Moving a Traditional Classroom into the 21st Century using Online Instruction

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Abstract: While even technologically savvy instructors may struggle in moving courses online, there are simple solutions to address most of the most common concerns instructors have about teaching at a distance. These solutions address everything from how to get students to show up to how to keep them engaged. The goal is to turn a potentially chaotic online classroom experience into something that is structured, defined, and successful. This paper discusses techniques that have proven effective in moving courses from traditional face-to-face instruction to a completely online format. Emphasis focuses on developing exemplary online instruction modules.

Introduction

The literature regarding online teaching indicates that the process requires different pedagogies than face-to-face instruction (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). According to Hieroymy (2012), distance-based educators provide value-added worth to online classes, much like a trainer helps gym patrons excel beyond their personal abilities. Certainly some students can teach themselves without any outside assistance, but they are probably the minority; professors provide valuable facilitative and transformative roles in distance learning classes.

Higher education institutions can choose a Fordist model (fully centralized control of course design, content, delivery, and updates), a post-Fordist design (the professor has complete control over all aspects of the course), or a hybrid neo-Fordist plan for delivery of online classes (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). For example, curriculum and design may be alterable partially by the individual professor, but there might be a centralized process for formalized course updating. The organization may decide to promote or restrict new technologies for use in the class (Lawrence & Lentle-Keenan, 2013).

Online professors make an impact on their students’ lives, albeit in a different way than they might in a traditional classroom. Just like face-to-face educators, distance-based professionals make custom comments on students’ assignments and promote intellectual discussions, getting to know the pupils and challenging them in the learning process. According to Marovich, “The virtual classroom is often presented as either a panacea or a deadly virus. It is neither of those things. The virtual classroom is a space, a territory, where learning can happen. If we bring passionate, thoughtful teachers into that space…students will really think and really learn” (2013, para. 14).

Research is ambivalent about what online learning format is best for or preferred by students. Working adults, particularly, prefer asynchronous classes but also admit that they like the personalization and access to the instructor in synchronous classes. Crawford-Ferre and West (2012) indicate that students regard synchronous classes as being superior to asynchronous classes, but many students lack the flexibility necessary to take these course offerings. One seeming disadvantage of asynchronous classes would be the lesser access to the professor, but greater collaboration between students can occur in this learning format as they are forced to rely on each other more (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Lawrence & Lentle-Keenan, 2013). Online classes actually can promote more interaction between professor and student, since contact is not limited to office hours or intimidating in-person meetings (Juan, Steegmann, Jesus Martinez, & Simosa, 2011; Lawrence & Lentle-Keenan, 2013). This does, however, make the professor feel the need to be available 24/7; the typical 40-hour workweek may appear to be an antiquated model.
Before the Class Starts

Designing a new online class or teaching one for the first time requires a great deal of preparation. Most schools have an Office of Distance Learning; consult its staff to find out institutional policies, procedures, and troubleshooting tips. Similarly, talk to other professors who have previously taught online in various learning management systems (LMSs) – new online teachers may not yet know the questions they need to ask. Better yet, if a new online instructor can team-teach his/her classes with an experienced professor the first semester, or have login privileges to the experienced professor’s classes, this provides valuable scaffolding for the newcomer (Casotti, Beneski, & Knabb, 2013). Individual departments, or perhaps the university as a whole, might consider setting up online classes in the same across-the-board format; students will quickly develop a familiarity with the standardized setup, which will transfer from class to class.

Professors must intimately familiarize themselves with the course LMS. Most LMSs have similar standard components, such as Announcements, Assignments, Calendar, Chat, Discussion forums, Email, File storage space, Syllabus tools, and Wikis. Subject-specific tools can be embedded; for example, a math class may include Equation Editors and Mathematical Laboratories of Experimentation (Juan et al., 2011). A simple internet search will uncover a host of other Web 2.0 tools, apps, widgets, and emerging technologies that may seem promising for use in the class; however, they must have a purpose. The implementation of flashy technologies does not mean that effective teaching and learning will occur (Juan et al., 2011; Ng’ambi, 2013).

All documents and assignments in an online class should be prepared and tested fully before the start date of the course. This allows students to work ahead if necessary, unless a course has date-sensitive conditional release protocols in place. Courses may take up to six months of advance preparation before they are ready to launch (Casotti et al., 2013). The more upfront work a professor puts into a course, the easier the experience for all involved parties.

Students should have access to an orientation before classes begin (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). This can be in static electronic format (a screencast or digital scavenger hunt) or an optional in-class meeting or live webinar. Consider creating a general course questions discussion board or FAQs document (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Juan et al., 2011) so that students can help themselves and others.

Think about the structure of the class assignments; make it difficult for students to cheat. Enter test items into the LMS’s Questions Pool for multiple choice tests; build a bank of questions larger than the number of items to be launched during the test, and have the LMS randomly select questions for each test attempt. The answer order of individual items can be randomized as well. For short-answer and essay questions, ask students to relate their personal experiences to the prompt; avoid low-level questions that can be easily copied and pasted from a search engine. Consider allowing students two attempts for all assignments (possibly excluding quizzes) so that if a student accidentally submits an incorrect file, the professor will not have to clear manually his or her attempt.

During the Class

LMSs can help track students’ progress and levels of attendance within the course (Juan et al., 2011; Lawrence & Lentle-Keenan, 2013). Professors can set up criteria so that the LMS warns them of students who have the potential for failure or exhibit poor participation. Most LMSs have extensive built-in reports that the professor can execute to examine critically a host of data about the students.

Instructors can configure assignments in multiple ways to automate the grading process. Discussion boards, for example, can be set to pop-up as “needs grading” after a student makes a certain number of responses. As mentioned earlier, coursework can be released conditionally, by date or according to previous module completion, and assignments can close on a specific date, preventing late attempts. All submissions to LMSs have time stamps, so the answer to the question, “Is this assignment late?” is easy to determine. Built-in rubrics that attach automatically to assignments allow instructors to click on the level of performance per criterion and make comments on individual parts of the rubric. Then scores from the rubric are summed automatically and added to the class grade book.

Group assignments are possible, if slightly different, in the online environment. It is generally easier for the instructor to assign groups, since students may not have pre-established relationships; LMSs do, however, have the
option to let students self-select groups. Professors and students can also utilize special group discussion boards, group wikis, and group blogs.

When completing large research papers or other heavily-weighted writing assignments, students may resort to cheating or plagiarizing (Gabriel, 2010). Indeed, assigning a large term paper with a fixed due date and no checkpoints along the way may lend itself to students (who have inevitably procrastinated) panicking at the last minute. Common issues with written assignments include submissions from paper mills, plagiarism, incorrect citation, or little thought put into the assignment. One way to alleviate these problems is to have students turn papers in via stages. Require an annotated bibliography first, then a rough draft, and then a final paper. Students should submit the rough draft through a plagiarism-checking device such as SafeAssign or TurnItIn (most LMSs have these tools embedded automatically). Make quality comments on each stage of the paper in order to recognize if the student’s writing style, level of attention to detail, or topic suddenly changes. Refuse to grade the final paper unless the prior iterations have been submitted.

After the Class Ends

The class is over, yet the professor’s responsibilities are not. In addition to finalizing grades, the instructor must begin a reflective process that will ready the class for future semesters. A good practice is to author a Word document that details what needs to be changed the next time the class is taught. No class is perfect, and students will uncover glitches, typos, and inconsistencies in even the best courses. Reconsider the point values of all assignments as compared to the actual time they took students to complete (or the instructor to grade) and adjust accordingly. Keep a text file of the most common announcements and feedback that can be reused in future classes.

When entering a new semester, most LMSs have a tool to reformat assignment due dates, so if the new semester begins 150 days after the previous one, all dates can be shifted forward a corresponding amount. If a professor wishes to reuse learning modules, s/he can import/export objects among various classes. Whole class sections can also be copied from one semester to the next. To some extent instructors may be able to copy modules between different LMSs if the learning objects follow Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) technical standards (Simonson et al., 2012).

Helpful Tools

The course LMS is not the only place in which there are tools that simplify an online instructor’s life; many exist externally. When grading papers, using Microsoft Word’s Track Changes feature enables professors to make comments directly in the body of the documents. Word add-ons such as GradeAssist (www.educo360.com) provide a built-in library of comments for APA or MLA format, saving instructors time when providing feedback to students. Most textbooks provide online access or additional tools, and these can generally be linked or embedded directly into the LMS and can interact directly with course content. Several third-party products have agreements with various LMSs, allowing custom objects to coexist in the LMS for seamless integration. These include the aforementioned TurnItIn and SafeAssign, Tutor.com, Atomic Learning, Blackboard Collaborate, Adobe Connect, and others. Colleges or individual departments can develop their own help centers, such as Writing Assistance Labs, and provide links to these resources in the master LMS shell for all classes. All LMSs have a built-in “help” section that sometimes must be made live so that students can see and use it.

Never underestimate the help that the college or university library can provide. Large institutions generally have a librarian solely devoted to online students or the specific academic department in which a class resides. Librarians can provide live help sessions, log into the course shell to chat directly with students, and lead students on virtual or in-person tours of resources, databases, books, and procedures. Most college libraries have tutorials on how to use their resources, so make it a habit to provide links to these in courses, especially if the students must complete a writing or research assignment.

Personalizing the Course
Online courses can seem like a lonely place unless the professor (and students) put forth the effort to make them less so. If the professor lives near the physical school, s/he should consider offering in-person office hours for those students who prefer face-to-face contact. Similarly, live office hours via web conferencing services such as Skype, FaceTime, or Google Hangouts may supply that human touch. Some LMSs, such as Blackboard, have a class roster feature that highlights students in their first or second semesters at the school, enabling the professor to reach out early and often to those individuals to ensure that they feel a sense of belonging. Other ideas include requiring students to complete video discussion boards and video introductions, so that voices and faces can be matched with names. Students do not need expensive webcams or software to accomplish this; most can use their smart phone's built-in video recording capabilities and upload the videos to sites like YouTube or Vimeo. Professors, too, should provide a biography and a video introduction. Encourage the students to answer each other’s questions on the Course Questions discussion board, and have students share and comment on each other’s assignments publicly, particularly capstone or final projects. Assign papers and projects that require peer editing, so that each student develops a closer relationship with at least one other person in the class.

Conclusion

Online teaching, just like in-person teaching, has its specific challenges and rewards, and if an instructor wants to be successful, s/he should investigate the advances already made in the subject area, consult with experienced professionals in the field, and accept that the first semester probably will be a learning curve. Mistakes will be made, but the reflective instructor will continue to mold and improve the class over time until it is a well-oiled machine that pleases students, professors, and administration.

References


