Online Teaching: A Faculty Perspective

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Abstract

In recent years Internet/Web based online teaching/learning has grown substantially. Institutions of higher learning are eager to offer online classes and are often asking on-ground faculty members to teach online classes even without any proper training. Many faculty members who have never taught online classes are very apprehensive about the possibility of teaching online classes and are sometimes questioning the validity, and the appropriateness of such classes. If a course is well designed and carefully implemented, online instruction can provide an effective educational environment and can be an enjoyable experience for both students and instructor, particularly if the students are motivated and self-disciplined and the instructor maintains continuous interaction with them (Cooper 1999). The author has been teaching online classes for the last three years in various institutions (national, regional, and local) using web-based tools. This paper addresses some of the lessons learned during this period of time and then provides some suggestions to improve online teaching. A web-based online class will be used to discuss the class structure, course delivery, course management, and student assessment.

Key words: Online teaching, course management tools, discussion forums, study teams, feedback, student participation, assessment, and student motivation.

1.   INTRODUCTION

During the last few years Internet/Web based online teaching/learning has grown substantially. Philips (1999) reported that there has been a 38% increase from 1995 to 1999 in the number of institutions using computer technology to deliver courses to students. According to Charp (2000), typical distance learners are those who don't have access to programs, employees who work during scheduled class hours, homebound individuals, self-motivated individuals who want to take courses for self-knowledge or advancement, or those who are unable or unwilling to attend regular classes. Institutions of higher learning are eager to offer online classes and are often asking on-ground faculty members to teach online classes even without any proper training. Faculty members are very apprehensive about the possibility of teaching online classes and are sometimes questioning the validity, and the appropriateness of such classes. A surprising number of administers seem to think that faculty members can simply add teaching at a distance to their existing workloads (Charp 1998). As a result of all these developments, educators are faced with a number of challenges and opportunities. The author has been teaching online classes for the last three years in various institutions (national, regional, and local), using web based tools. This paper summarizes the experience of the author in delivering online classes and then offers some suggestions to improve the quality of online leaching.

2.   LESSONS LEARNED

Plan Ahead
Depending on your institution, your course may last Five weeks, six weeks, eight weeks, or fifteen weeks. You need to create a very detailed syllabus for your class and this syllabus must contain all the details of the course. The syllabus will become the contract between you and your students. Every detail of the course needs to be explained in this document to avoid any confusion. This is very important for classes that last only five or six weeks since the time needed to clarify some of these issues can be wisely utilized for other purpose. Individual assignment due dates and time, point values of each assignment and test, policy for late assignments, letter grade determination, and all the weekly assignments must be clearly spelled out in this document. Discussion participation requirements and group/team project participation requirements also need to be explained. Since the students are not seeing you in the classroom, you need to try to avoid as much

confusion as you can by providing detailed information about the course content, requirement, and delivery at the very beginning of your online class. It is a good idea to repeat the information at different part of your syllabus, but make sure that you are consistent when using the same information in different areas.

Kubala (1998) pointed out that each week's assignments must be prepared carefully well before the course begins and you must follow the syllabus vigorously to avoid student confusion. For a five/six week course it is necessary that the lectures, discussion questions, tests/quizzes, and assignments are ready even before the class starts. This will allow the faculty to spend sufficient time on managing discussion, grading student papers/assignments, and preparing weekly feedbacks. In addition to the course calendar, it is very helpful to the students to post a weekly schedule with all the required reading, assignments, and deadlines. Since you may have students from different time zones, it is important to state your deadline policy very clearly.

I usually post a master schedule at the beginning of the class then a weekly schedule at the beginning of every week. I include an assignment list with my weekly lectures and then post a weekly reminder with the weekly assignments. I normally complete all my lectures before the class starts and make the final adjustments before I post them every week. My deadline policy states that the date and time stamped on the course management system (CMS) are the date and time you submitted your assignment.

Be an Active Participant in Your Class
In a regular classroom the instructor is always present for the students to ask questions and to solve problems. In a similar manner we need to create an atmosphere in our online classes where students can feel your presence. According to Smith, Ferguson, and Caris (2001), an online instructor has to spend hours online to create an 'online presence", a psychological perception for students that the instructor is out there and is responding to them. They also pointed out that without this feeling, students quickly become insecure and tend to drop the class. Some institutions require the faculty member to be present a certain number of days. For example an institution where the author teaches online classes, the requirement is five days out of the seven days. The instructor is required to participate in the discussion, answer student questions, and post new information on the discussion board.

It is the responsibility of the instructor to guide the students through the discussion so that they are getting the appropriate information. A lot of the learning in an online class actually takes place through active participation and discussion. You need to encourage students to share their (appropriate) work experience with the class so that the whole class will benefit from these experiences.Williams and Peters (1997) pointed

out that in an online class, the instructor must shift from the role of content provider to content facilitator, gain comfort and proficiency in using the web as the primary teacher-student link, and learn to teach effectively without the visual control provided by direct eye contact.

Under normal circumstances, I will sign-on everyday and try to respond to as many postings as I can. Obviously you cannot respond to all the postings, but you really need to try your best to hit as many as you can. This will give a feeling to the students that you are available and willing to help them. If I am out of town for a conference, I will let the students know that I will not be available as often as before, but I will try to check the progress if I have access to the web.

Provide Timely Feedback
Students expect immediate feedback from their instructors. White (2000) reported that the immediacy of the feedback might raise student expectations of instructor availability. Sometimes their expectations are unreasonable and you need to let them know about your policy about feedback. It is a good idea to state this policy in the syllabus otherwise you will be answering a lot of e–mails. If due to some unforeseen circumstances, you were not able to provide the feedback as stated in the syllabus, please let the students know about it as early as possible. Students depend on these feedbacks to improve their future assignments and thus it is very important to provide the feedback as early as possible. You must be prepared to answer their questions about the feedback and the grade. We are still a grade driven society and the grade plays a big role in every students expectations. It may not be possible to satisfy every student but if you provide a detailed explanation for the assessment, majority of the students will accept your evaluation. Charp (1999) pointed out that the students appreciate written comments by the instructor and their peers on work in progress. She also pointed out that the interaction between the participants is of crucial importance to the learning process and direct communication with students via discussion board (bulletin board), private e-mail, chats etc. are very effective.

I normally return their short assignments (assignments that require two or less pages) within forty-eight hours after the deadline and long assignments (assignment that require three or more pages) within three days after the deadline. Students also like detailed and specific feedbacks. It is very important for you to state your policy about the feedback in your syllabus and then follow that policy religiously.

Use the Capabilities of the Course Management System

Course management systems (CMS) are software tools that will automate a number of the course delivery and

management functions. Blackboard and WebCt are the two major players in the field at the present time. My institution uses Blackboard 5.5 but WebCT has almost the same functions available. The learning curves of these tools are almost the same. Blackboard has a threaded discussion form, group facilities, test and grade book facilities, chat facility, ability to create announcements, course calendar, file transfer capabilities, e-mail and a number of other features. The discussion form allows you to sort the messages by author, date, and subject, which is very convenient when you grade participation and the quality of the discussion. The e-mail allows you to send e-mail to the whole class, a group within your class, individual students, and the faculty member. You can create groups in your class for group discussion, file transfer, and e-mail communication and these groups are password protected. Blackboard allows you to create a variety of assessments including true/false, multiple choice, fill-in, and short answer questions. The Course Statistics function in Blackboard allows you to produce a number of reports and graphics of student activities. Blackboard allows you to see what the students see while you develop your course. Blackboard is a server-based product, and all you need is an Internet Browser to access your courses from a Blackboard server.

Blackboard still did not have a spell checker. I normally type my lectures and other class material in a word-processing program, spell check it, and then copy and paste it on the Blackboard. Since no spell checker is available, you need to take extra care when typing responses in the discussion forum in Blackboard. I heard that they are incorporating a good text and math editor in version 6.0, with a spell checker. Creating tests/quizzes are very time consuming but some third party software tools (free downloads) are available to make this process a little easier. The grade book had a very undesirable feature, but they have created a fix for this problem in version 5.5.

Motivate Students to Participate in Class Activities
Learning is best accomplished when the learner is actively engaged in the process. For online discussion, this means that we want them to be active participants, providing input that will make everybody learn and think (Klemm 1998). Some suggestions to make this activity more productive are: make the participation as a requirement, form learning teams, make the activities interesting, require messages with explanations, require a deliverable at the end of the discussion, structure the activity to encourage critical thinking, and faculty guidance and participation in the discussion (Klemm, 1998). Moore (1993) suggested that there are three types of interaction necessary for successful distance education: (1) leaner-content interaction, (2) leaner-instructor interaction, and (3) leaner-leaner interaction. Cooper (2000) also suggested that the instructor/student communication, student/instructor communication and the student/student communication are very essential for

the success of an online program. Online instructors need to ensure that all three forms of interaction are maximized in their course structure. Rich communication environments, both synchronous and asynchronous, make it possible for students to interact more effectively with classmates and instructors (Hofstetter, 1999). Facilitating discussion is the duty of the professor who must keep track the involvement of all students and encourage those who are not participating actively to do so (Kroder, Suess, and Sachs, 1998).

Group/Team projects are a vital part of online learning. You need to take extra care in formulating groups. One approach is to ask the students to form their own groups and the instructor gets involved only when there is problem. The advantage of this approach is that when problems arise in the group, the instructor can put the responsibility on the students. Another approach is that the instructor formulates groups after consulting with the students using certain criteria like time zone. Inevitably there will be dropouts and you need to deal with these kinds of problems.

Active participation on the discussion form has several advantages. According to Karayan and Crowe (1997), discussion forms have the ability to cater the needs of all students, to create a sense of community, to help students to think before they respond, and to increase the interaction. Stith (2000) reported a positive correlation between the final grade and the number of messages (articles) read by students in a class. According to (Burgstahler, 1997), it is a challenge for any online instructor to ensure the active participation by all students.

I require my students to participate at least five days out of the seven days and I also require them that the responses must be substantial. I let them know that Quality and quantity counts. Simple "I agree" kind of answers with out qualifications will not be counted as participation. I often ask them to apply the concepts in their work environment and they often describe examples from work to illustrate the application of the theory. I actively participate in the discussion form to guide them and if I notice any "slackers" I will send them personal messages to get them involved in the discussion.

Understand the Importance of Content Delivery
The main purpose of an online class is to deliver the content and you need to create your own methods and mechanism to deliver your content. Also you need to choose the appropriate methodology for your course/subject. Computer-based learning material can model the student's learning and proactively help the student achieve the learning objective. Peregoy (1998) pointed out that faculty may be able to translate some techniques from a traditional classroom to a distance-learning environment but creativity is required for this translation. White (2000) reported that online students

are most concerned with the course content, regardless of the course format. According to Gibson and Herrara (1999), web based education puts students at the center of the learning process and encourages research, exploration, and independence on the part of the students. They also added that the web-based education requires the faculty to completely rethink the teaching/learning process and the structuring of their courseware. Terry (2001) concluded that courses requiring extensive mathematics maybe be difficult to convert to an Internet instruction format.

For some classes I use discussion, weekly summary, team projects, and individual writing assignments without any test or quizzes. For some other classes I use chapter tests, midterm, and finals. Weekly summaries are an excellent way to close the discussion of weekly materials. I choose my discussion questions in such a way that every body in the class have some thing to say about it. Some times I will ask them to do some research about the weekly topic and post a one-page summary of their findings. After this research summary is posted, then the actual discussion about that topic will last for two to three days.

Be Creative in Developing Assessment, Feedback, Grading, etc
Distance learning has, by its nature, introduced several new success indicators. Written communication can be an indicator of growth and learning by using a studied approach to that communicator's progression in grammar, organization and development. The use of threaded discussion also provides a point of evaluation through an analysis of the types of questions posed, the types of responses given, the depth of the observations between teacher and student, and student and student, and the number of posted entries (Wade, 1999).

Short (2000) pointed out that it is wise to break the lecture into distinct sections and it is best to limit lectures to 20 minute worth segments. She also pointed out that it is a good idea for the faculty to keep electronic office hours to reduce the student expectations of 24-hour accessibility and to increase student access and response to questions. Ryan (2000) reported that all content may not be suitable for teaching online and one of the determinants of this suitability is the degree and method of testing that is necessary to assess participants understanding. Over the Internet, students can access instructional material on demand, instead of having to wait for them to be broadcasted or mailed.

We want to make sure that the students understand what we are teaching. In order to do this we need to create assessments that will test the content knowledge. I use weekly summary as a review vehicle in which students describe the highlights of the week. According to Hazari and Schno (1999), feedback and assessment can be used to monitor student progress, control the pace of learning, and evaluate teaching strategies.

We need to provide detailed weekly feedback for all assignment and course work. I organize my feedback under the various titles of the assignment like: individual assignment, discussion, participation, and weekly summary. In this document I include the good and the bad about their assignment and their grade for each assignment. I will try my best to do this in a positive tone and with a heavy dose of encouragement.

Use Your Time Wisely
Online teaching is a very time consuming process. Course preparation, class participation, feedback, assessment, and keeping track the progress of each student will all take a tremendous amount of time. According to Smith, Ferguson, and Caris (2001) web-based distance education classes require considerably more work, often including hundreds of hours of up-front work to set up the course. They also pointed out that instructors need to respond threaded discussion questions, evaluate assignments, and answer questions clearing up ambiguities, often spending an intolerable amount of time communicating. Hsu, Hamza, and Alhalabi (1999), pointed out that content creation, conversion to digital format and manipulation takes much longer than one might originally expect and the development of an online class will add significant amount of work to the instructor's daily routine. Brown (1998) observed that the computer mediated instruction is more time consuming, at least initially, both from the standpoint of up-front course design and later, painstaking, labour intensive hours online, designing messages for the classroom forum, reading and downloading from the screen, posting new material, providing feedback, checking community bulletin boards, e-mailing student comments and grade reports. She estimated that the online mode of instruction requires roughly 40% to 50% more work on the teacher's part in comparison with conventional classroom delivery. She also added that teaching online is far more intense and absorbing from the instructor's point of view than traditional teaching, and therefore, simultaneously more exhilarating and more mentally exhausting.

Organize Your/Student Files Logically
The amount of teaching material and student material is tremendous and you need to organize and manage these materials. You need to develop a good scheme to organize your work so that you can locate the material at a later period if needed. Some institutions require you to keep all the class related material for a period of six months after the class is over. Many of us reuse our material when we teach the same class again and this kind of organization will save a lot of our time.

I organize all my announcements, master schedule, weekly schedules, syllabus, and some form letters in a separate folder. I create separate folders for lectures, grade book and weekly feedback. All student work is

organized by week, and I have a separate folder for summary, papers, final project, tests, and assignments within this folder. When I download Mary's week 1 summary, I name that file as Mary-week1-summary and save that in the summary folder. I have other folders for PowerPoint presentations (if used), research articles, and a folder to keep some graphics, jokes, and cartoons. Every week I save a copy of the grade book in excel format in the grade book folder. I even keep a printed copy of the grade book after each change for security reasons. You need to create a scheme that is appropriate for you depending on your course and preference.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The technology of distance learning continues to influence the practice of education. Distance education is forcing institutions to think about the quality and uniqueness of their offerings (Kearsley, 1998). Mattthews (1999) reported that the benefits of distance education include: increased access to higher education, flexible scheduling of personal time, convenient location, individualized attention by the instructor, less travel, and increased time to think about and respond to questions posed by the instructor. Dominguez and Ridley (1999) concluded that the online courses prepared students for advanced study at least as well as the traditionally accepted forms of prerequisites at their institution. Online learning gives an excellent opportunity to foster high-order thinking skills, time management capabilities, interpersonal communications, and the capacity to process information (Benson and Wright, 1999). Charp (1999) indicated that online teaching could be as effective as traditional instruction: (1) where the methods are appropriate to the instructional objectives; (2) where student interaction exists; and (3) where there is ongoing teacher-to-student feedback. If the course is carefully planned and implemented and the instructor is open to student feedback and continuous improvement, online instruction can be an effective educational environment and offer a viable alternative to traditional classroom instruction (Cooper, 2000). Online education is here to stay and faculty members who want to be a part of this experience must be prepared to accept the challenges that are associated with this change.

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