Maximizing the Online Student Experience

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Abstract

Students are faced with the choice of taking traditional lecture classes or pursuing their education online. There has been substantial focus on the pedagogy of distance learning, the tools and platforms that are available, the requirements for effective teaching at a distance, and the appropriate support mechanisms needed for success. However, there is little understanding of what it takes to "learn" at a distance. The learner is the other part of the distance learning equation. This paper, written by professors with extensive experience teaching distance based classes and significant research in computer-mediated communication processes, addresses this often overlooked aspect of distance learning. Taking classes at a distance requires much more planning and diligence than just a "how-to" course related to navigating the platform used. This discussion includes helping learners understand and modify (if necessary) their own personal social interaction style to be effective online. Learners must be able to organize their distance learning class experience, develop relationships with faculty whom they may never meet, network with other learners in the class whom they may also never meet. Learners in distant education programs must also work diligently to establish the credibility of their educational experience and their online degrees.

Keywords: distance learning, online education, managing expectations, learner responsibility, networking, communication skills

1. INTRODUCTION

Students are increasingly faced with educational choices. They may elect to take classes in a traditional format, sitting in a classroom and absorbing lecture material presented by an expert in the subject at hand. Traditional lectures represent the distillation of materials from the assigned texts as well as the professor's years of experience. Or students may choose to pursue classes at a distance (entirely delivered virtually, or partially), using Internet capabilities to access course materials, written lectures, assignments, and their classmates. The latter option is becoming more and more attractive as universities are increasing the marketing of distance-learning classes emphasizing the flexibility that such classes provide for learners. Learners can attend online classes on their own schedules and work around the temporal constraints of their jobs and families. More employees are expected to work in a telecommuting modality, and

distance learning can be part of that. Accessibility for a variety of limitations is also a benefit that is emphasized.

Regardless of one's geographical location or the travel commitments for work, learners are able to "attend classes" anywhere they have access to the World Wide Web. However, it takes more than access to course content to be a successful learner at a distance. Students must understand how to get the most out of their distance education experience. This begins with an understanding of the motivators that encourage universities to offer online classes, degrees, and programs.

2. THE UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE

Universities offer distance learning because higher education has become a very competitive marketplace at a time when advances in technology have made it possible to find new ways to bring educational opportunities to new markets (Bonk, 2004). Students demand it, and the faculty and university must respond to keep the students enrolled. Many private universities have built their entire business model on solely offering distance learning.

Investment: A university must make a considerable investment in order to be a successful player in the distance learning game. The biggest dollar investment is in the information technology infrastructure to deliver courses and other services online similar to an organization offering telecommuting options (Baker, Avery, Crawford, 2004). Many universities are making this happen through state and federal granting agencies.

The less obvious, hidden costs are for the organizational and telecommunications infrastructure costs, instructional technology experts, online advising and tech assistance, library and bookstore resources, training for faculty motivated and skilled in teaching at a distance, online writing support, and for other university services for learners and faculty. Costs savings result from fewer classrooms and faculty offices needed.

If a university is going to do distance education well, there will be significant investments involved. Most of this investment cannot be discerned or evaluated by prospective learners wishing to compare universities. Potential applicants can inquire about the course delivery technology platforms and other support services online, but the other support is less visible. Developing and offering ongoing training on all aspects of distance learning is another major factor. It is in the university's financial interests, at least for the short term, to minimize this investment. It is in the best interest of the instructors and learners to have the richest support environment possible.

Once the initial technology and training investment has been made, universities often choose to charge premium tuition for the courses, and find the payoff to be in the minimal incremental cost involved in adding more sections of distance-based courses.

Faculty issues: Faced with learning a new way of teaching that requires frequent and meaningful student interaction, many faculty consider teaching at a distance a time consuming and inefficient delivery method. It becomes almost individual tutoring for each learner enrolled in a class, if it is done well. It is significantly more time-consuming to handle an online class than one in a traditional classroom; however the teacher/student interaction can be much
more rewarding than in lecture formats. Learners need to compete for the time and attention of the faculty, and faculty need to learn to manage their time and interactions to be effective (Bormann-Young, Hess, & Johnson, 2004).

Universities use a variety of compensation schemes for faculty including making them part of the regular teaching load (for full time faculty), offering a premium for teaching online, or paying adjuncts on a per head basis. Online courses may be mostly taught with adjuncts, due to demand, experience, and reluctance of many traditional academics to teach in the mode. Adjuncts represent the flexible workforce, and are much more easily added or not hired (than full time faculty) depending on student demand. Department supervisors may exercise minimal quality control over the content/activity of the courses due to 'academic freedom' principles (and lack of time), just as often happens with adjunct faculty teaching in a traditional setting. For-profit schools often exercise a much higher level of actively 'monitoring' faculty classroom performance against published

expectations with computer programs or hired monitors.

While a vetting process is followed before contracting with an instructor to teach, it may take several semesters before a really bad distance learning faculty member can be identified and eliminated from the teaching roster. Many schools require an online training course for the instructor, which is one form of filtering out those who should not be teaching online. It is in the best financial interest of the university to pay as little as possible for someone to facilitate such a class, and this increases the reliance on adjunct faculty.

Faculty other than those who are "teaching" the class often develop the classes, including choosing the textbook and developing the weekly online learning modules, the reading assignments and important discussion questions. The university may have a staff of instructional designers that work with the faculty, and review the course designs for appropriateness and innovation. Many universities pay a highly experienced faculty member to develop (and maintain) a 'master' course template that can be used in all sections to ensure consistency of learning rigor, approaches, and outcomes.

Adjunct faculty members who teach a class are often working from someone else's course design and teaching notes. While this can improve consistency, it can mean the instructor is not as familiar with the material. Good training and support for an online course are of assistance to a relatively new teacher, and saves class development time for all faculty.

From the perspective of the university, distance-learning based courses offer a much more cost efficient way to deliver courses and collect tuition once the initial technology, service, instructional design, and staff investments have been made. The demand on physical classroom and office space is eliminated. From a strategic business perspective, this reduction in additional unit costs as enrollment increases represents a genuine strategic and competitive advantage. Geographical boundaries to attracting new students are eliminated. The financial benefits continue if universities keep their expenses as low as possible to deliver the services. They often do this through minimization of support services and hiring faculty who are willing to work for the lowest wages possible.

Revenues: While universities have to cut costs as much as possible, they also need to bring in as much revenue as possible through tuition which directly relates to the number of learners enrolled, and the individual class section sizes. Public universities often have tuition constraints from their state, and teacher unions that dictate pay scales (e.g., Minnesota State Colleges and Universities faculty are represented by a faculty union). Classes larger than 25 students impede the learning quality due to the number of interactions between students and from the instructor, but some universities create larger sections and assign graduate teaching assistants to handle sub-groups.

Admissions standards may be lowered to bring in larger numbers of students with the hope that marginal learners will learn and persevere through the coursework. This tactic is initially more cost effective than turning down eager applicants; however it can deter highly capable students from continuing as they don't want to be associated with low-performing fellow students. The capabilities of the graduates in the marketplace determine the reputation of the institution. Traditional university programs are also finding themselves facing this new reality also, but most of them maintain the same admission standards for their traditional land and virtual students.

A university does not enter into distance learning through altruism or through a belief that this is a superior way to teach or to learn. Universities often enter into distance learning because higher education has become a competitive market place (with fewer public funds, and growing number of mid-career students) and they need to retain current, and attract new, students. They do so by addressing niche markets of under-served populations as well as making education easier and more convenient for currently served groups of learners. Universities need to do this as cost-effectively as they can, minimizing expenses and maximizing revenues in the face of new economic realities. It is really a different business model than that which faced higher educational institutions throughout this past century. Things are still very much in the early stages of evolution as these new

approaches and practice are trying to sort themselves out in a way that provides for tomorrow's workforce needs.

3. THE LEARNER PERSPECTIVE

Distance education is appealing to many learners in pursuit of a university degree. They are attracted to this non-traditional method of education for a variety of reasons, often because traditional land-based classes are not feasible. Few students have a means of evaluating the learning experience before trying it out. They are attracted to the access, the flexibility, the freedom from travel constraints and time, the independence, opportunities to better balance family and study time, employer tuition support, and other often advertised advantages of learning at a distance.

The employers still are a challenge in accepting online degree programs, due to a few highly publicized diploma mills. Also most recruiters only have personal experience with traditional land-based programs, despite seven percent of job applicants having completed an entire degree program online. Fewer than one percent of universities offering online programs are entirely online (Wellen, 2006).

As educators, we applaud this outreach into populations that may not have been a part of the higher education process without distance learning. Incorporating rigor into every delivery mode is necessary for good quality education. However, we deeply believe that potential distance learners need comprehensive understanding of the distance education world in order to set realistic expectations, maximize the learning experience and ensure the value of the credentials that they earn.

Choosing a university

Learners need to be working only with regionally accredited universities, and understand the types of licensure and accreditation required for their professions. Being regionally accredited is the first, and bottom-line, litmus test for choosing a program. Without regional accreditation, courses are not transferable and the degree will have very little value in the marketplace.

Blended/hybrid classes: Learners need to evaluate the types of distance learning approach taken by universities that are competing for their enrollment. Are the distance learning classes offered with a blended/hybrid approach (Bisson, 2005; French, 2003)? This type is one in which some of the curriculum or class is in a traditional lecture/lab based classroom. Universities offering classes at a distance frequently require physical presence for taking the final examinations. This ensures that the student earning the class credits is the person taking the final exam (when identifying credentials are examined).

When marketing a newly earned degree, this is one means of "proving" who actually took the classes in question. When classes are offered only through the virtual classroom technology, validation of the identity of the learner becomes problematic. Just as in any type class, instructors and employers can question who really took that test or wrote the paper. Online classes require use of log-on and passwords as one barrier to entry; however students can hire assistance in any type of modality of learning.

More universities require instructors to use plagiarism detection software reviews (e.g., Turnitin.com) on all written student assignments to ensure originality, and more creative paper topic assignments ensure that papers cannot be purchased from paper mills. A physical presence with photo identification eliminates identity questions, but it is not always possible.

Hybrid/blended classes offer opportunities to meet and interact with professors and classmates while still offering some of the online flexibility. The professor's perceptions of students from written and in-person perceptions can be very helpful when it comes times to write recommendations for application to a graduate program or new job.

Admissions standards: Applicants may be in a remote or constantly moving (e.g., military bases) location with no access to a traditional campus, and require a completely online education. Choosing between online programs usually requires differentiating between for-profit and public/private universities. The first thing to consider is the admissions process.

With the goal of a credible degree, an applicant needs to understand the admissions standards and process to assess the rigor of a program. In the highly competitive marketplace of higher education, for-profit schools may set lower admission standards to increase the number of tuition paying students. However, many online programs and universities do not offer remediation programs for those who need extra help (e.g., writing skills or English language) to compensate for lower admission standards. Many for-profit schools have quotas for admissions staff, so there may be increased pressure on potential applicants.

Faculty members may not have any incentive to assist students needing extra guidance, however if the faculty are paid on a per-head basis they may be more inclined to keeping all students enrolled. As an applicant, be sure to ask what types of assistance services are available as well as graduate rates (vs. entry rates).

Residency program: Many online programs require attendance at regional "residencies" where discussions are held about topics germane to the distance learning program. These are conceptually a wonderful idea and offer excellent peer networking opportunities, however, you must be prepared for the time, expense, and emotional energy commitment that is required to attend them.

Ask the university admissions staff about the residences for the program. How many are required (and available) in your degree program? How often are they offered and where? How long do they last? What are the typical expenses? Who is required to attend for both faculty and students? Faculty is part of residencies, but adjuncts may not be invited. A small core of full-time faculty affiliated with an online university may staff the residencies.

Online teaching faculty may only be accessible in cyberspace or by phone. They may be semi-retired, career professionals also teaching or full-time professors at a traditional university and teaching as an adjunct faculty member at the online university.

Class size: Applicants should inquire about the typical class size as well as the maximum class size. Online classes must be small in order to be successful learning experiences, and for students to fully participate. Between fifteen and twenty is the optimal class size (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). This is because of the immense number of interactions that develop in larger classes.

In a traditional classroom the interactions are mostly between the faculty member and individual students (called a spoke and wheel communications model). In distance learning environments, there is much more interaction between learners than there may be between the faculty member and the individual learner. In larger classes, faculty cannot maintain the intense one-on-one communication, usually through private emails, that develops in support of individual queries and needs. Applicants need to be certain that the classes are small enough to allow good interaction in the online discussions and to allow the professor to get to know individuals through discussions and assignments in the online class.

Faculty qualifications: Faculty quality is not as easy to quantify as one might think. Academic and licensing credentials matter, but do the teaching faculty have terminal degrees related to their disciplines? Applicants may not want to be learning civil engineering from a faculty member whose degree is in philosophy. Academic preparation is an issue in many universities, traditional as well as online.

"Degrees in field" do not necessarily assure top quality faculty or even good teachers, but related degrees are certainly likely to assure solid academic grounding in the content area the faculty member is teaching about. Another means of assessing faculty qualifications is to review recent publications and presentation history for relevance. It is reasonable to ask about faculty training and experience in online teaching.

Assessing faculty is not easy to do for a learner who doesn't know the subject in the first place, but faculty biographies/short resumes should be available to review. Ask about faculty backgrounds and how faculty can be contacted (e.g., e-mail, telephone, in-person). Ask about the ability to select specific faculty for advising and teaching (students may not have a choice).

Support services: The final issue of concern when comparing online programs and universities is the type of support services that are offered. Applicants will be courted heavily to enroll and it is important to be certain that this attention will not disappear when your tuition check is cashed. Support services include writing assistance, online library services, online advising access, English tutoring (if needed), and student organizations for networking. Knowing what is available before investing in coursework is critical to ensure that the time and money required are going to have a good outcome. If an applicant plans to transfer earned credits to a graduate program or another school, check with that school to see if they will accept credits from private schools or online courses.

Applicants need to be assertive during the application process and ask about the specific types of support for the technology platform and for ongoing technical questions you might have that relate to the use of the technology. What is the past outage rate, for example?

Students considering online learning also need to have high-speed access and the appropriate computers that will allow easy interaction with the online classes. Do students get the technical help needed 24/7 and in a timely manner especially on weekends and evenings. If a student plans to access classes from a work computer or cyber café/public library, has the system administrator approved crossing the firewall and file transfers? Is the student well versed in using the operating system, the word processing, the spreadsheets, the statistical analysis packages and web searching tools required by the classes?

It is not the faculty member's responsibility to help students with technical questions and problems. Students have to get this help from the university technical support folks and they are often thousands of miles away and overloaded with demands on their time. Applicants need to ensure that they can have secure, reliable, and productive connections with the online classes. Does the university offer online system checks to ensure that all settings are correct to access the online course rooms?

Ask to have trial access to the online class system or a software platform training class,

and ask for sample syllabi from the program. Ask the admissions counselor to "shadow" an online class for a few weeks to see if the learning style is appropriate (although this may not be allowed by federal privacy regulations). Read the discussions postings and get a feel for the types of activities that are taking place.

Ask also about the online library resources and check them out for ease of access. Upper division undergraduate and graduate programs demand reliable access to full text peer-reviewed journal publications for research. Again, it is not the job of the faculty to deal with this. Faculty will require students to use library information access to meet the requirements of the class.

Ask about the bookstore provisions for off-campus students. Check the options for mailing of textbooks, requirements to purchase from campus bookstores only, and payment options. What is the lead time for posting textbook and other teaching materials that must be purchased? Will the shipping options ensure receipt of the textbook before the start of class? This is very important as faculty require textbook based discussions in the first week of online classes. Meeting all deadlines for class participation becomes critical in faculty evaluation of a student's performance, especially the first week of the course. This may be different from a traditional class in which the first session is introductions and syllabus review.

Maximizing the class experience

Get clear expectations: In order to manage university and faculty expectations for students, it is important to understand the characteristics of online classes, policies, and programs. The university should have published guidelines for required student participation in online class, and publish those on its web site (e.g., number of access times per week). The instructor's syllabus should stipulate expectations for postings, and policies on late/missing assignments.

Instructors develop online classes in great detail before the class is available to students. It is good practice to send an introductory email to the instructor prior to the start of the class. Begin the dialogue early in order to assure that the faculty member knows who you are. Request a clear statement of expectations and a

syllabus for the class. There will be deadlines throughout the modules, often on a weekly or mid-weekly basis. There may be flexibility for individual participation rates within a given week of the class, but that should be clarified with each instructor.

Students' original posting contributions (in response to discussion questions) may be due on a Sunday evening – but students may have the flexibility to post the previous Tuesday. Students are likely to have expectations to interact with other students in the discussions during the module. Each class is handled differently and it is hard to do well if the expectations are ambiguous. Online classes require much more detail in terms of expectations than a traditional class syllabus would provide. Without the ongoing discussion banter from other students, the class would just be a traditional independent study.

Get organized: Once the schedule is clear, it is helpful to lay out the course in a calendar. Students are responsible for keeping up with the reading assignments and the assignment deadlines. It is very difficult to take more than two online courses while working full-time due to the independent work required. Online classes usually take much more time due to the reading and posting requirements. In the online environment, students are responsible for reading and understanding the course material independently. The time saved by not commuting and sitting in a lecture is more than consumed with reading, researching, and posting in discussions.

The class will be divided, most likely, into weekly modules, perhaps aligned with the various chapters in the text. Students are expected to read the assigned material and reflect upon questions and engage in activities that are posted in the online classroom. This usually involves an in-depth original posting, in response to the questions given, submitted by the teacher. Keeping copies of postings on personal computers is good policy in case a posting gets "lost" or fails to "stick" in the course room.

Faculty often post current articles relevant to a module, in addition to the required textbooks, and require learners to read and respond to them. Online discussions are typically asynchronous and frequent value-added participation demonstrates mastery of the course materials. Students may be required to participate in small work group

projects and there may be a requirement to engage in real-time chat room discussions about a particular topic. Email contact with your faculty member is often expected, as well as responses within 48 hours.

Understand the workload: Online classes are often much more work than traditional classes because every student is actively engaged every week of the course. Self-discipline and time management skills are critical for success in constructing postings and papers. It is tempting to think that an online class is similar to an independent study conducted by an individual working with one faculty member. But online classes are different and require ongoing asynchronous and/or synchronous discussions throughout the weeks of the class.

Many classes require 10-15 hours per week to read the assigned materials, interact with fellow learners and faculty member, conduct needed research, and finally develop each formal posting contribution.

Gain computing skills: It is important for those enrolling in online classes to have a good foundation in the use of computer software usage, data backup, safe computing practices, and in navigating online. Not knowing how to use the Internet, the university's library, and the World Wide Web will be a certain barrier to your success. This goes far beyond just a familiarity with using search engines such as Google. It is imperative that learners know how to search the library indices, databases, and other similar facilities.

Exercising independence: It is virtually impossible to "hide" in an online class. In the traditional classroom, one often receives credit or at the very least acknowledgement for just showing up. Learners must be active participants in the online classroom (Handal & Herrington, 2003). Email and posting contributions are time and date stamped, creating verifiable records online of each student's participation.

Online classes present real challenges, as learners are independently responsible for reading and understanding the assigned materials. Lack of effort and/or understanding will be visible to the entire class through the online discussions. Similarly, each student's ability to communicate cogently and coherently in English, or the language used in your

course, will be critical to communicating your intent in your postings (Campbell, 2004).

Build career/peer networks: Online classes offer you exceptional networking opportunities. How well do lecture based students get to know each other? The online class environment is much richer in this regard. Online students are usually asked to share career, education, and other interest background (by choice) at the start of the course and this is available for reading by all members of the class. It is very easy to get to know someone at a fairly deep level with commonalities of interest, backgrounds, previous college attendance, careers, and more.

Each student needs to work to maximize these connections through private dialogues with others in the class. Research has shown that strong communication and 'people' skills are essential for success in online classes (Vincent, Meche, & Ross, 2002). Building and maintaining a network of contacts is one of the major benefits (responsibilities) of any college education. Online learning presents an expanded opportunity to meet others and stay in touch via email and list-serves.

Networking is also true for relationships with faculty members. This can be more challenging to do in the online environment but not impossible. Without face-to-face contact, it is harder for one learner to make an impression on a particular faculty member.

Because all learners are required to be active and participating frequently in the online discussions, how can one learner stand out from the rest? Engage early in a dialogue and with private emails with the professors. When taking a class that is particularly interesting, because of its subject matter, let the professor know why it is important to career or personal interests. Engage the professor in discussions of your educational and career goals through these private exchanges.

This is not a time to be shy about getting to know others. Maximizing the online learning experience with networks in addition to discipline learning extends the value of the education. Professors can be lifelines to further advancement at work, through the references they will provide for you. Class peers can provide good networks for career changes. Class projects/papers can benefit

careers also, especially if turned into presentations.

4. CONCLUSION

The virtual classroom is indeed a 'Brave New World' for those on both sides of the education equation. Universities and faculties find themselves thrust into an era of intense competition for students/learners. Geographic barriers cease to exist because of the telecommunications technology advances. Online universities now offer what appear to be the same degrees and they can be earned anywhere and anytime. Student demand has mandated that traditional universities enter the online learning marketplace also. As a result, choices abound for those consumers seeking an education. This paper has discussed ways in which those seeking an online education, whether taking just a few courses or pursuing a degree online, can maximize their online learning experience. It is critical to take control of any educational experience, and even more important in distance learning.

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