



Putting a Course Online

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Introduction

If you are an instructor these days, you've no doubt noticed that the "traditional" educational experience is becoming somewhat atypical. Many individuals seeking to further their education are expressing a wish to participate in authentic learning opportunities—but only on their own terms. To meet the demands of this constituency, many universities and colleges are adjusting and developing programs in an attempt to promote true flexibility for both the institution and student. Changes in pedagogical strategies and the advent of robust technological tools enable today's educators to successfully shape this vision. More than ever before, higher-education institutions are offering courses (and degree programs) that utilize online resources to deliver distance education.

What is distance education?

Distance education is a method of instruction that does not require students to be in the same physical location as the instructor or other students in order to participate in a course. Numerous methods of delivery are used in distance education including (but not limited to) video tutorials, correspondence,

audio/video-teleconferencing, and online Internet-based courses delivered by a course management system. The attraction of this educational method lies primarily in the ability for educators to create better access for their students by building flexibility into the time and place of the teaching and assessment of students (Waits & Lewis, 2003).

The phenomenon of distance education continues to display rapid growth. Lewis, Alexander and Farris report that in 1995 one-third of higher-education institutions provided distance education (1997). Five years later, during the 2000-2001 academic year, Waits and Lewis (2003) report that 56 percent of national two- and four-year colleges and universities offered some type of distance learning and “the majority of these institutions (90%) reported that they offered Internet courses using asynchronous computer-based instruction as a primary mode of instructional delivery” (p. 11). Technological advances in computer devices, more ubiquitous connectivity and a more technologically savvy constituency is driving the surge. Additionally, the concept of distance education itself speaks directly to current student needs, where working individuals and traditional student learners look for ways to access and continue their education through less traditional means. Distance education, primarily in the form of online computer-based instruction, is in the process of transforming modern educational paradigms and has become a central tenet of models designed to meet the needs of post-secondary education’s evolving student base.

Two common models of online resources.

There is an entire continuum of online resources available to instructors who decide to participate in distance education. These resources are applied in various different combinations that range from a course that references single images (or single web pages) to full courses delivered and supported by a combination of technological tools. This paper will focus on asynchronous online computer-based instruction (also known as “web-based” or “Internet”) in two common modes: Purely online courses, and Hybrid (or Blended) courses.

Purely online courses:

Purely online courses place student and instructor at different locations (often thousands of miles apart) and these participants only interact using virtual means – online, phone, video, and so on. The class never meets in a face-to-face environment. Student and instructor typically work from his or her own computer in an asynchronous manner and use synchronous (real time) communication only during pre-arranged and agreed upon times. Teaching purely online raises interesting logistical and pedagogical issues associated with the successful or unsuccessful delivery of a course.

Hybrid courses:

Hybrid courses are those that have both a face-to-face and an online component, and there are many flavors to choose from. Some courses may meet physically on a very regular schedule but have access to some readings, syllabus, or other materials online. Other courses may meet only occasionally in person and all of the course materials and much of the interaction takes place online.

Examining needs--do I need to put a course online?

It all depends. In a typical face-to-face classroom the instructor does not *need* to put a course online. Many successful traditional face-to-face courses have no online component. But let's say, for the sake of argument, that you have been getting some nudges from precocious students, or maybe you have been experiencing some of the "Oedipal aggression" that Green (2003) describes as arising out of the "New Computing". Perhaps students have approached you recently saying "You should put your notes and supplemental content online—then I can access whatever I need whenever I want!" or "Gee, it sure would be nice to have an easy and sure-fire way to contact you and get my grades without having to schedule an appointment!" If you want to be responsive to your students, and are interested in enhancing the educational experience—then yes, you need an online course! Further, perhaps your department is getting a bit itchy about all the other online courses from other universities that are sprouting from every nook and cranny to lend competition to your course and your university. Perhaps the department is getting pressure to remain competitive, generate revenue and recruit/retain students. The department wants to "Get online, NOW!" and all of a sudden the department looks to you to make it happen. Do you need an online course then? Absolutely!

Is teaching online different than teaching a traditional face-to-face course?

Yes. Both pure distance offerings and hybrid course offerings differ in certain respects to the traditional face-to-face model. The primary concerns of any instructor remain constant: are students meeting the objectives established by the instructor as outlined in the curriculum—is learning taking place? But the actual pedagogical design, implementation of successful teaching methods and physical action of the teaching is quite different. Shea, Pelz, Fredericksen, and Pickett's 2001 study suggests that:

“...faculty explore the idea that online instruction does not simply entail mimicking what happens in the classroom, but rather, *requires a transformation*: a re-conceptualization of their course and learning objectives given the options and constraints of the new learning environment.” (p. 9, emphasis added)

Developing a *pure* distance course involves “considerably more work, often including hundreds of hours of up-front work to set up the course” (Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2001, p. 4). Documents must be converted into electronic formats for web delivery and course design must be developed to meet the demands of this different style of teaching in which instructors shift roles from that of content provider to content facilitator (Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2001). In a pure distance course there are no classroom meetings so the instructor is not able to deal with students face-to-face. Body language, verbal tone and a regularly scheduled timeframe for class meetings are effectively eliminated from the equation. Clear and articulate communication of instructions becomes critical and online interactions need to be timely, steady, and sure-handed. Moore's

1993 research indicates that successful distance education courses need to encourage and promote meaningful interactions between student and instructor, student and student, and ultimately, student and content in order for learning to take place. In addition to clarity and interaction concerns, instructors must also watch out for technological issues relating to the use of the course management system. Technical problems experienced by students may serve to compound any problematic educational issues that the student(s) might encounter, making the learning of course content more difficult (Hara & Kling, 2001).

Hybrid course offerings combine regular classroom meetings with Internet or other technology mediated instruction and support. In some cases, a hybrid course is used to reduce the number of times a class meets on-campus each week during the semester. Usually, an attempt is made to combine the best elements of face-to-face with the best that a distance-learning course has to offer (Kaleta, 2003). Instructors may find that their pedagogical techniques change with the advent of an online supplement that can provide such benefits as:

- 24/7 grade management options
- Student-to-instructor and student-to-student communication options (both asynchronous and synchronous)
- The ability for students to turn in assignments electronically
- Quiz/test/survey functions.

Many instructors report anecdotally that after an initial investment of time to get their various documents and course content made available electronically they

are freed up to concentrate more on the pure pedagogical concerns of the classroom. Technological limitations or problems in a hybrid course situation are often mitigated by the ability of instructor and student to discuss these issues in a face-to-face situation.

Where do I begin--in a world that's constantly changing?

Once you have decided you want to utilize online learning resources, you must look at what the course offering needs to do. A basic first step is to determine whether you need a pure distance offering or a hybrid offering. Care must be taken to consider the constituency to which the course will be delivered, how long the course will run, and how the course content will be used to most effectively teach the objectives of the class. It is also necessary to determine the timeframe needed and available to design and construct the course and materials. Factors that affect the actual design and build phase of the course include whether content is already available but not in an electronic format; content is already available and is in some form of electronic format; or whether it will be necessary to develop the content and the electronic format of the content from the ground up.

After determining what type of course offering is needed and to what extent development of content needs to take place, instructors must ask questions of themselves in regards to distance learning. Is the instructor an experienced instructor with a solid set of fundamental teaching abilities? Has the instructor

ever taught an online course? Is the instructor computer savvy or computer illiterate? Does the instructor have access to associates or students who possess computer skills and are willing (or can be coerced) to help develop online course materials and design? What general support avenues are available? All of these considerations have repercussions on timeframe and effectiveness of the course development cycle. Obviously, the instructors who are well versed in distance education and comfortable with course management technology might have an easier time developing and delivering an online course of some fashion. But this is not to say that a novice will not be able to design and complete an effective offering, it's just that the learning curve (conversion of traditional content for an online course offering, learning a course management tool and pedagogical paradigm) is a bit more protracted, serving to prolong the period it takes to develop and implement a course.

All the hard work will pay off.

All the up-front and during-the-course work that goes into the creation and running of an online course does pay dividends eventually. For instance, after an initial offering, instructors walk away from the experience with, at the very least, an “electronic course” of some sort. This collection of electronically enabled content and teaching experience may lead to reflection on the part of the instructor as he or she starts to refine what has already been developed. As with all teaching, this reflective aspect becomes essential as each successive offering renders the process more familiar, less daunting and (hopefully) more effective.

Additionally, if an instructor is utilizing a course management system, the opportunity is there to use the established framework (course organization schemes; student management techniques; appropriate tool selection and use) of the initial offering to create not only the same course again, but other different courses. Having a “template” to work from is clearly advantageous in terms of course development time and course effectiveness for those instructors utilizing online resources. Each successive pass through a design cycle (envision the objective; create the material; apply the appropriate tool; reflect, adjust and revise) can help to refine course content and methodology of delivery. With a course management system, instructors can make a backup of a good course and begin a new semester with a solid framework intact and ready to go.

And in the end...

Finally, instructors must look to the school to see what course management system is being used and get in touch with the support staff of that system. The administrators of a course management system typically understand the system and offer training on the use of the technology. As soon as possible, instructors should request a course, attend some training seminars and begin to work in the system—there is absolutely no substitute for time spent in front of the screen learning how the course management system works. Instructors should take care to avoid waiting until the last second to begin to develop a course offering

because technology (computers in particular) sense urgency and unfailingly pick that exact moment to begin to behave “unpredictably”. Generally speaking, instructors that work one semester ahead are giving themselves enough time to actually deliver a cohesive, well thought out course offering.

***Note:** Presently Montana State University is using WebCT. MSU WebCT gives instructors a gated (password protected) course management resource that shares data with the MSU Banner system to provide consistently updated rosters of registered MSU students. WebCT features a plethora of “tools” that enable content, communication, and assessment.

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