

Editor's Note: This article is a distillation of principles and best practices to ensure effective online learning. It recognizes the changing roles and responsibilities of administrators, teachers and learners and provides simple taxonomies to guide the change process.

The Course is Online: Why Aren't the Students Learning?

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Abstract

Despite literally hundreds of thousands of courses being transferred wholly or partly to an online mode of delivery over the last decade, many institutions continue to get it badly wrong. This paper draws on the literature to highlight some important aspects of online learning implementation that are often overlooked or given little attention. One common thread throughout is the major importance of good communication to the success of any online course. The authors distil the essence of good practice to present ten guidelines for effective online learning, in the hope that some of the more prominent pitfalls and disasters can be avoided.

Keywords: online learning, distance education, web-based delivery, online communication.

Introduction

The nature of education at tertiary level is currently undergoing an enormous transformation. Gone are the days when students expected little else but a lecture twice a week and a set text from which to study. Now, more students are expecting – indeed demanding – that courses be available online, so that they can study at times and from places of their own choosing, without, necessarily, any face-to-face contact with the academics responsible for the course.

In response to these pressures, many universities and colleges worldwide have introduced partial or full online courses: such as the University of Phoenix for working adults who want to further their education, and M.I.T, who have recently placed the majority of their curriculum online, available to a worldwide audience free of charge.

But along the way to full online delivery there have been many casualties. Institutions have attempted to place their courses online with minimal planning, paying little or no regard to the resources required. Panettieri (2004) stated in relation to online learning that:

"... most universities do offer distance learning programs. But many of them don't live up to their hype. In some cases, immature technology is to blame for the online woes. Yet far more often, distance learning initiatives fail because of internal cultural issues across multiple departments--academic, financial, marketing, and so forth."

Online learning challenges the existing relationships between academics, those who learn and those who administer the learning institution.

Marsden (2003) stated it well when she said:

"Understanding the online education paradigm is more than an academic pursuit. All of those concerned – administrators, course developers, teachers, and students - must embrace the paradigm to realize success."

Unfortunately, many students seeking to study online have become disenchanted with low-quality materials, with outdated links, and with files that take hours to download. Where such online materials have replaced face-to-face lectures, students have become disenchanted with what they perceive as academics 'not doing their job'. Further, the use of email and discussion lists has led to an expectation of help being available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, which many institutions have been unable or unwilling to provide. How can these and other similar disasters be avoided?

In this paper we take as our starting point that

- resources have been made available to transfer courses to an online mode of delivery,
- both administrators and academics have been consulted on all changes,
- instructional designers have been involved throughout the process of course development,
- adequate resources have been provided for continuous development, and

- timeline and schedule pressures have been duly recognized.

As a minimum, the learning resources should include the following:

- A course home page with a range of links to electronic resources;
- The provision of electronic copies of course materials available for printing;
- The placement workshop tasks and solutions to encourage participation in online communications;
- The inclusion of clear and concise assignment marking guidelines;
- The full contact details of all instructors;
- The provision of facilities to enable online submission and return of assignment items in a timely and efficient manner,
- A copy of the web site on CD-Rom.

Regrettably, many online courses do not currently provide even these essential requirements. But even with them, many courses still fail, because institutions fail to recognise the importance of many other factors, which are the subject of the rest of this paper.

The Ten Guidelines

Rather than take a negative stance and describe the problems often encountered, we describe ten guidelines which, if adhered to, greatly improve the chances that successful learning outcomes will be achieved.

GL 1. Ensure academics are fully conversant with potential problems.

Some academics may feel that a lifetime of teaching skills has been wasted or rendered obsolete in the institutional charge to online education. They may feel unable to use the talents that they most value in teaching – their presence in a classroom, their oral ability to control problem situations, and their skills in enhancing the benefits of learning for their students from opportunities that may present themselves whilst in class.

Berge (1998) listed many fears that still have a major impact on academic resistance to online learning. Amongst the most relevant almost a decade later are: -

- *"faceless" teaching...* Will the 'facelessness' of online learning mean a loss of control and ability to guide students? This ability is normally aided by an effective use and understanding of body language by the academic. The

answer here is the effective inculcation of good online communication skills.

- *diffusion of value traditionally placed on getting a degree* Will the course or program being taught online be valued as highly by employers as that which is taught classically (face-to-face)? Time, and the continued development and practice of online teaching and learning, and effective quality controls are essential to convey the value of this still reasonably innovative method of learning to prospective employers.
- *lack of an adequate time-frame to implement online courses....* Will the academics be given an appropriate time period to develop and test the online courses prior to implementation? An institutional understanding of the increasing workload of many academics can alleviate this fear.
- *high cost of materials* Will the online course be too expensive to 'build' or maintain which may lead to a cheapened and therefore inferior product? Effective financial planning is clearly essential.
- *increased time required for both online contacts and preparation of materials/activities* Will more time be spent online with students than would be the case in conventional teaching? The time spent online may be reduced if the academic provides guidelines for students to follow, clearly states times of availability, and utilizes an appropriate discussion forum for questions.
- *lack of technological assistance* Will appropriate assistance be available? This can be a very large obstacle if the concerned institution does not provide technological support for all parties – academics, administrators and students.

Many academics may benefit from auditing an online course, prior to a more substantial commitment, to help them to understand the dynamics involved in online teaching and learning. In addition to those factors mentioned previously change is often feared and resisted simply because of a reluctance to admit a lack of preparedness to meet the challenge of a new educational environment.

Smith, Ferguson and Caris (2002), stated that online courses are:

"... a labor-intensive, highly text-based, intellectually challenging forum which elicits deeper thinking on the part of the students, and which presents, for better or worse, more equality between instructor and student."

It is vitally important that academics should not be intimidated by the perception of a greater equality between themselves and students. This changing role for academics in the online environment has an importance that should not be underestimated.

It is also important that those academics who do decide to teach online enjoy using technology, or they may find that the environment of online learning is far more demanding than they have been led to expect. Kearsley (2002) plainly states his view that '*many teachers*

who are excellent at classroom teaching will not make good online teachers.'

Once the transition to online teaching and learning has occurred, academics may find themselves online in chat rooms and email sessions with students for several hours per week. The responses to questions and assignments will lead towards the creation of an online persona that will reassure students that someone is 'out there' and interested in them and what they produce. The successful creation of an online persona will ease the possibility of an increase in the class attrition rate (Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2002: 65). To feel confident in this environment academics should embrace and become literate with the technologies connected to the teaching and learning of their online course.

GL 2. Consider the use of synchronous communication where feasible.

Many authors stress the importance of asynchronous communication: for example, Aitken and Shedletsky (2002) however, both types of forum are often required for the successful operation of an online course. Wang and Newlin (2001) advocate the simultaneous use of asynchronous and synchronous communication for an online course to be successful.

Asynchronous online courses often have a one-way flow of information between the lecturer and student, and are a passive method of teaching, which simply turns the Internet based online course into another form of distance education. By utilizing synchronous chat rooms, a sense of social presence develops that often leads to a greater sense of community (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004).

Wang and Newlin (2001) advocated the simultaneous use of asynchronous and synchronous communication for an online course to be successful:

"... the type of interaction fostered by online chat rooms will enhance and clarify the information that is gathered via asynchronous interactions. Both types of information delivery systems are needed."

They asserted that asynchronous online courses often have a one-way flow of information between the lecturer and student, and are a passive method of teaching, which simply turns the Internet based online course into another form of distance education. By utilizing synchronous chat rooms, or a system such as Blackboard, a sense of

social presence develops that often leads to a greater sense of community.

Whether the online communication that is occurring is synchronous or asynchronous, one significant advantage resulting from online learning and communication is that the individual competitiveness of the face-to-face classroom is reduced. In an on-campus class, there is usually a strict time limit to each session or tutorial, and this may mean that the less vocal or less self-assured students do not have adequate opportunities to express themselves to either fellow students or academics. Online communication gives those students the time they need to express themselves without the pressures that are often inherent in a face-to-face setting (Bowman, 2003).

GL 3. Ensure instructors have the appropriate communication skills.

The effectiveness of online learning can often be severely constrained by poor communication between academics and students. Essential to effective online communication is that appropriate technology be affordable and available to students, and that courses be designed with this understanding. Another aspect that may lead to poor communication is the constraint of time for the academic or tutor monitoring several hundred emails and many chat rooms, particularly if these are the primary means of communication.

We are all used to the standard forms of communication. That is where one is face to face with someone and can read and become accustomed to the other persons body language. Gender is also important in communication protocols as the differences in the thought and body language processes between men and women can and often do cause difficulties when one is trying to interpret social interactions (Rossetti, 1998; Tannen, 1994).

Some instructors may lack the communication skills necessary to give advice with clarity and explicitness, especially if they are overworked and frustrated with the problems they are encountering. Priest (2000) stated that there are several areas in the teaching and learning of online learning that need to be addressed by both academics and institutions.

- Provide consistent access to course and program advisors,
- Practice clear and effective communication with online learning,
- Provide clear and concise curriculum guidelines,

- Provide student motivation when needed, and
- Be tolerant.

While Finley (2000) succinctly states a set of *'DO'S AND DON'TS'* that go some way towards explaining the complexities of online communication.

- Personalize the environment,
- Encourage introductions – introduce yourself,
- Use names when addressing responses to students – comment on personal things they have mentioned,
- Use an informal writing style but model correct grammar and spelling,
- Be aware that students cannot see your nonverbal behavior – avoid sarcasm,
- Be visible in the classroom - you can do this without dominating but students like to know that the instructor is there, and
- Establish clear guidelines for participation in conferences

Anyone who uses email regularly will know that although this is an excellent medium for fast communication it does place limitations on their own, and others, ability to socially interact. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that academics clearly communicate their expectations on how they want students to communicate in the online environment.

GL 4. Use a system such as W.R.I.T.E. as a basis for good communication

When communicating online educators and students have to learn to fill in the blanks that are left when they are unable to 'read' the body language of the people to whom they are 'talking'. Lewis (2000) asserted that it is important that academics master the art of communicating online in both asynchronous and synchronous format and that it is:

"...helpful ... (to) engage in ... the WRITE way to communicate online.

... that is (W)arm, (R)esponsive, (I)nquisitive, (T)entative, and (E)mpathetic."

McInnerney and Roberts (2002a) stated that if academics, administrators and students can manage to incorporate Lewis' concepts into their teaching, when online, then they will increase the ability of all concerned to succeed.

Haight (2002) suggested three ways to reduce student frustration with

online learning:

- *Reassure*....students that support is there for them and that any problems they may be having with the technology are common and fixable.
- *Encourage*....students who may be having problems with the material, and offer suggestions that will help their understanding, and
- *Orient and Facilitate*....students by clarifying expectations of behaviour and performance while undertaking online study.

Other authors have stressed the importance of the establishment of rules of conduct at the beginning of the course, such as not allowing individual students to dominate online discussion periods, and the summarization by the academic of student contributions and comments on the topic under discussion (McInnerney & Roberts, 2002b).

GL 5. Stress the importance of all online participants (instructors, technical staff, students) treating each other with respect.

One important issue not addressed by Lewis (2000), is that of respect. Academics, administrators and students should show respect towards the comments and ideas of others when communicating. This attitude of respect allows others to contribute meaningfully to discussions and along the way, all parties may discover that not only have they learnt how to communicate, but they may also have learnt how to learn more effectively and efficiently.

Good communication skills are of paramount importance in an online environment. If academics are not appropriately prepared, little can be done to salvage an essential component of the course, and this is likely to lead to low student morale, thereby compounding the problem.

Although no one style of education is going to be successful for all students, it is important that educational bodies and academics appreciate that effective support may be given to distant online learners by the implementation of, and adherence to, appropriate communication protocols. Universities have to ensure that their educators do not become blasé and assume that everyone knows what they mean – clear and precise communication has to continue for the lifetime of the institution's teaching and learning practice.

GL 6. Ensure that academics are aware of the problem of

student isolation

Cowley et al (2002) provided a profile of '*ideal*' online students.

- Self-disciplined
- Mature, experienced
- High emotional quotient
- Willingness to ask for help (which requires self-awareness and high emotional quotient)
- Independent

In reality, not many students would conform to this ideal. Students are likely to bring a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and skills to the online environment.

Kearsley (2002) has stated that although online learning is seen by many students as the most flexible manner in which to study, it is not an ideal forum for all as it requires an enormous amount of self-discipline and initiative on the part of the student. It is also for many an isolating experience as they are more familiar with the face-to-face experience.

Isolation, or the lack of physical interaction, is not always seen as a constraint but as a symptom or side effect of online learning. It is hard for academics to combat this very real problem (Hara & Kling, 2000). Humans are gregarious beings and no matter how mature the student, the feeling of isolation that is often generated by the sheer geographical distance between students, and between students and academics is a very real problem that needs to be addressed before the courses are placed online. Solutions must be deployed to overcome this isolation or many students may elect to leave the course. The research of Wegerif (1998), Palloff and Pratt (1999) and Curry (2000) substantiated that the online medium is often seen as cold, and that student attrition can be high.

Daugherty and Funke (1998) indicated that the issue of isolation is '*an important criterion for student satisfaction*' with a web-based online course. This feeling of isolation is often '*based on the physical separation between student and instructor*' and is one that academics may be able to ameliorate, but are unlikely to ever be able to successfully eradicate. It is however very worthwhile to attempt to minimize this problem.

Cereijo, Young & Wilhelm (2001) confirmed that isolation could be a

problem with online learning, particularly if students are extroverts, are visual learners, live near campus, have computer problems or are inexperienced. Despite this, they indicated that for those students who are working, have families, or face socio-economic problems, the concept of online education is a preferred option, as their other commitments may prevent them from attending face-to-face classes.

GL 7. Provide as much flexibility in schedules and procedures as possible.

Students attempting to study online may also become intensely frustrated by online administrative procedures. Generally, schedules and procedures will have been established so that the administration of the institution can operate smoothly and efficiently. However, changes will be needed if courses are to operate in an online manner. Additional flexibility is often required if online students' needs are to be fully met.

Roberts (2001) proposed a three-by-three grid to classify nine ways in which online courses may be said to be flexible. On the vertical axis are time, place, and mode of study; along the horizontal are administrative procedures, learning, and assessment. Many online courses would currently be worthy of a positive ranking in only perhaps two or three of the nine classifications, indicating that, at least according to this method of classification; true flexibility is still a long way off.

One of the nine classifications is the ability to learn via a variety of modes. Werry (2002) points out that:

"...students must, of necessity, show a great deal of initiative. They are at the "center" of the system in the sense that they must take charge of their education in a way that traditional students aren't required to. However, it isn't clear that this necessarily empowers students, provides for a better educational experience, or is really in line with constructivist pedagogy".

As an opposing view, Rovai (2001) said that:

"Findings indicated that online learners took advantage of the learn anytime characteristics of the Internet by accessing the course seven days per week, 24 hours per day."

Rovai (2001) indicated that students could adapt to, and cope with, the concepts used in online learning far more readily than is commonly acknowledged. Western society is becoming familiar with the use of the Internet, and students are more able to accommodate their study programs around their work and lifestyles. It is therefore up to

administrators and academics to ameliorate any problems that exist within their institutions so that students may avail themselves of this form of education with ease. In the twenty-first century, potential students are likely to be more comfortable in the use of the online environment than are academics from previous generations.

What are the principal sources of student frustration? Three in particular seem to occur very regularly throughout the literature. Almost all students, but especially those studying online, expect prompt feedback on assignments, do not appreciate ambiguous instructions from academics, and get frustrated when the institution has 'technical problems' which can make communication problematic (Hara & Kling, 1999).

GL 8. Recognize the importance of prompt feedback and unambiguous communication.

In the online environment, students have an increased expectation that they will receive prompt feedback. If assignments are not returned promptly, and with adequate notations by markers, this may well lead to an increase in the students' sense of isolation, contribute to their feelings of frustration, and lead to a repetition of mistakes in follow-up assignments.

The expectation of prompt feedback needs to be addressed at the outset of the course. The instructor should make explicit to the students the rates of response that can reasonably be expected.

Ambiguity can also be a source of major dissatisfaction. If academics do not give clear and precise directions concerning assessment requirements, and then receive incorrect assignments based on those unclear instructions, the students may have justifiable complaints if they are penalized for submitting incorrect work. Clear and unambiguous communication is a key concept that all academics must follow whether in a face-to-face or online course. It is therefore of extreme importance that all academics be instructed in the use of email and chat room styles of communication (see Diagram 2).

GL 9. Provide a well resourced permanently available Help Desk facility.

Technical problems may present substantial challenges for academics. Students may be left with negative feelings towards online education if course web sites and chat rooms are unable to be accessed due to technical problems. This is often the most difficult of the limitations to

overcome. Institutions should as a matter of priority ensure the provision of well-resourced IT departments able to maintain and upgrade computing facilities and hardware, thereby minimizing the potential for technical problems, as well as providing well-trained and patient help desk staff able to respond promptly to 'cries for help' from students (Kazmer, 2000). It is essential to recognize that such support may be especially important to online students outside of normal office hours.

GL 10. Implement appropriate feedback mechanisms to enable continuous improvement.

It is essential that adequate communication channels and feedback mechanisms be provided for academic and administrative staff, and for students. Appropriate feedback is not just the ubiquitous survey forms, which students are loath to fill in but also the intelligent use by academics and administrators of good and clear communications technology – whether synchronous or asynchronous.

Academics and administrators should constantly gauge the success of the course materials via interactive processes. Have they successfully achieved what they set out to do – the creation or adaptation of a standard course to its new online environment? Have the students found this environment to be an easy one in which to study?

With careful monitoring of the appropriate communication mechanisms, such as email lists and course specific chat rooms, academics will be able to find, understand, and hopefully solve, any problems that may be a cause of concern. This continuous feedback from students will be one of the most important tools used to improve the online course materials. This process will also enable the academics and administrators to gauge the success of both their materials, and the delivery method.

Summary

The issues that confront academics, administrators when they attempt to introduce online learning courses in the curriculum of their educational institutions are many. This paper has attempted to highlight some of the common problems, and has presented ten guidelines designed to ensure that online courses have a reasonable expectation of success – that is, where the courses present an environment in which students are capable of effective learning. With careful planning, the introduction of online learning can greatly benefit

all those involved – academics, administrators, and students.

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