

Online Learning: Ready or Not Here I Come, Starting at Ground Zero!

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Abstract

About a year ago I accepted the assignment to develop an online course. I cautiously navigated through the process of transforming my previous developmental psychology on-ground course content into my new online course. I found there was much to learn about the pedagogy of teaching online. This article will discuss the journey that was made into this new teaching environment, and the process of transforming a web-enhanced on-ground course into an online course. Once a professor feels comfortable with a web-enhanced course, the natural progression is to move to online instruction. Advantages, disadvantages, online testing, online grading, and pedagogical and technical aspects of using the Discussion Board will be discussed

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is the greatest technological advancement in education and learning since the advent of the printed book some 500 years ago. It is changing the way students learn and is transforming the traditional classroom into a better way to learn and teach (Draves, 2002). Online and world wide web-based learning can tie together geographically distributed people facilitating learning with a variety of modalities. Asynchronous learning affords the opportunity to learn anywhere at any time in a learning community (Bourne, McMaster, Rieger, Campbell, 1997). The purpose of the paper is to discuss the journey of transforming a previous on-ground developmental psychology course into an online course.

The development of the online course required taking a class offered by Faculty Instructional Technology Staff (FITS) on how to create simple web pages with image links using WebCT. WebCT offers full online delivery capability including threaded discussions, student websites, live chat rooms, and secure testing in any format. The development of online courses usually flows from “web enhanced” on-ground classes to full development of all course materials in online format. Issues associated with this transition include: 1) factors to consider in developing an online course; 2) mechanics of developing an online course; 3) advantages and disadvantages of teaching online; 4) online testing; 5) online grading; and 6) pedagogical and technical aspects of using the discussion board, testing online, surveys, and group presentations.

READY OR NOT HERE I COME!

As professors accept the challenge to become more technologically savvy, the question will eventually surface, “Am I ready for on line teaching?” As instructors look for effective teaching delivery, the development of web-enhanced courses seems a natural first step. As lecture notes, PowerPoint presentations, and class activities are developed and “uploaded” into a course website, a “web enhanced” on-ground course evolves.

Students appreciate lectures notes and a variety of course content presented in several modalities. They come to class with lecture notes and expect the professor to

provide something more during class. The more responsibility the student takes for class preparation the greater the expectation for the professor to deliver “new content.” Study sheets for exams and other relevant handouts posted on the site provide students with excellent learning resources and exam preparation.

As a web-enhanced course is being developed, websites designed by the text publisher to supplement the text can be utilized and publisher designed epacks can be uploaded into the course website. Text websites usually contain a wealth of resources and learning tools. A text website may include chapter objectives, summaries, outlines, PowerPoint, practice quizzes, exams, case studies, and excellent course-related websites. When developing an “enhanced” course, always check to see if the text has provided a website. Some text websites are expansive and provide a wealth of learning opportunity and resources. Other text websites may provide only limited resources. If web-enhanced and online learning is a priority, the quality of text website offered should be a consideration when adopting a text. When establishing a web-enhanced course, the additional benefit of adding a text website substantially increases the depth and breadth of the course website. The benefit to students has exponential possibilities.

Some of the logistical issues with traditional classroom teaching are solved with web-enhanced courses. Students via the web can access syllabus, reading schedule, assignments, rubrics, handouts, study sheets and any handout used in class. Handing out and collecting papers in class can be eliminated via web-enhanced courses. The copy cost to the university is reduced significantly. When considering the possibility of adding web-enhanced learning, one major consideration was the reams of copies needed to provide materials to graduate students. Resources could be better utilized by posting all course materials on the website including syllabus, reading schedule, assignment sheet, handouts, and rubrics, etc.

Students quickly learn how to use the site and prefer all classes be taught web-enhanced. Course content can be delivered via the website and face-to-face instruction will then focus on application of concepts. Students are more challenged and engaged in the learning experience.

Once an instructor feels comfortable with a web-enhanced course, the natural progression is to move to online instruction. All courses were web-enhanced before

moving to the development of an online asynchronous course. The Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Faculty Technology staff facilitated this transition and a course offered in online instruction. An instructor planning to teach an online course must take classes on how to use WebCT software. After participating in the training course, an instructor begins to create the online course materials.

The design and structure of the online homepage is a first consideration. The homepage provides a graphic picture of the layout of the course. Careful consideration must be given for design of the course. Because online instruction does not afford the student the opportunity to ask questions in class, the site must be logically presented and user friendly. Students need all instructions clearly stated so that no confusion arises. More detail is needed in online instruction than on-ground. The major divisions for the developmental psychology course are as follows: 1) Course Content and Related Materials; 2) Communication Tools; 3) Study Tools; 4) Grades; 5) Assignments; 6) Extra Credit; 7) My personal university homepage—a link to my university web page; and 8) Sample Papers.

The link to Course Content and Related Materials provides links to the syllabus, reading assignments, student information sheet, calendar, child development resources, adulthood resources, nutritional resources, chapter discussions, class notes, and study guides. The Course Content section is the gateway to course content presented in a variety of ways. The course syllabus must include specifics that address technical issues. Such as making sure that students have prepared their browser to work correctly with WebCT. Some of those preparations include running through WebCT's browser tune-up, making sure that the most current version of JAVA is installed on their computer, and turning off pop-up blockers, etc. Detailed reading and assignment schedules allow students to plan coursework over the semester. The weekly timetable is from Monday at 12:00 midnight until Sunday 11:55. All exams and assignments are due in a particular week would be "open" for submission during those days and hours. When students missed an exam or an assignment deadline, the site would block them from taking the exam or submitting assignments. Students constantly pull information from this link for class and exam preparation. Handouts and study sheets are located in this section.

The Communication Tools link connects the class to Mail, Discussion Board, and Chat Rooms. The instructor and students spend many hours communicating via email and Discussion Board. The instructor stays in touch with the class collectively and individually communicating general information and clarifying concepts that need further instruction. Students needing individual help are contacted through email. When students are having difficulty, they stay in constant contact with the instructor. Chapter summaries are posted to the Discussion Board with questions for “class discussion.” All students are expected to respond at least three times a week with substantive responses to the questions posted. Students enjoy and learn a lot from the Discussion Board, and they openly share personal experiences relating to the content of the chapters. The Discussion Board is a tremendous learning tool that broadens the learning experience.

The Student Homepage tool provides the students an opportunity to develop personal homepages. Some students enjoy posting personal information and learn a great deal about their classmates via the homepages.

The Grade icon takes students to their grades. As soon as a student takes an exam and the instructor releases the grade, students are notified of their grade through the Grade icon. When papers are graded, the instructor can release grades immediately; therefore, students never have to wait for the posting of grades.

The Assignment icon directs students to each course assignment. Each assignment has a drop box and a place for the instructor to distribute files that can be used in completing an assignment. Instructors may also specify an open and close date between which assignments can be uploaded. They may also specify criteria for opening the box such as completing a specific quiz and earning at least a specific grade on that quiz. Instructors may also open the box only to specific students within their course. Each assignment has specific instructions with rubrics setting forth standards for baseline, effective, and exemplary work.

The Extra Credit icon links the students to extra credit options with detailed instructions.

My Homepage icon links students to my MTSU website that connects them with a variety of resources. This website has not been fully developed and only serves as a link to additional resources.

Sample Papers icon connects students to examples of the types of papers and assignments. These sample papers provide students with an opportunity to look over the work of students who have done an excellent job in the past.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Advantages

Most online students are highly motivated independent students who are committed to their educational goals. In order to be successful in an online course, students need to be good time managers, initiators, self-learners and seekers of knowledge. Online instruction promotes student-to-student interaction and instructor-to-student interaction. Most students enjoy getting to know their classmates and feel they have developed some meaningful friendships by the end of the semester. Students are more engaged with professor, other students, and course content than on-ground students due to the nature of online courses. Professors have an opportunity to “get to know” all online students and offer encouragement, and support during the semester. Students learn on their own timetable when it is convenient for them. No commute and class time allows for more study time and learning. Small class size makes it manageable for the instructor. Draves (2002) lists ten reasons he believes that online learning is better than traditional in-person teaching:

- 1) You can learn at your own peak learning time of day;
- 2) You can learn at your own speed;
- 3) You can learn faster;
- 4) You can interact more with the teacher and other participants;
- 5) There are more topics and subjects online;
- 6) Participants come from around the world;
- 7) You can learn from the foremost authorities and experts;
- 8) Online learning is less expensive and thus more accessible;
- 9) Internet links provide more resources; and
- 10) You can form a virtual community.

Disadvantages

If an instructor is looking for an easy course to teach without investing much time, online teaching is not an option. Designing an online course takes an inordinate amount of time, from beginning of the process until the course is a comprehensive effective learning opportunity for students. The daily/weekly workload is tremendous initially. The professor “goes” to class at least five days a week, sometimes twice a day. Students email everyday and post to the Discussion Board everyday. A student’s lack of technical expertise can become a problem when their computer cannot receive or transmit assignments or they are unable to take exams. More class maintenance from the professor and the student is required. At the beginning of the semester, there is a high drop out rate. In an effort to have enough students to justify the course, many professors will “open” the course and take 10-15 students beyond what is manageable knowing that many students will drop the course within the first two weeks. Using a prescreening survey may help reduce the student dropout rate.

Once a course is converted to a 100% online course, it is difficult to offer the class live. Last semester developmental psychology was taught online, and in the spring the course was offered on-ground with the students having access to the entire online course except for exams. Attendance and chapter summaries are required as part of their grade, so skipping class affects their grade. Most of the students come to class with PowerPoint presentations in two formats, class lecture notes, and they have read the chapter and typed a three-page outline. The students are not interested in lecture, because they “know” the material by the time they get to class and they think live lectures are redundant. If attendance were not required, the students would probably not come to class because they can take most of the course “online.” Students are looking for something more challenging in class which forces the professor to be creative and innovative in teaching concepts in different ways. Some of the possibilities are as follows: 1) Invite speakers occasionally; 2) Prepare broad philosophical questions that overview the chapter and ask students to synthesize, analyze, and discuss concepts in pairs or groups and in large group class discussion; 3) Require students to search newspapers, journal articles, and the internet for topics of interest that relate to the

chapter and bring information to class for discussion; 4) Require “hands on” learning in the community with specific populations that relate to issues covered by the course; and 5) Discuss case studies.

OTHER ONLINE CONSIDERATIONS

Online Testing

The course is designed to run from Monday morning at midnight until Sunday night at 11:55 p.m. Students can complete their assignments and exams anytime within that time frame. They can take the exams when they are prepared. The course is tightly structured and the students need to stay on track and take the exams in the sequence listed; otherwise, they can get behind. Once the class has taken the exams and submitted assignments, the professor releases grades and students are immediately notified. An advantage of online teaching is that exam questions and grades are never debated. Students who are having technical problems can have exams reset and an opportunity to retake the exam. When family crises arise and a student misses an exam, it is easy to reset the exam for the student.

Online Grading

Grades are posted after submissions, and students can see their grades for the semester in each category. Grading is simple for the professor.

Pedagogical and Technical Aspects of Using the Discussion Board

An overview of the most important information and concepts were listed on the Discussion Board with questions to overview the chapter. The class was expected to discuss the questions and post their answers to the Discussion Board. The students were also encouraged to share appropriate personal information that related to the content of the chapter. Information shared offered an opportunity for the class to become more transparent and socially connected.

Topics were created to organize discussions. A topic was created for students to ask technical questions about WebCT or their computer and another topic was for general class questions. Other content specific topics were created for weekly class discussions.

When each weekly discussion was complete, the instructor could lock that week's particular discussion so that students could no longer post to it. The instructors would then grade the postings.

Discussion topics could be created for specific groups of students also. These group specific topics are only visible to the students who are part of each particular group. Group members can use their private discussion group to plan group projects, some of which can be uploaded to the group presentation tool.

The Discussion Board postings and responses were graded based on the quality of response. The quality of response was measured by the student thoroughly answering the question and appropriately responding to responses posted by other students.

BENEFITS OF WEB ENHANCED AND ONLINE COURSES

In summary, web-enhanced courses and online courses offer the student an opportunity to learn at their own rate of speed, at a time of day and week that works best for their schedule. Web-enhanced courses offer the students a wealth of information that is easy to access, and offered in a variety of modalities. Students take more initiative and responsibility for their learning process and enjoy the independence that it affords.

References

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