

Innovations and Strategies for Teaching Online

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Abstract

The development and delivery of online courses has also become more sophisticated as course management systems have improved and the information available on the internet has proliferated. Faculty involvement and administrative support in online course development and delivery varies across universities, nevertheless, technological advances have allowed online instructors to address criticisms of the virtual classroom. Establishing clear expectations, building learning communities through interaction, and aligning goals and objectives with activities and assessments are strategies addressed to enhance the online learning experience.

Introduction

Many universities view distance education through online courses as a means to gain competitive advantage. Online courses can increase university enrollments by reaching a larger audience and providing greater flexibility in meeting the needs of a variety of students, particularly working professionals. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2003), 90% of the two and four year institutions that offered distance education in the 2000-2001 academic year used the internet to deliver the courses. There has been a 9.7% growth rate in online enrollment within the last five years—during fall 2006 there were 3.5 million students enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Among the institutions that did not plan to offer distance education in the near future, 26% cited concerns for course quality (NCES, 2003). Critics of distance education contend that personal interaction is missing, that online courses may not be as rigorous, and that certain subjects (e.g. statistics) are best left to the traditional classroom format. Nevertheless, a few recent studies reveal that critical thinking skills can be developed and enhanced in an online course (Beckett-Camarata, 2007), and that student performance was similar in a traditional and online course taught by an instructor during the same semester (Arbaugh, 2000).

This article examines the importance of faculty involvement and administrative support in online course development and delivery, the potential for technological advances to remedy some of the criticisms of online courses, and strategies to enhance the online learning experience.

Faculty Involvement and Administrative Support

Whether a course is offered in-class, as a hybrid, or completely online, instructors and students, university administrators, and accrediting agencies all want to ensure quality. To ensure the development of a coherent curriculum, the U.S. Department of Education (ED, 2006) recommends offering training sessions for faculty and providing a common platform for online courses. Faculty development is necessary and is “a sign of quality distance education initiative” (ED, 2006, p. 9). Training should be offered at regular intervals and technical assistance and support should be available throughout the academic year.

Variations exist among universities regarding the development and delivery of online courses and numerous individuals may be involved at different stages. Regional accreditation agencies emphasize the importance of faculty involvement and curriculum oversight in online course development and delivery (ED, 2006). A course development team might include a subject specialist, instructional designer, graphic designer, programmer, and learning manager (Miller, 2007). When a development team exists, the role of the faculty member is to deliver the course

content. In other instances, a faculty member may be involved and solely responsible for each step of the process—from course development and design to delivery. While most colleges and universities that offer online courses have an “online” department committed to providing support for faculty and students, the process for developing and delivering an online course may dramatically differ. Consider the experience of one author at University X and University Y and one author at University Z. All three universities are accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). University X is a small liberal arts university in a Mid-Atlantic State. The university scaled back its online degree options, however, a variety of courses are still offered online. University Y is a comprehensive university in the South that enrolls an average of 11,000 students. Although a few departments offer the option of an online baccalaureate degree and other departments offer a few courses online, many departments do not offer any online courses. University Z is also a comprehensive university in the South that enrolls an average of 28,000 students. Most departments have both online courses and degrees at the associate, undergraduate and graduate level. All three universities have an online department with a dedicated full-time staff to address online course development and delivery.

There are a few distinct differences between University X, University Y and University Z with respect to online teaching. First, both University Y and Z require a faculty member to become certified to teach online. Even if a new faculty member had prior experience teaching online at another university, he or she must attend mandatory training sessions to become certified. Second, the process for getting a course approved to be taught online was quite different between the three universities. At University X, getting a course approved online was a matter of scheduling approval by the appropriate individuals/departments (e.g. chair, dean). At University Y, it took at least one year before a course could be offered completely online. A faculty member, the department chair, and members from the online staff scheduled an initial meeting to discuss intent, expectations, and intellectual property agreements. The next semester was dedicated to building the online course. A faculty member had to have all assignments, discussion questions, online tests, course readings, the syllabus, and any other related material in-place one semester prior to offering the course online. A final approval meeting was then scheduled between the faculty member, department chair, and online staff. A third major difference between the three universities was compensation for online development and teaching. No additional compensation was offered at University X or University Z. At University Z, the pay for all online courses was set at \$200 per student with a cap of 25. In contrast, University Y offered \$2,500 above salary to develop an online course and an additional \$1,000 each time the course was taught online.

The variations between the three universities may reflect differences in available resources (financial and otherwise) and commitment to distance education, differences in university missions, as well as differences in the number of years that the university has been working on distance education. While a “one-size-fits all” approach is unrealistic and undesirable, successful online programs require commitment from leadership, are built into the strategic plan, and provide faculty training and technical support.

Technological Advances

Blackboard and Web-CT are widely used platforms to deliver online courses and the technological advances during the past decade make it possible to address many of the criticisms of online courses. Faculty members now have the opportunity to combine asynchronous discussion boards and assignments with synchronous chat rooms and video-conferencing in online courses. The ability to integrate audio and visual media both synchronously and asynchronously through Web-CT and Blackboard challenges prior assertions that the human element is missing in online courses. For example, synchronous ‘real-time’ conversations can occur via the chat function offered in most online platforms; face-to-face interaction via web-cams is also possible.

The changes in the structure and functions of course management systems also contribute to greater coherence and coordination in the dissemination of information. For example, instructors

who use Web-CT are now able to combine a variety of functions (discussion board, chat, web-links, notes, self-tests, quizzes, etc) into individual learning modules. The modules may be built in advance, yet hidden from view until a certain sequence is complete or at a particular time during the semester. Additionally, the information available on the internet has proliferated in the last decade. Peer reviewed journal articles, newspaper articles, government reports, and court cases are all available online. Within the field of Public Administration, of which both authors teach, the American Society for Public Administration lists recent government reports on the web in each PA Times edition. In addition to written reports, video clips are also available on numerous web-sites. For example, C-SPAN provides footage of Congressional activities and many state legislatures post video footage of legislative sessions. Instructors might include links to a variety of media sources online within each learning module to support the subject matter, e.g. a learning module on Presidential Elections might require students to link to the national party conventions or presidential debates.

Unfortunately, the potential for plagiarism is one of the disadvantages of the proliferation of information on the internet. While plagiarism is not new, technological advances have elicited two main types: cutting and pasting from legitimate sources and buying or trading papers from a "paper mill". Fortunately, there have also been advances in technology to detect plagiarism. Simple strategies to detect plagiarism include "Googling" a phrase from the paper in question or checking online paper mills. A more sophisticated strategy is to purchase software or a service such as Turnitin.com or Essay Verification Engine (EVE). One author has used EVE to check term papers for both traditional and online classes. University Z subscribes to Turnitin.com and requires professors to check all written student assignments for all classes. Any professor who has experienced the burden of building up evidence in a case of plagiarism will appreciate the efficiency of the new software.

Strategies to Enhance the Online Learning Experience

There are several strategies used by the authors to enhance the online learning experience. They include creating detailed syllabi, building learning communities, and aligning goals and objectives with activities and assessments. Integrating these strategies often results in a more rewarding online experience for students and faculty.

Establish Clear Expectations

The course syllabus is one of the most important documents in any course because it establishes expectations, goals and objectives, and a tentative schedule of readings and activities throughout the semester. Like most professors, the authors include contact information, course goals and objectives, university policies such as the honor code or ADA compliance, the grading distribution, a description of tests and assignments, and a tentative reading schedule. In addition to establishing clear expectations between students and faculty, the syllabus in an online course becomes even more important as agency accreditation reviewers examine it to determine the amount of interaction between students and faculty. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2006), reviewers are looking for evidence such as discussion questions, group work, and quality of participation grading rubrics.

Build a Learning Community through Interaction

The online learning experience might also be enhanced, and a learning community established, through interaction. Not surprisingly, one recent study by Ho, Lu, and Thumaier (2006) found that student perceptions of an online course were more likely to be positive when in-depth discussions occurred and timely feedback was provided by the instructor. Both authors require students to post bios on the discussion board during the first week of class and one requires students to attach a picture. Students generally share information such as marital or parental status, work experience, major, reason for enrolling in the course, and hobbies. The bio puts a "human face" on the person who will post information throughout the semester. Students also tend to welcome each other or "catch up" with each other during this time. To facilitate

interaction between classmates throughout the semester, both authors require students to respond to a fellow classmate's discussion posting on a regular basis. To assess the quality of postings to the discussions board, a former colleague at University X developed the "3C's criteria": connectivity, correctness, and civility. Students should be able to connect theories and concepts to readings and discussions, provide correct information relevant to the course readings, and maintain a sense of civility toward classmates in the online discussions.

New online instructors quickly learn that unless students are required to stagger their activities, particularly online discussion postings, they will attempt to meet all requirements on one particular day. While convenience and flexibility are still essential in online courses, what instructor hasn't been frustrated to find hundreds of discussion postings in his or her online course on a Monday morning followed by minimal activity during the week? One author requires students to stagger postings throughout the week. Interaction requirements provided in the syllabus for a graduate course on Public Organizations and Management are provided below:

Class participation is essential to your learning. It is expected that students will participate fully in the online class discussions. Students are expected to respond to the professor and each other in discussion of assigned readings. The online learning modules include weekly discussions and self-test. You will need to post four messages each week. The first three postings will be responses to questions presented by the instructor. The fourth posting is a response to one of the discussion questions posted by the team assigned to present a case study that particular week. At a minimum each message should be at least one paragraph. At least three of the postings must be staggered and the first response must be posted by Tuesday of each week. This means that at least three responses are posted on three separate days. Each student is also required to participate in four live chats scheduled at various dates and times throughout the semester

In addition to student-to-student interaction, instructor-to-student interaction is critical. One author learned a few years ago that students had different expectations of the instructor's participation in the discussions section, as evident the following written comments from an online course:

Comment 1: "She quickly takes part in forum discussion and clears up any misunderstandings" Comment 2: "The instructor should have interacted more in the discussion questions. The class was very interesting and I felt otherwise the instructor did an excellent job. She did provide some interesting web sites for us to view in regard to what we were studying. I just felt a little more interaction would have added to the learning experience"

As a result of the different expectations and comments, the instructor now outlines the method and frequency of instructor-to-student interaction in each learning module to clarify expectations.

Align Goals and Objectives with Activities and Assessments

Aligning goals and objectives with activities and assessments further contributes to a quality online learning experience. While most faculty members incorporate course goals and objectives into the syllabus, fewer of us integrate goals and objectives into lesson plans and course requirements. The learning modules function in Web-CT allows instructors to improve coordination of various activities under specific subjects. Many instructors also find it useful to list the goals and objectives as well as how the students will be assessed at the beginning of each learning module. For example, in a graduate course on Public Organizations and Management the subject of Leadership is provided as a specific learning module. When students click on the learning module a table of contents opens up in the left-hand column. The table of contents includes: a brief introduction, the goals and objectives of the specific module, how students will be assessed, a lecture and notes, relevant readings, links to the discussion questions, chat, and self-test, and a module wrap-up. Some examples:

Content Introduction: This week we address theories and styles of leadership and share personal observations of perceptions and experiences with leaders in organizations.

Goal: The goal of this lesson is to examine theories of leadership in the context of public organizational setting. Objectives:

- o Recognize definitions and common elements of leadership
- o Understand power, influence, and authority
- o Describe four levels of leadership
- o Compare transformational and transactional leadership
- o Analyze the situational leadership model
- o Identify public sector leaders

Assessment: Knowledge of material is assessed through responses to discussion questions and a self-test. A live chat is scheduled Wednesday 6:30-8:00. Please remember to participate in at least 4 live chats this semester. Module Wrap-up: Before moving to the next module, be sure to complete the following:

- o Assigned readings
- o Reviewed lecture notes and additional material
- o Weekly discussions
- o Voluntary chat
- o Self-test

Conclusion

There is significant potential for improvement as course enrollments increase, technology advances, and faculty members gain experience in the virtual classroom. The criticisms that online courses are not as rigorous and that the human element is missing have been repeatedly rebuked throughout the literature. The degree of difficulty and interaction are determined by the instructor, not the forum. Technological advances also allow instructors to incorporate synchronous elements into a traditionally asynchronous forum. However, in addition to staying abreast of technology, faculty members must continue to experiment with pedagogical strategies to enhance the online learning experience.

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