Abstract: It is no secret that moving your instruction online presents a multitude of challenges but these challenges can be managed successfully if proper planning techniques are applied in the conversion process. This planning and attention before the course starts can have dramatic results allowing the students to not only master their content area but to also develop the skills and confidence necessary to become self-directed learners. This session will discuss techniques that have proven effective in moving courses from traditional face-to-face instruction to a completely online format. Emphasis will be on developing exemplary online instruction modules.

Introduction

Distance learning programs have been gaining popularity in higher education for years but now this trend is making its way into public education as well. With distance and online learning becoming more common, the need for faculty to be able to create quality online courses is greater than ever. Jacksonville State University has been a leader in designing online instructional modules for years but a question that is frequently asked is how do you ensure that your online instruction is as good as courses taught in the traditional classroom setting. This paper discusses our efforts to ensure the quality of our online courses and is designed to offer practical advice and give you resources that can be used in creating your first online course. We will explore some characteristics of online instruction and then look at several principles for online course planning and design.

Initial Considerations

As with most projects, adequate planning before you even start the design process is key to the success of the completed course. Planning an online course requires you to re-examine everything you do in the traditional classroom setting with emphasis on whether or not it can even be used in the online setting. This first step in planning your online course is to reinvent and re-conceptualize your courses. Understanding that online courses function differently from face-to-face classes is difficult for some but it is a necessary first step in their journey to organize and adapt materials to the online environment. Realizing that creating an online course is much
more than just posting your materials on the web is a good start in the course development process.

As you evaluate your methods and course materials you will find that every medium has its own strengths and weaknesses and it will be up to you as the designer to decide which medium is best suited to the particular needs of your course. When you move the same message from one medium to another, you will find that you radically alter the nature, process, and ultimately, the content of that communication. The online course and real world classroom are two entirely different environments and you must plan your strategies for each much differently. Developing an online course requires instructors to “think differently” about teaching and how learning takes place online. It will be necessary for you to re-conceptualize your instruction and evaluate how it will function in this new online environment. “Instructors must adapt their course materials and teaching styles to the new medium, as Internet instruction and classroom instruction are two different creatures and are not interchangeable” (Dyrud, 2000, p. 88).

Many of the early attempts at online teaching fell victim to this fallacy as the instructors failed to realize that simply putting lecture notes, slides, or a videotaped lecture on a webpage and calling it “online learning” was not sufficient. Obviously there are advantages to having course materials available online for immediate and repeated use but early online learning advocates warned that these methods would not result in much student learning (Bourne, McMaster, Rieger, & Campbell, 1997). Simply making resources available online focuses on information or course content and neglects other important elements of the learning process, such as the classroom environment, collegiality, problem solving, and cooperation. This has resulted in some major differences between the traditional classroom and online learning.

Since the beginning of online education, several differences between traditional and online classrooms have emerged. The first and probably the most obvious is that with online education, one student’s activities will occur independently from the activity of other students. Face-to-face classrooms largely operate on synchronous models where all students meet together at the same time and a great number of the course activities occur in this group setting. Online, students are not restricted to a certain block of time and are free to interact with course materials when it is convenient for them. It is not unusual for distance learning students to be working around the clock and your course design must take this into account.

Online discussions are another area where special considerations must be made. Generally these discussions will be non-linear, requiring students to juggle several conversations at once (Picciano, 2002). Discussions in face-to-face classrooms usually involve one person being allowed to speak at a time. With online instruction, discussions are usually facilitated by message boards and forums where students can participate in multiple conversations simultaneously.

Online environments also rely a great deal on text communication (Kim & Bonk, 2010). A significant portion of communication with students takes place through discussion boards, assignment instructions, or individual feedback and this communication is mostly text based and this text takes a great deal of time to type. Zhang (1998) noted that 15 minutes of oral dialog generally takes one hour for a professional transcriptionist to complete. This means that the time commitment from online instructors will be much greater than from instructors in the traditional classroom.

Another accommodation that must be made in the online classroom relates to speed at which communication occurs. Even though the Internet has the potential for instant communication, in practice the separation of teacher and student makes communication much
slower. An electronic message can wait in an instructor’s inbox for many hours before a response is sent. In face-to-face classrooms, students can ask a question and get an immediate response from the instructor. Since e-mail is often the primary means for students to communicate with the instructor in online courses, and since messages can take a great deal of time to be answered, it is possible for students to become very frustrated while they wait for a reply. Researchers have found that these delays can create “high levels of frustration and outright anger” among online students (Amrein-Beardsley, Foulger, & Toth, 2007, p. 340).

To compensate for possible delays in communication, online courses require that the instructors make themselves available to students in some non-traditional ways. In traditional face-to-face courses, instructors are expected to meet with students for a few hours per week in the classroom and to be available a few additional hours reserved for office time. The online classroom is open 24/7 and since online classes are asynchronous, this creates a higher demand from students on the instructor to be available when they are online. The instant gratification nature of the Internet has trained students to expect help any time they need it. To address this concern some online instructors increase the amount of time they spend with their classes online. This increased availability can help students feel less isolated and will also help reduce student frustration (Keeton, 2004).

In online instruction, the volume of information available is much greater. Face-to-face classrooms often tend to be static, meaning materials are often prepared in advance of the class session (or semester), and class discussions draw upon that limited pool of resources. In online classes, teachers and students are free to draw upon new web-based resources week-to-week, day-to-day, or even moment-to-moment.

One additional difference in the online classroom relates to the role of the instructor. Online classrooms tend to be much less teacher-centered so the students must adopt a much more active role in their learning. No longer is the instructor seen as the one standing at the front of the room imparting information to the students. In the online model the instructor becomes more of a facilitator of the instructional activities helping the students become more responsible for their learning. In some cases, the instructor may even take the role of co-learner, allowing students to teach portions of the course or bring new, unplanned ideas to the class discussion (Edwards et al., 2011).

Course Development Considerations

In order to facilitate the online course design process, Jacksonville State University developed a checklist of course requirements that is used to evaluate each online course. By ensuring that each concept is addressed, online instruction is greatly enhanced and it is assured that all courses contain the same instructional elements found in traditional face-to-face instruction.

The first criteria on which online instruction is evaluated relates to the goals and objectives. These must be prominently displayed, explained clearly, and must reflect the desired learning outcomes. Objectives must be provided for specific content areas throughout the course. Content presentation must be provided in manageable units and should be easily navigable. Progression within units should be intuitive and obvious. Content must also be presented using a variety of media. Supplementary content areas should be suggested along with suggestions for further study. Instructional strategies must be designed to help students reach certain instructional goals. Learning activities should also encourage development of higher
order thinking skills emphasizing problem solving. The course design should also utilize the tools available in the Course Management System (CMS) to enhance student learning.

Learner support is another area that must be properly addressed to ensure that students in online courses have appropriate resources available to ensure their success in the course. A course orientation should be available for students. They will also need an orientation to the CMS you will use. Required materials for the course should also be discussed in enough detail that students are comfortable with the resources available to them. In the orientation materials you should also provide links to necessary software plug-ins along with instructions for downloading and installing them. Information should also be available describing the procedures to reach the instructor for help, technical assistance from help desk personnel, or the institutions learning support services. Expected response times should also be clearly explained.

The next area where online instruction is evaluated is interaction and collaboration. Both asynchronous and synchronous activities are available and must be included in instruction where appropriate. These activities should provide students with opportunities for reflection, problem solving, and higher order thinking skills. Communication activities are rated on whether or not they are used to enhance student learning and build a sense of community. Collaborative activities must not only help students learn course material but must also help students improve their skills in working as a part of a team. Levels of participation must be clearly explained to students and they must be provided with a rubric detailing how their course participation will be assessed.

Providing detailed assessment plans for all areas of the course will help students understand instructor expectations. Assignments and assessments must be aligned with the stated goals and objectives of the course. Rubrics or descriptive criteria should be provided to make sure expectations are clear. The instructions should offer sufficient detail to ensure that students understand the instructor expectations for the course. Multiple opportunities for self-assessment should be provided and these self-assessments should provide feedback that helps students improve their skills and understanding. These assessments must also require the use of higher order thinking skills.

Additional areas of interest can be included at the instructor’s discretion. These can include a discussion of the appropriate use of online resources, plagiarism, netiquette, file format expectations, and disability support services. Proper attention to all these topics will help ensure that online instruction provides a quality experience for both the instructor and the students.
References


