ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

There are many issues and challenges associated with delivering a course online via the Internet. These include development and revision of the course prior to being online, teaching the course once it goes "live", quality control of online vs. on-campus courses, efficient time utilization by faculty and students when online, encouraging interaction among students and faculty online, and methods and procedures for teaching an online course.

Keywords: online courses, e-learning, course delivery, teaching methods

INTRODUCTION

Many universities are seeking to provide students, particularly graduate students and adult undergraduate students, with access to quality educational opportunities through the use of both synchronous and asynchronous delivery technologies. With a foundation in educational television that began in the 1950's, universities have created networks to reach both on-campus and off-campus populations. The rapid development of computers and telecommunications technologies, along with the introduction of the Internet, provided the tools to expand and enhance distance education and forever transform the university educational delivery system. Hanna (2) states that Internet-supported distance education courses form a critical pressure point for challenging the dominant assumptions and characteristics of existing traditionally organized universities in the 21st century.

Working adults comprise a large portion of our college population, and are a primary target for an e-learning market that is predicted to reach $15 billion by 2002 (1). Online courses meet the needs of individuals who want to earn college credits and/or a degree while maintaining a full-time job. Universities have seen online course delivery as a way to reach beyond geographic and time constraints normally associated with traditional programs, and to target non-traditional student populations and establish new revenue sources. Thanks to the Internet and interactive multimedia, the delivery of education is being revolutionized (4).

However, it is important to understand that online education is not without pitfalls. The expectations for technology to transform higher education may be disproportionately high (3). Behind efforts promoting the use of technology in education are often found techno-zealots, who view computers as the panacea for everything because they like to play with them. Learning and teaching online is much different than a traditional classroom experience. Since most communications take place via written messages, writing skills and the ability to put thoughts into words are paramount. It is important for the instructor to function as a facilitator, which turns out to be much more difficult then delivering a lecture. The single most important element of successful online education is interaction among participants (5).

At a time when universities are competing for quality students, enhanced delivery systems are a means to help individuals better meet their work and family schedules, interests, and other needs. We will discuss four major areas that relate to online course delivery: (1) advantages and disadvantages of online delivery; (2) utilizing faculty time effectively; (3) quality control in the online environment; (4) building discussions into the course.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE DELIVERY

For the student, there is a price for participation in online learning. There is a fundamental need for minimum technology access – either personal or at a specific learning site. To utilize the equipment there is a need for skills to interact with the instructor and other students. We believe this goes beyond computer literacy and might be called computer competence. Without this competence, students experience significant frustration. This may negatively impact motivation and initiative, causing underperformance and course dissatisfaction.

On the other hand, online education allows students to be personally responsible for their own learning. They need to determine for themselves the amount of time they need to achieve expected outcomes and meet course requirements (1). Flexibility, then, can be important for students with other commitments in pursuing university coursework.

From a faculty perspective, there are both advantages and disadvantages. At or near the top of the list of disadvantages are frustrations with technical problems and infrastructure support. Also, as the technologies mature, there is a continual need for faculty training. On the plus side, there is often a more robust and rich student population with online courses, and instructors are able to gain flexibility in both course content and their personal time allocation. Figure 1 describes some of the more significant advantages and disadvantages of online education.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Utilizing Faculty Time Effectively

Teaching a class online is completely different from teaching a class in the traditional classroom. It requires faculty to make fundamental changes in the way they organize and deliver a class. In the online environment faculty are required to be knowledgeable of both course content and delivery technologies. Online course planning and delivery can (and usually does) consume very large blocks of instructor time. The increasing number of online options and features makes it difficult for instructors and course designers to determine which functions should be used for what aspects of the course (5). Also, not all faculty members who are asked to teach online courses have the skills and experience to effectively do so (6). Figure 2 illustrates a number of key faculty issues when developing and delivering online courses.

Figure 1
Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Education

Advantages:
- Generally a more diverse student population
- Eliminates geographic barriers and may increase enrollments
- More diverse curriculum offerings possible
- Increased access to higher education for non-traditional students
- Flexibility of scheduling personal time
- Eliminates or reduces travel time, parking, and need for transportation
- Individualized attention from the instructor
- Reduces the need to build and maintain campus facilities
- Offers a new level of communications with students
- Provides a format for self-paced learning
- Instruction can be more customized and flexible

Disadvantages:
- Very capital intensive for delivery systems and resources
- Labor intensive for faculty
- Need for continual training and support for faculty
- Student and faculty frustration with technical problems
- Student isolation
- Challenging to maintain sufficient student contact, assistance, and feedback
- Inadequate financial aid policies
- Hard for instructors to move traditional content online
- Does not provide the social environment of the traditional class
- Cheating/academic fraud and virus possible
- A teaching environment without face-to-face interaction

Figure 2
Faculty Issues for Online Course Delivery

- Assessing group performance in an online setting
- Replacing "seat time" with meaningful work
- Added time requirements to develop content and setup in the interactive online environment
- Copyright issues
- Learning to use software and updates
- Developing meaningful assessment techniques
- Structuring assignments and providing clear and explicit instructions
- Course revisions for both content and delivery technologies

Quality Control in the Online Environment

To be successful, online education needs good quality, well delivered material supported by tutorials, advice and counseling, and an overall support system which will effectively manage the program (4). The quality of student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction may be less than is found in a face-to-face classroom setting, where prompting by the instructor, body language, and social interaction come into play. To mitigate this, instructors need to organize and deliver their courses in ways very different from traditional lecture formats. With any online course, the danger is that students will become spectators rather than participators (4). The instructor needs to devise ways to capture and hold student attention, limit exposure to technological frustration, and provide consistency among course offerings, navigation techniques, and assessments. Sustained frustrations impede students' learning and cause dissatisfaction.

Research related to online coursework and learning generally lacks disciplined scholarly articles. The vast majority of published work contains descriptions of technological implementations in classrooms or anecdotal observations (3). Instructors are faced with developing and delivery courses without a tried and proven model, creating an environment that is much more prone to frustration and even failure. There are a number of basic foundations that can be used to help assure quality and success of the online course. Figure 3 lists some of the more important quality initiatives.

Figure 3
Quality Initiatives

- ➢ On-campus course is the benchmark
- ➢ Adequate infrastructure and technical support
- ➢ Instructor training
- ➢ Adequate development and preparation time
- ➢ Structure learning activities (assignments, cases, discussions) specifically for the online environment
- ➢ Structure assessment and exams for the online environment
- ➢ Collaborative activities for the online student
- ➢ Creation of a "chat room" for student social interaction
- ➢ Prompt feedback by the instructor
- ➢ Clearly articulated directives for assignments, projects, etc.
- ➢ Creation of a "Raise your hand" area for students

Building Discussions Into the Online Course

It is easy to set up discussion groups in most software platforms used to deliver online courses. However, whether they are effective or not is to be debated. Depending upon the course and the direction faculty provide to the students in the course, discussions can be valuable. However, discussing a topic or case online is probably not as effective as a face-to-face discussion. Even

though discussions are not easy in an online course, it still should be built into some part of each course to facilitate group interaction among the students in the course.

CONCLUSION

There are many issues to think about as faculty plan, develop, and revise online courses. These include issues related to overall design of the course, efficient time utilization for both the instructor and the students, and effectively using the technologies to deliver the course. Online course delivery systems can consume large blocks of time for instructors. By properly planning and structuring assignment, discussions, and exams, instructors can have greater control over the time they spend interacting with students and managing the course learning activities. Instructors who invest more time in planning will benefit from more effective time management as they deliver the online course. Planning also contributes to improved course quality. Methods and procedures for effective teaching and learning need to be applied in all teaching environments. The recent growth of online course delivery requires special attention to careful development of these methods and procedures.

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