

Chapter 7.10

Technophobe to Technophile... Entering the Internet Culture

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter describes a successful means of introducing returning, older students to online education in a university setting. After presenting basic background from the literature on retention within online classes, the case is presented in detail as to how 16 fearful learners became confident and successful through the instructor's taking time for preparation, establishing a sense of achievement using the technology, creating interconnections with peers, and demonstrating the usefulness of the virtual class over the face-to-face class. The author hopes that by describing in detail the case and the principles found, future educators can prepare their traditional students for the culture of virtual learning environments, thus expanding options for their programs while addressing university administrative concerns about student retention.

BACKGROUND

The goal of this case is to present a concise means to engage traditional, returning learners in online education delivered via internet exclusively. These "older" learners, who are returning to university after one career or who are required to update their teaching (or other types of) credentials while still working often have less experience with technology than the typical undergraduate student. They may

be terrified when confronted with newer course delivery systems ranging from web-enhanced learning to completely online courses or programs. This case fits within the topic of "bridging the e-learning divide" although it does not fit the usual meaning of those who have access vs. those without access to internet resources. These students served in this case, who are sometimes called digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001) or, as some younger people today say "t'phobes," live in a society which values rapid information exchange, has easy access to computers, online technology and electricity but who,

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because of their experiences both in education and life, are not computer savvy. They need to become accustomed to the culture of online learning.

The case is located at the University of Texas—PanAmerican (UTPA), on the Mexican-U.S. border in deep south Texas. UTPA serves approximately 15,000 undergraduate and 2,000 graduate students in six colleges. Today the university has 56 Bachelor's level, 57 Master's level and 3 Doctoral level programs of study. UTPA's Carnegie classification is Master's Colleges & Universities (Larger Programs). The student population is 87.9% Hispanic for undergraduates and 75.1% Hispanic for graduate students (UTPA, 2008). Among strategic goals of the university is the incorporation of technology in teaching and there is a long-standing desire to see programs, as well as individual courses, taught with a significant online component, if not with reduced seat time or entirely online.

SETTING THE STAGE

The case described below is based on a number of courses which required practicing teachers to use the internet for updating their credentials as part of a master's program in second language teaching. Age of learners ranged from 23 – 61, with the average being 45 years, 8 months. These teachers were the program population from 2002 through 2006. Many of these learners were what have been called digital immigrants (Prensky 2001); they were new to the territory! Not to take the analogy too far (and not necessarily to validate all of Prensky's conclusions), I do find that age often correlates with experience in the online environment and with fear of using computers in general. To describe a couple of individual's comments on hearing that a given course would contain significant online requirements (all names have been changed to maintain anonymity) I present the following introductory information.

Student one, male, 56 years young, a grandfather who had served overseas for many years and decided

to get a Master's degree for personal satisfaction, had the following comments. "I just can't get that computer machine to work right. Every time I need to do something, it just quits. I don't think I can possibly really learn by using it."

Student two, female, 48 years young, an "empty-nester" whose spouse is a busy professional decided to get the Master's degree also for personal satisfaction. She commented that she did not want to learn online because she liked to come to class and talk with everyone; she was sure she would miss the interaction and fun of the in-class environment. She was quite technologically savvy and connected to her children by the latest cellular phone, but did not use a Blackberry or other internet connection by phone because "those darned letters are too hard to hit."

The above two students were part of the program during a transition phase where the majority of courses included web-enhanced instruction using a variety of formats. All courses used e-mail and discussion boards in the WebCT platform. Some courses had additional requirements which permitted students to meet together online in lieu of one 3-hour class meeting per month. One course, which I personally taught, met online in three-week blocks and face-to-face only four times during the semester. Other instructors conducted parts of their courses entirely asynchronously. The goal was to familiarize our students with virtual learning so that eventually any or all of the program could be online. As a program this has been successful; in 2007-08 an instructor taught all of her graduate and undergraduate courses online while she was in Indonesia. The case described below took place just as the program was expanding to allow for such events.

Suddenly in 2005, the program included students who were truly distance learners. One was accessing from China, another from the interior of Mexico, and then there were local students. Because of the inclusion of these international students from abroad, the university Center for Distance Learning and Excellence in Education (CDL) was

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