

Ethical and Social Issues of Online Courses
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Abstract: Academic institutions are rapidly adding online courses—either new courses or blends of traditional face-to-face courses. What issues must institutions, faculty, and students address with online courses? There are a number of ethical and social issues which need to be addressed. This presentation/paper will discuss these issues, plus others: Intellectual property, copyright, the TEACH Act; plagiarism; library services; registration; time limitations; access limitations; language impact; equipment needs; and technology skill requirements. A list of suggested readings and resources is provided at the end of this paper.

Academic institutions are rapidly adding online courses. Institutions must address many issues as they expand their online offerings, whether these courses are entirely online courses or hybrids. What issues must institutions, faculty, and students address with these online courses? There are a number of ethical and social issues which need to be addressed and resolved.

Both the number of students participating in “online courses” (again, whether these courses be entirely online or blended) and the number of courses offered is increasing. Just looking at St. Cloud State University since it began using a CMS (Course Management System) shows the overall increase in usage over the years.

Increase in Use of CMS/Online Learning

St. Cloud State University began using WebCT in Spring 2001, and switched to D2L (DesiretoLearn) for Fall 2004. The numbers represented in the table are from Fall 2004 through Spring 2007 semesters; statistics were not readily available at the time this presentation was created for the earlier semesters (Spring 2001 through Spring 2004).

There has been a steady increase in the usage of the D2L system for course delivery. There is no breakdown in these numbers for courses which were completely online or blended courses.

An explanation of the numbers in the table: “unique teachers” does not include courses in the development or “semesterless” category; “unique students” does not include any

students in a development or “semesterless” course; “total student enrollments” are total student entries (one student taking 3 D2L courses is a total count of 3). “Unique” indicated the teacher or student was counted once.

Table 1
Increase of CMS Usage Fall 2004 through Spring 2007

<u>Semester</u>	<u># of Courses</u>	<u>Sections of Courses</u>	<u>Unique Teachers</u>	<u>Unique Students</u>	<u>Total Student Enrollment</u>
Fall 2004	472	689	225	10,852	19,463
Spring 2005	573	863	271	10,460	19,539
Fall 2005	715	1,038	332	12,186	25,897
Spring 2006	767	1,083	366	11,715	25,781
Fall 2006	952	1,273	451	13,142	33,100
Spring 2007	949	1,333	437	12,396	30,788

Student Preparedness for Online Courses

Distance learners enter an online course from a variety of backgrounds, including educational, socio-economical, and geographical differences. Picciano (2006, p. 188) indicates that many U.S. adult distance learning students are between the ages of 25 and 50, two-thirds are female, and most are married and have full-time employment.

In an ideal world, distance learners are highly motivated, are independent, and are active learners. They usually have good organizational and time management skills, and they have the discipline to study without external members. They adapt well to new training environments (which distance learning qualifies), and they may have very diverse educational backgrounds.

Needed Skills for Online Courses

There are a number of skills which students need to be successful online learners, and if we (faculty and administration) permit students to enroll in classes without these skills, we are setting the stage for failure.

Study skills. There are a number of study skills that online learners need to have in order to successfully complete the coursework. Naturally, there will be technological glitches during the course, but Conrad and Donaldson (2004, p. 19) point out that “. . . personal hurdles far outweigh the technological ones.” Organizational skills may include a neat work environment, a location that is peaceful and quiet, and definite structure for completing assignments are but a few ways to keep organized. A three-ring binder can be extremely beneficial.

One of the biggest problems in online learning is managing time. Palloff and Pratt (2003, pp. 172-73) tell students that the ability to manage time is a critical factor in successfully completing an online course. Faculty need to “stay on top” of assignments and discussions to make sure the students are managing their time well and completing work on schedule.

Other skills which students need include multi-tasking ability, flexibility, and sharp attention to due dates for assignments. Because a course may have the complexity of threaded discussions, students need to participate on an ongoing basis, perhaps two or three times during the discussion open period. They might be working on two different assignments, keeping a journal, and participating in a threaded discussion—all in the same time period.

Technology skills. According to Bitter and Pierson (2006, p. 3-4), “Since the inception of the personal computer in 1977, two ‘generations’ (two 12-year cycles) of students have completely progressed through the school system. Their experiences with computers depended on the visions and financial priorities of their teachers, administrators, and state and community leadership.” Students are entering higher education institutions with a varied level of technological competencies.

To complete their assignments, online students will very likely need basic skills in word processing, Web creation, PowerPoint basics, researching strategies (including electronic searching), basic keyboarding skills, and CMS (course management system) skills. Some institutions require students to complete a short course in how to be an effective online learner; in this course they may learn the basic skills needed to complete their assignments. Conrad and Donaldson (2004, pp. 37-45) provide a sample skills survey as well as some basic assignments to determine whether students have the requisite skills to participate in an online course. Palloff and Pratt (2003) also address the technology skills issue. As faculty, we expect students to have basic skills needed for course participation, and without these skills, students may become one of the unsuccessful online learners.

Copyright and Intellectual Property

Copyright and intellectual property must be faced by all institutions, faculty, and students. There’s no question about it. But what are the special needs of the online learner in regard to copyright and intellectual property?

First, the student needs to understand copyright as it related to print materials and what may and may not be used in teaching and learning. Then, the question of intellectual property needs to be addressed—basically, who owns the property and has the responsibility for updating it? The TEACH Act of 2002 addresses many of the questionable issues as they relate to electronic formats. TEACH was enacted to bring the print, non-print, and electronic formats into better alignment. Post-secondary students,

(regardless of age or grade in school) believe that Fair Use permits them to use any material, including copyrighted material, without permission. Granted, the TEACH Act does provide more leniency is posted materials when a CMS is used, but there are still criteria which must be met. You have told them, you have warned them, and it's the faculty member's responsibility to enforce the law.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism haunts us on campuses across the nation and the world. What can be expected of students and faculty relating to plagiarism? What tools are available? Why are these tools necessary?

Faculty, especially those teaching online courses, should be very emphatic about the content of materials, the proper use of citing, the tools which may be used to determine plagiarism (turnitin.com, for example), and the penalties for plagiarism. Although theft of materials (plagiarism) is frequently mentioned in traditional face-to-face courses, it needs to be stressed also in the online courses. Once again: You have told them, you have warned them, and it's the faculty member's responsibility to enforce the law.

Learning Styles and Preferences

We know that students learn in different ways, and we know that professors instruct using a variety of instructional strategies and materials. Aragon, Johnson, and Shaik (2002, pp. 235-37) found that both face-to-face and online students are similar in their learning and study strategies, with the exception of study styles, and the online students report a greater preference for abstract conceptualization in comparison to the face-to-face students. By design, an online environment will require students to utilize reflective observation (learning by watching and listening) and abstract conceptualization (learning by thinking) because of the way many course materials are organized and delivered. We, as faculty, need to explain some of these differences to the students in our introductory materials.

Institutional Guidance and Obligations

We talked a little in the previous sections about faculty expectations for smoothing the path for online learners. There are additional responsibilities and obligations on the part of our institutions, including faculty, staff, and administrators.

Technology support. Technology is merely a tool in making a course available to students. The institution is obligated to provide a system which works (and works well) as well as support staff to assist students when they need advice or assistance. Students expect faculty to have a basic understanding of the CMS and its intricacies. Troubleshooting is often requested by telephone or e-mail, and the student's initial call

for help is usually to the instructor. The instructor, however, cannot be expected to understand the idiosyncracies and foibles of a CMS. Students need to be told the process for getting technical assistance.

Library Services. One difficult area relating to online learning has to do with library services that are available to online learners. What are the library services **needed** by online learners? What are the special services **available** to online learners?

Some institutions offer a special “provision” for online learners—they can access materials through Interlibrary Loan which are not available to on-campus students. Institutions offering online courses might well have a set of guidelines identifying policies and procedures for online students to acquire resources materials. As more institutions increase the number of full-text materials available electronically, the research needs of online students can be more easily met.

It is probably beneficial to be very clear in the introductory materials (i.e. Syllabus) about what services are available to students taking online courses.

Registration Process. Students who decide to register for an online course at an institution are at an advantage if they are already attending that institution. But what about the “newbie” who registers for the first time? What provisions are or need to be in place to help this student actually register? Because online students may be not only off-campus students, but they might be geographically a long distance away, never taken a course at the institution, or perhaps never set foot on the campus, a streamlined registration process for online students would be very helpful. This process might be noted on the departmental Web page or even the Continuing Studies Web page if the course is offered through that unit.

Students taking an online course are sometimes levied a special fee for an online course, whether the online course is taken by students actually living on campus or students across the world. Students need to be aware of this surcharge at the time of registration.

Time Limitations. What time limitations need to be addressed? Certainly the time zone(s) must be considered. What about the student in Nepal or Anchorage or Munich who enrolls in an online course or program? What other time limitations need addressing? In the event of chatroom exercises, time limitations (time zones) is especially critical.

Access Limitations. Access limitations such as sign-ons and other restrictions can impact whether a student’s experience is successful. Are there people available (i.e. HelpDesk) to answer questions by e-mail or telephone.

Language Impact. What language differences need to be discussed or addressed during the initial stages of the course? Since we may have limited or no visual access, we need to try a little harder to understand the students from other cultures. What are the

differences which must be addressed? Faculty and students must be flexible and tolerant of accents and languages.

Equipment Needs. Meeting equipment needs are paramount to the success of an online course. What about the students who are “borderline” cases who have substandard or minimal equipment and still want to participate in online courses? Does an institution or faculty member have the right to unenroll a student who does not have the appropriate technology for the course? Absolutely! The online student must at least meet the minimum requirements in order to take an online course, or the institution has the responsibility to advise the student of needed equipment and remove the student from the class in the event the standards cannot be met.

Faculty Obligations and Responsibilities

Faculty have responsibility to students to enroll in an online course. Many of these responsibilities are the same as with a face-to-face course.

Content. Faculty need to “know their stuff,” meaning the content. If a new edition of a textbook is used, faculty have the responsibility of updating the materials on the CMS. Materials should be easy for students to read and understand. Instructional design guidelines should be followed.

Technology support. Faculty need to understand the basics of the CMS as well as pedagogy associated with online learning. They (the faculty) need to be fully trained in the use of the CMS—initial training and ongoing updating of skills as the CMS changes.

Feedback and reinforcement. Students learn by doing, and they learn by receiving feedback from the instructor as well as their peers. Students can expect a response to their questions within 12-24 hours. If this time frame is not possible for a period of time, explain to the students the temporary turnaround time. Students expect detailed explanations for what items or components did not meet the criteria, and they also appreciate positive feedback. Reinforcement comes in many forms: e-mails, in-person visits (when possible), in-depth messages, and even “cutsie” messages with smiling faces to name but a few.

Conclusion

Taking an online course can be complicated. Teaching an online course can be complicated, too. There are ethical and social issues of online courses that faculty and institutions can and must address as the number of online courses and online students increases over the upcoming years.

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