2024) showed that high-quality instructional videos and layered assessments in online criminal justice courses can improve comprehension and student motivation. Paired with reflective writing tasks, video lectures let students engage with material

at their own pace while maintaining conceptual continuity across modules. In practice, this involves aligning assessments with the cognitive presence element of the Community of Inquiry framework. Early assignments (e.g., short reflections or quizzes) reinforce foundational understanding, while later projects (e.g., case analysis or policy evaluation) require synthesis and application. Maintaining this progression helps ensure that asynchronous courses meet academic standards comparable to on-campus offerings. This alignment matters especially in justice education, where students must integrate empirical evidence, theory, and ethical reasoning.

Case-Based and Applied Learning

Criminal justice education thrives on applied inquiry, and case-based learning bridges theoretical knowledge and real-world application. As Allen (2022) and Kritt and Budwig (2022) note, constructivist pedagogy relies on authentic tasks that allow learners to connect abstract principles with lived contexts. In asynchronous criminal justice courses, instructors achieve this through multimedia case studies, simulated policy briefs, or student-generated scenarios. For instance, a module on white-collar crime may ask students to evaluate systemic failures that enabled corporate misconduct, while a juvenile justice course may prompt reflection on restorative justice practices in diverse cultural contexts. These approaches reflect Bernat and Frailing's (2015) emphasis on integrating practice and reflection to enhance professional preparedness and encourage students to assume the role of decision-makers, cultivating critical analysis and professional judgment.

Fostering Community and Presence in Asynchronous Classrooms

Social Presence and Empathy

A major critique of asynchronous learning is the perceived absence of interpersonal connection. Yet, as Smadi et al. (2021) and Tu and McIsaac (2002) argue, instructional design and facilitation can intentionally cultivate social presence. In criminal justice education, where topics such as victimization, ethics, and inequality are often emotionally charged, building a sense of community supports both academic and affective learning. Personal introductions, video reflections, and discussion norms emphasizing respect and empathy create an environment conducive to open exchange. Consistent instructor participation, through affirming feedback, probing questions, and acknowledgment of students' professional experiences, fosters trust and a sense of belonging. Jones (2021) illustrated this dynamic in an online course addressing gender and justice, where student reflections demonstrated how asynchronous dialogue can become a site of empowerment and solidarity.

Teaching Presence and Instructor Visibility

Teaching presence anchors asynchronous classrooms. Garrison et al. (1999) describe it as the deliberate orchestration of instructional design, facilitation, and direct instruction. This includes weekly announcements, video overviews, targeted discussion feedback, and consistent grading timelines. Hummer et al. (2010) noted that online criminal justice faculty often underestimate the time required to maintain an active teaching presence, as asynchronous courses demand sustained monitoring and individualized responses. To mitigate burnout, institutions must

recognize online teaching as more labor-intensive than traditional formats and provide commensurate support. Faculty commonly employ strategies such as templated course navigation, clearly articulated rubrics, and learning management system–integrated messaging tools to sustain teaching presence. Collectively, these design and facilitation practices reinforce the perception that the instructor is visible, responsive, and engaged, even without synchronous interaction.

Workload, Recognition, and Support

Online education has expanded access while also increasing demands on faculty time and institutional resources. Hummer et al. (2010) cautioned that many criminal justice programs underestimate the labor involved in online course design, communication, and assessment. Faculty teaching asynchronous courses may experience increased cognitive load and diminished research productivity, particularly when instructional design support and technical resources are limited.

Al-Freih (2022) further emphasized that successful digital transformation requires attention to both technological infrastructure and human factors. Training, mentoring, and recognition systems must evolve alongside technological adoption to ensure that online instruction enhances rather than burdens faculty work. Without sufficient institutional readiness, online programs risk overextending instructors and compromising instructional quality. Alignment between administrative vision and pedagogical autonomy is therefore critical to sustaining effective asynchronous education.

Equity and Accessibility

Online education holds promise for expanding access, yet it can also reproduce inequities in digital access, learning preferences, and socioeconomic conditions. Zhang and Chen (2023) found that post-pandemic students valued instructional flexibility but still faced challenges related to motivation and uneven access to technology. Similar patterns emerge in criminal justice education, where students from rural or resource-limited contexts may encounter barriers related to connectivity or digital literacy. Promoting equitable participation in asynchronous criminal justice courses requires intentional attention to accessibility and inclusion. This includes adopting universal design principles, ensuring captioned and downloadable materials, and designing content that functions across devices. Culturally responsive pedagogy further supports equity by enabling students to connect course concepts to their lived experiences—an essential consideration when addressing justice-related issues across diverse populations.

The Role of Reflection and Professional Identity Formation

Reflection is a cornerstone of both constructivist learning and professional development in criminal justice education. Asynchronous environments offer unique opportunities for extended reflection, enabling students to engage deeply in ethical, philosophical, and professional questions. Bernat and Frailing (2015) emphasized that integrating reflection and application fosters self-awareness and professional identity among criminal justice students.

Instructional experience in asynchronous criminal justice courses demonstrates how structured reflection supports this process. Reflective assignments encourage students to examine ethical dilemmas, interrogate systemic assumptions, and connect theory to professional responsibility. These activities mirror the integration and application stages of learning, bridging theory and practice. Over time, reflection functions as both a metacognitive tool and a professional competency, enabling students to assess not only criminal justice policy but also their own values, biases, and responsibilities within the justice system.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Despite the pedagogical potential of asynchronous online learning, its implementation in criminal justice education presents persistent challenges. These challenges often involve sustaining engagement, balancing faculty workload, and supporting students as they navigate complex or abstract content. Such issues are not unique to criminal justice but are frequently intensified by the field's applied, discussion-driven nature, which emphasizes ethical reasoning, interpretation, and methodological understanding. Lessons drawn from iterative course design highlight how asynchronous learning environments can evolve through reflective teaching practice.

One recurring challenge in asynchronous criminal justice courses is inconsistent student participation, particularly during the middle portion of the term. Initial engagement often declines as coursework intensifies or external demands increase. Students may also struggle to connect certain course components to their professional goals, which can affect motivation and persistence. Design refinements implemented across course iterations highlight strategies for addressing these challenges. These include integrating short instructional videos that contextualize complex material, incorporating peer-supported discussion structures, and embedding low-stakes reflective activities that link course content to real-world applications. Together, these strategies sustained engagement and reinforced the relevance of the course material to professional practice.

Across multiple teaching cycles, asynchronous criminal justice courses were most effective when instructional design evolved through ongoing reflection and adaptation. Student feedback and course analytics consistently indicated the importance of scaffolding, visible instructor presence, and flexible pacing. Conversely, courses that relied heavily on text-based instruction, without multimedia or structured interaction, were associated with lower engagement and satisfaction. These observations underscore that asynchronous teaching is not a static format but a dynamic pedagogical practice requiring instructors to function as designers, facilitators, and reflective practitioners.

Drawing from research and instructional experience, several key recommendations emerge for educators and institutions seeking to strengthen asynchronous criminal justice education:

- **Design for presence.** Align content, communication, and assessment with the CoI framework to foster cognitive, social, and teaching presence.
- **Value faculty labor.** Recognize and compensate the time investment required for quality online instruction; provide instructional design support and manageable course loads.

- **Scaffold learning.** Develop tiered assessments that gradually cultivate analytical and reflective skills while maintaining engagement.
- **Cultivate empathy.** Prioritize social presence through inclusive dialogue, respectful communication norms, and culturally sensitive content.
- **Promote equity.** Ensure accessibility, universal design, and technological support for diverse learners.
- **Encourage reflective practice.** Integrate structured reflection to help students connect their theoretical understanding with their professional identity and ethical reasoning.

These recommendations are not prescriptive but adaptable, offering a flexible framework for justice educators across institutional contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

This analysis is grounded in the author's teaching experience across several institutions and course levels, and therefore reflects the structures, technologies, and supports available in those contexts. As such, the insights may not generalize to environments with substantially different LMS platforms, class sizes, or institutional policies. In addition, while the paper draws on student feedback and course analytics, it does not report formal empirical analyses of learning outcomes or comparative data across modalities.

Future research should examine the impact of specific design features, such as scaffolded discussions, multimedia integration, and reflective assignments, on measurable outcomes, including critical thinking, retention, and professional identity development. Comparative studies of synchronous and asynchronous criminal justice courses, as well as cross-institutional analyses that include diverse student populations and program types, would also strengthen the evidence base. Finally, collaborative inquiry between instructors, instructional designers, and students could help refine models of presence and engagement tailored specifically to justice education.

Conclusion

Asynchronous learning has evolved from a convenience to a central feature of contemporary higher education, including in applied and discussion-driven disciplines such as criminal justice. When grounded in constructivist learning theory and guided by the Community of Inquiry framework, asynchronous criminal justice education can foster meaningful engagement, reflective inquiry, and professional identity development. This article shows that the effectiveness of asynchronous instruction depends not solely on modality, but on intentional design, sustained instructor presence, and institutional support.

By integrating theory, prior scholarship, and reflective instructional practice, this paper contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning by articulating design principles that support cognitive, social, and teaching presence in fully asynchronous environments. The pedagogical strategies discussed- scaffolded interaction, aligned assessment, case-based learning, and structured reflection- illustrate how justice-oriented learning outcomes can be achieved without reliance on synchronous instruction.

As institutions continue to expand online offerings, criminal justice educators face ongoing questions about rigor, engagement, and equity. This analysis suggests that asynchronous education, when thoughtfully designed and adequately supported, offers not only flexibility but also opportunities for deeper reflection and inclusive participation. While further empirical research is needed, the frameworks and strategies outlined here provide a foundation for educators and institutions seeking to strengthen asynchronous teaching in criminal justice and related fields.

References

- Allen, A. (2022). Constructivism in online learning: Learner autonomy and engagement in digital environments. *Journal of Learning Design and Leadership*, 1(1), 1–11.
- Al-Freih, M. (2022). From the adoption to the implementation of online teaching in a post-COVID world: Applying Ely's conditions of change framework. *Education Sciences*, 12(11), 757. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12110757>
- Bernat, F., & Frailing, K. (2015). Perfecting lessons learned for criminal justice online graduate education: Reflection, integration, and application. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 26(3), 330–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2015.1036090>
- Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (1999). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2–3), 87–105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6)
- Hummer, D., Sims, B., Wooditch, A., & Salley, K. S. (2010). Considerations for faculty preparing to develop and teach online criminal justice courses at traditional institutions of higher learning. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 21(3), 285–310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2010.488108>
- Jones, L. C. (2021). 'Justice for victims is possible': Student reflections on #MeToo in an online gender and justice course. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 32(3), 344–360. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2021.1958886>
- Kormos, E., Julio, L., & Morgan, A. (2023). Preservice teacher perceptions of using video discussions to foster a community of inquiry—Does the learning environment matter? *TechTrends*, 67, 354–364. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-022-00827-5>
- Kritt, D., & Budwig, N. (2022). The future of constructivist education. *Human Development*, 66(4–5), 295–309. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000526275>
- Marshall, E. A. (2024). Examining of the effectiveness of high-quality lecture videos in an asynchronous online criminal justice course. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2024.2305166>
- Smadi, O., Chamberlain, D., Shifaza, D., & Hamiduzzaman, M. (2021). A Community of Inquiry lens into nursing education: The educators' experiences and perspectives from three Australian universities. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 54, 103114. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2021.103114>
- Sitren, A. H., & Smith, H. P. (2016). Teaching criminal justice online: Current status and important considerations. *Journal of Criminal Justice Education*, 28(3), 352–367. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511253.2016.1254267>
- Tu, C. H., & McIsaac, M. (2002). The relationship of social presence and interaction in online classes. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 16(3), 131–150. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15389286AJDE1603_2

Zhang, Y., & Chen, X. (2023). Students' perceptions of online learning in the post-COVID era: A focused case from the universities of applied sciences in China. *Sustainability*, 15(2), 946. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15020946>