Teaching In Cyberspace: The Faculty Perspective

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Abstract

Broader audiences of students are seeking alternative course delivery methods using electronic formats. For this reason, business instructors are embracing web-based delivery modalities to accommodate the needs of such audiences. This presentation is intended for instructors choosing to enter online learning environments. It provides suggestions for student-friendly online course design, delivery and closure. Student friendly online courses begin with mental thought processes that drive course objectives and learning outcomes in the preparation phase of course development. The student friendly environment then transpires as a result of the instructor's style during course delivery. The online instructor then leaves the audience with a final impression through course closure activities. With the final course details completed, the instructor reflects on areas of success and potential improvement to be applied to future courses.

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly known among practitioners within business academic and training campuses that three phases of activities contribute to student experiences within online learning environments (OLE) (Colley and Volkan, 2004). The first level of activity falls within the category of course design and development, while the next phase is focused on formative learning activities that occur during course implementation. The third and final set of practices brings about closure and summative evaluation of learner outcomes, as well as instructor effectiveness after the completion of a course or training program. Hence, the student experience seems to be associated with faculty decisions and performance that occur before, during and after course implementation, regardless of the chosen modality used to deliver new knowledge and skills.

The current OLE lexicon uses the word "modality" to describe varying degrees of web-based course interaction relative to the traditional face-to-face (F2F) delivery method (Slate, 2001). In this context, course modality may be viewed as a continuum with the F2F (traditional classroom) mode to the far left and a full web-based course placed at the right end of the spectrum. Two varietals exist between the two polarities to include 'web-enhanced' and 'mixed-mode' course versions. All interaction takes place in regular classroom sessions for web-enhanced courses, however, information (for example, the course outline) or individual activities (case studies, for instance) are accessed through a website. A mixed-mode class (sometimes called a 'blended-class') will blend F2F class meetings with web-based interaction on a discussion board or chat room. Mixed mode classes often follow a weekly routine. For instance, the class may meet in person on Tuesdays and in an online format on Thursdays during each week of the course term. Finally, there is the full web course, in which the entire course is provided in an online format that requires no scheduled F2F interaction.

This presentation discusses faculty activities that take place before, during and after the delivery of a mixed mode or full web online course. The discussion is based on the presenter's many years of online teaching experience and lessons learned about enhancing student success in OLE courses. The presentation provides proven techniques for new OLE instructors to develop and deliver student friendly online courses.

THE DEVELOPMENT PHASE

The first phase is really a thinking process in the mind of the instructor concerning course modality, resource availability, tone and levels of intended student interactivity. This process is based on the old adage that says, "All things are created twice, once in the mind, next in reality." The decisions that are made in this phase become the key drivers for course objectives, learning activities and protocols (rules for course participation). The research tells us time and again that learners choose online courses based on the convenience factors of time and place (Sims, 1998; Tesone, Gibson & Blackwell, 2003; Walker, 2003; and others).

Many interested learners demonstrate a preference for coursework to be completed at times that do not interfere with work and family obligations. They also express an aversion toward commuting to designated classroom locations. The place factor for some is more of a need than a preference, in that certain individuals live in remote locations or have jobs that require extensive travel. For those of us engaged in online learning environments, time and/or place learner convenience factors serve as our mission or mantra if you will, for course development thought processes concerning modality.

Another modality concern is the decision to adopt "synchronous" (real-time) or "asynchronous" (any time) communication modes within the online portion of the course. Synchronous communications require arranged group meetings at appointed times via web-based chat or virtual meeting rooms. An asynchronous approach uses a discussion or bulletin board that permits individuals to post, read and respond to discussion comments at any time of the day or night. The asynchronous mode overcomes both time and place constraints, however, certain instructors prefer the immediacy of a 'live' discussion that is a feature of synchronous mode. Of course, time zone considerations become a factor when using this mode with international audiences. In some cases, both modes are used for learner/instructor interaction.

A third consideration in the original thought process involves looking at the resources that are available to you as the instructor, as well as the students. In the case of OLE development and delivery, resources consist of computer hardware, software and technical support personnel. The majority of courses currently use specialized software packages called courseware platforms. These include brand names, such as *WebCT, Blackboard* and others. Platforms consist of web pages used to display lectures and presentations, chat rooms for synchronous discussions, and discussion boards for asynchronous interaction. They also provide courseware management tools, such as grade books, quiz tools, and email software. Most facilities that own courseware platforms also employ technical personnel (instructional designers) to convert word processing, spreadsheet and presentation documents into web code for display. Other technical support personnel such as technology managers are usually available to assist instructors with the use of platforms. Instructors and students learn how to use platform tools through in-house training programs or tutorials. While courseware platforms are convenient for instructors, they are not required to produce and deliver online courses.

A final technical concern has to do with the computers used by learners in the course. Experience tells us that the majority of online learners do not possess the latest versions of hardware and software in their homes and offices. For this reason, it is suggested that online instructors build the course with the Lowest Common Technological Denominator (LCTD) of the audience in mind (Gibson, Tesone, & Blackwell, 2002). In other words, most of us try to keep the technical aspects of the course simple by using very few platform tools, no attachments that require users to download 'plug-ins' and documents that are transferable over limited bandwidth connections (56k telephone line modems).

THE INSTRUCTIONAL PHASE

Now the course is in full-swing and you are serving in the capacity of learner-centered facilitator. Experience notes that some instructors have difficulty in shifting gears from classroom 'sage on the stage' to virtual professor. Remembering that there may be hesitancy to participate on the part of certain learners, the instructor sometimes chooses to demonstrate a dominant, yet inviting presence at the beginning of the course. In most cases,

the learners will bond quickly, which permits the instructor to settle into a lower key facilitator's role. This involves intermittent comments in response to ongoing dialogues.

The remainder of instructor activities parallel those used in regular classrooms. Rapid feedback on course performance and frequent grade reports are important for all learners. The same is true for reminders of pending due dates and coaching for continued learner performance. Those stimulating lectures that we talked about before are appealing to the visual, auditory and kinesthetic senses, which is the same way we present verbal information in the classroom. Anecdotal evidence suggests visual learners find text-based lectures more appealing than those with other dominant learning styles. For this reason, online instructors are encouraged to use wording in the presentations that create a sense of hearing and getting an intuitive feel for the content. Within the next couple of years it is predicted that text based web lectures will be enhanced with streaming video components that will be readable by LCTD (lowest common technological denominator) computer users.

THE COMPLETION PHASE

Many instructors report that time seems to fly during the delivery of an online course. Before we know it, the course is drawing to a close. It is a nice touch for instructors to provide a 'sign-off'' message during the last week of interaction and to compute/report final grades in an expeditious manner. Certain instructors prefer to conduct summative student course evaluations toward the end of a course, just prior to final examinations. In some cases, institutions require such a procedure.

While the activities of the course are still fresh in the mind of an instructor, it may be wise to reflect upon course experiences. The insights gained from this process may be used to re-think and re-design certain aspects of the course. After completing any revisions, the instructor is prepared to start a new course, and so the cycle continues.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the majority of time and thought afforded to an initial online course takes place during the preparation phase. Once the course is up and running, it becomes a matter of frequent interaction in small time blocks on a daily schedule. The instructor activities after course completion mirror those of a traditional class to include course closure, evaluation, and new additions for the next delivery.

The initial foray into online course development and delivery requires intense levels of time and energy. If we think back to when we first started teaching through traditional classroom models, we might recall a similar commitment in our course preparation and delivery practices. This time around, we are seasoned veterans of instruction who are experimenting with new modalities of course delivery. In a short span of time, however, those who choose to enter the OLE domain today will quickly become the 'Web-Vets' who will mentor instructors that will inevitably join our ranks in the near future.

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