Moving from Traditional to Online Instruction: Considerations for Improving Trainer and Instructor Performance

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the product of perspectives of three online instructors. The authors, one of whom is an experienced online instructor and two others, who are new to online learning, discuss the implementation and delivery of online courses. More specifically, the paper takes the perspective of a new online instructor. Based on the delivery of three terms of simultaneous distance courses (taught by the authors), and the observations, conversations, and continuous improvement efforts related to those courses, the authors attempt to identify considerations that will help new online instructors improve performance and avoid potential problems.

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of online instruction and other non-traditional delivery systems, universities are experimenting with alternative delivery modes. Many variations of methodologies have been attempted to merge traditional material into an online environment. Distance, and in particular, online courses, are more prevalent and popular than ever before. The growth experienced in this sector of the educational arena is at an all-time high. According to recent data:

"Students enrolled in nearly 2.9 million college-level distance education courses in 2000 - 2001, more than double the enrollment of 1997 - 1998. While distance learning can mean taking courses through audio or video feeds, schools that offer such courses are most likely to use the Internet...But the emergence of online programs at 90 percent of public colleges, universities and technical training schools and 40 percent of all private institutions has helped remove much of the stigma from distance learning”


With enormous potential and proven growth, faculties have been drawn into this alternative course delivery and the demand for proficient faculty in this environment will continue to increase. The authors attempt to expand on the available research through their experience with the implementation and delivery of online courses.

Administrative Issues

When students are recruited, enrolled, or registered, it is imperative to inform them of what portion of their respective program of study will be required, or available, via the virtual classroom. Student frustration often grows from a lack of information, communication, and/or awareness of the course delivery mode in which they will be expected to participate. During this process, inquiries must be made into a student’s technical hardware and software availabilities. This might include, but is not limited to, modem speed, word processing software, Internet browser compatibility, and multimedia viewing capabilities. For example, if a student was enrolled in an online course without having the necessary hardware and software, he or she would likely experience insurmountable barriers to successful course completion.
It is highly recommended that the technology aptitude of each student enrolled in an online course be certified before he or she is accepted into an online educational environment. If not, remediation must be made available. Additionally, students who are not visual learners, or have other learning disadvantages, must be accommodated. Further, ADA guidelines are an issue that must be resolved during this phase of the online learning process.

With the considerable amount of resources available to students via the Internet, it has become increasingly easy for students to commit an act of academic dishonesty, specifically, plagiarism. Plagiarism is the act of using another’s work for one’s own, without giving proper credit. Whether “copying and pasting” from electronic documents or swapping electronic media coursework, instructors need to be apprised of this potential when assessing student products. It is not the intent of the authors to develop a distrusting environment with students in online course delivery; we believe that each student will perform to their best abilities. The act of electronic plagiarism has been identified by one of the authors in two separate instances. In order to assist instructors in the identification of plagiarism, software and other web tools are available to “screen” electronic documents for common phrases and other authors’ work.

Course Structure

Curriculum materials and course structuring constitute a critical phase in the transfer of courses from traditional to online delivery. Recently Smith, Ferguson, and Caris (2002, p. 64) stated that,

Because of the reliance on text-based communication and lack of visual cues, every aspect of the course has to be laid out explicitly, in meticulous detail to avoid misunderstandings. Every lecture must be converted to a typed up document. Direction for every assignment must be spelled out in a logical, self-contained way. Therefore, web-based distance classes require considerably more work, often including hundreds of hours of up-front work to set up the course.

While the point here regarding detail is well taken, it should be stressed that a simple conversion of one medium to another is insufficient in preparing online learning materials. Because successful students in online environments process information, and ultimately, from the authors’ perspective, learn differently than traditional students, identical curriculum materials are largely unsuccessful.

The ideal online delivery strategy would be hybrid in nature. Consistently, student feedback has indicated frustration from reading excessively long text-based documents via the web. Content must be broken into small modules, and articulated to course learning objectives, which demonstrate a multiple sequence approach. Bortz (2004), identified the multiple sequence approach, which he defined as an “adaptation of the basic model for organizing learning activities for a learning objective. The intent of the multiple sequence concept is to accommodate the education and training needs of non-traditional groups.” The authors’ belief is that online content should be broken up into small, focused learning activities that can be processed in short periods of time.

Instructor Load

Optimal class size would be one in which the faculty could respond to student assignments, questions, and concerns in twenty-four hours or less. Because of the nature of individualized instruction, for students to continue steady progress on course assignments, students must receive timely, motivating, and accommodating feedback. Students who are forced to wait excessive amounts of time for responses to inquiries often become disenchanted not only with the course, but with the educational delivery system in general.

Based upon a course with twenty students, four assignments (midterm, final, paper, and project) in a sixteen-week period, one could reasonably expect 1000 individual interactions (e-mail and telephone calls). In fact, one of the authors, in a course of twenty-two students, received nine hundred and fifty-two individual interactions. Further, in this class, none of the students had any previous experience with online courses.

Considering other typical faculty responsibilities, the quality of service and effective transfer of knowledge could be significantly degraded. Such responsibilities might include a variety of research projects, two to three additional
teaching assignments, student advisement, professional development activities and community service (all within a given term). Further, the attention to class size and quantity of curriculum being delivered via the virtual classroom demands highly motivated faculty. Additional consideration should be given to the previous online-specific teaching experience of the faculty member. As new online instructors become more familiar with the process, they may more efficiently serve the students while maintaining effectiveness. Therefore, attention to class size is paramount.

Instructor Training

Preparation of instructors for alternative delivery methods is an important component to success. In the authors’ experience, instructors who are familiar with traditional classroom preparation have a tendency to transplant course learning material “as is” into the online environment. The fundamental pitfall with this strategy is that the intended target audience is completely different. Items such as learning styles, technology experience, software access, student support systems, and previous student and faculty online experience come into play. A thorough assessment of student needs and existing available resources must be completed prior to launching an online learning scenario. Prior to engaging in online instruction, effective instructor training must address each of these issues.

Interaction: Student-to-Faculty

Interaction is crucial to the success of any learning environment. Traditional classroom environments are planned, consistent, and carefully organized by the course instructor. A seasoned instructor understands student behavior and adjusts interaction to ensure transfer of learning. In any individualized learning scenario, it is incumbent on the student to initiate and control the interaction. Unlike in the traditional classroom setting, online students initiate and control the majority of interaction in a virtual environment. For example, in a traditional planned environment, students submit assignments/coursework and inherently understand they will receive the graded assignment the following class meeting, at the earliest.

The practice of online teaching and interaction with students is constantly evolving. “Online instructors are having to learn how to take full advantage of electronic delivery to provide good instruction and effective feedback on student work” (Bowman, 2003). From the perspective of the authors, this process is very complex. The communication pattern seems to be more reactive and less proactive for most of the communication activities within an online course.

In the online environment, students electronically submit assignments and the instructor replies to acknowledge receipt. Additionally, the online instructor must issue both a grade and specific comments pertaining to each assignment. Typically, students’ concerns, issues, etc., follow this interaction.

In a standard delivery format, classroom questions are asked once and addressed once to all students. In an online environment, student questions must be addressed individually. Dependant on the course structure, methodology of delivery and course management, individual student questions may require multiple independent responses. While some course management systems aid in the aforementioned uncertainties, they raise other issues. For example, when building courses that are largely self-managed, such as those with objective online exam functions, feedback for incorrect and correct answers must be a part of the exam development process. Indeed, virtually all assessment systems for online examinations provide ways for faculty to offer remediation to students who submit incorrect answers. These feedback mechanisms must be employed to aid the interaction mechanism within online courses.

Interaction: Student-to-Student

In many learning situations, student interaction with one another is as (or more) meaningful than student interaction with faculty. This is no different for an online learning environment. Within virtual universities, which focus on individualized learning, structure for student-feedback and interaction are a mainstay. These structures must be in place in order to provide students with alternative viewpoints and informal peer review processes. Whether asynchronous or synchronous in nature, a plethora of tools are available to implement student-to-student communication systems. Examples of these systems include student forums, threaded discussion, online chats, and directories of student e-mail information, among others.
Interaction: Student-to-Student Support Services

Student services are a critical success factor in the support of a student in an online environment. In online courses, perhaps more than any other learning environment, students are more dependent on educational support services. In addition to traditional issues such as admission, enrollment, financial aid, registration, program planning and graduation, students in this environment must also overcome the additional barriers of intense technical support (software, Internet access, hardware, and troubleshooting) and, often, a lack of available resources.

Instructor Competencies

As previously discussed in this paper, students enrolled in 2.9 million distance-learning courses in 2000-01. According to Spector and Teja (2001),

“The constant transformation of information technology makes the development of competencies for online teachers a continuous process and demands continuing professional preparation and training for online teachers. Such endeavors will improve our ability to effectively utilize technology in an online environment.”

An additional consideration necessary to instruct in an online environment is the identification and implementation of faculty competencies. This includes a full mastery of computer related and web-based skills (as deemed necessary in their particular online course management strategy), combined with proven educational principles designed for online instruction. Pending further research and development by the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI) and the University of Quebec online instructor competencies will be interrelated with traditional teaching competencies (Spector and Teja, 2001).

Suggestions for Further Study

The purpose of this paper is not to solve all the issues relevant to online instruction. Indeed, the authors’ purpose is to provide a perspective to aid new online instructors. One of the unique dynamics of this paper was having an experienced online instructor be present as two new online instructors used this delivery method for the first time.

Teacher education is a cornerstone issue in today’s educational environment. As proven instructional competencies for traditional delivery format are in place, further study should attempt to identify those strategies specifically for the online environment. The development of online-specific instructor competencies will assist new online faculty in their efforts to deliver virtual courses.

Abundance of course management systems and strategies are available in online learning. Because no two are identical, and many hybrid systems are in place, the evaluation of the effectiveness of such systems is needed. More specifically, the various tools used in online environments (from chat rooms to document submission processes) must be studied and “best case” scenarios identified for each.

Classroom courses across disciplines are offered in very different ways. Options ranging from seminar style courses to lecture only and the use of projects, groups, teams, etc. are all used in the traditional classroom. Online environments must evaluate the degree to which certain courses are more suitable for virtual delivery. In addition, the identification of needed tools to better deliver certain types of courses (that might be more difficult to prepare for online delivery) is a necessary research area.

Class size continues to be a paramount issue in online learning. A closer look at course structure and use of course tools should yield more specific ranges of student loads that can be effectively managed in an online learning situation.

As increasing numbers of students complete online courses, and even entire online programs, longitudinal studies need to be conducted regarding a variety of issues. In addition to training transfer and retention of knowledge, future research should investigate the perception of employers (end users of student knowledge gains) regarding e-learning.

This list, while not all-inclusive of needed research on online instruction, provides a baseline that would help in better preparation of online faculty.

A Note Regarding the Authors

Of the three authors, one has been teaching in an online environment for over three years; serving over 600 students during that time. Another, who was new to online learning, has logged over 10,000 hours of classroom...
instruction and training. The third was new to instructional delivery, having no experience in virtual or classroom instruction, prior to teaching an online course. Because of the variety of backgrounds from each author, this paper provides a wide range of perspectives and insight for existing and new online instructors.

REFERENCES


