

Successful Strategies in Online Courses

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INTRODUCTION

Working adults are becoming an increasingly large percentage of the college population; with their busy schedules, they are insisting on “more flexible and convenient learning options” (NBEA, 2002a). Additionally, greater numbers of students are entering college having already acquired extensive computer and Internet experience. As a result of these changes in college populations, an increasing number of post-secondary institutions are offering online instruction to meet students’ educational needs. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education recently reported that nearly 2.9 million students enrolled in college-level distance education courses in 2000-01, more than double the enrollment of 1997-98 (CNN.com, 2003). As distance learning is gaining acceptance and more students are enrolling in online courses, the need for quality online programs is also increasing.

BACKGROUND

In 2001, this author wrote a chapter in *The Design & Management of Effective Distance Learning Programs* (Discenza, Howard & Schenk, 2002) called “Online Courses: Strategies for Success.” At the time of writing, the author shared a number of practices that she found successful in teaching her online class. Since that time, she has attempted to continually improve the online course, either by eliminating features that students did not find useful or by adding online resources to better assist students with learning.

This article focuses on strategies and practices that the author has found successful in teaching online courses. It reviews some of the techniques written about earlier and presents additional practices incorporated into her course to create a more effective online learning environment. Topics such as the importance of an initial class meeting, providing diverse instructional materials, the value of student course evaluations,

and the importance of continuous interaction will be addressed.

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ONLINE COURSES

Spend Time Planning

The first and most important step for developing an effective online course is careful planning (White & Myers, 2001). Prior to developing the course, it is a good idea for the instructor to look at other online courses and talk to experienced instructors of online courses to determine how to set up and actually teach or facilitate an online course. During the planning stage, it is important that the instructor define course goals and objectives, decide on course content or online learning resources, determine how the course content will be organized, decide on evaluation procedures, and identify interaction procedures to be used in the class.

Be Knowledgeable of Online Course Technology

By being familiar with the software and hardware used in the class and working through all online class components beforehand, the instructor will be able to answer students’ questions—both content-related and technical—promptly and with expertise. The instructor will also be able to anticipate student needs and questions before the class begins, which can prevent student problems and frustration.

CONSIDER USING A COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (CMS)

If teachers have access to a server but possess limited time or technical expertise, they might consider us-

ing a commercially developed course management system (CMS) to set up and manage the online class. A major advantage of using a CMS is that instructors do not need to be well versed in programming or be computer experts. If they can create in HTML format the various documents that they want to make available to students (objectives, lecture notes, study guides, exams), uploading them into the system is a very simple procedure. Additionally, if the online course is one that the instructor has already taught, much of the materials, tests, quizzes, and other content will have been previously developed (Lewis & Blair, 2003).

In addition, a CMS can make the course more user friendly and more professional looking with little designer expertise on the part of the instructor (Fredrickson, 1999).

With a CMS, instructors can manage the posting of assignments, grades, and exams (Crews, 2003). Course management systems generally provide their own tools for communication such as e-mail (eliminating the need for students and instructor to keep track of numerous e-mail addresses), threaded discussion (student and instructor postings can be read by all students), and teacher announcements (sending a note or reminder to the entire class). Exams can be set up in advance with date and time restrictions and can be graded automatically, providing students with immediate feedback. Additionally, with a CMS, students find the Web sites easy to use and when they log on, they receive pop-up reminders about new e-mails, new discussion postings, or scheduled tests.

A CMS allows the instructor the capability of tracking student activity throughout the term. At any time, the instructor can check to see which modules students have accessed, how many postings the students have made, and the date on which they last logged in. The ability to check on student activity helps determine which students are on task, which ones might need some personal assistance or encouragement, and which modules are giving students difficulty.

Additionally, by using a CMS, the instructor can use the school's database as a source for inputting students into the online class roster, eliminating the need to input individual student names and passwords.

Hold an Initial Class Meeting

One of the most beneficial steps to both instructor and students is the requirement that students attend

an initial class meeting or orientation session. This meeting provides an excellent opportunity for students to meet the instructor and each other, ask questions, and become acquainted with course logistics (Cooper, 1999). It also gives students the opportunity to become familiar with the hardware and software that they will need and the level of computing proficiency required for the course (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000).

During the initial class meeting, it is helpful to go over information typically covered the first day of a regular class, such as syllabus, textbook, instructor office hours, testing procedures, and so forth. In addition to the syllabus, one of the most beneficial handouts to both students and the instructor is the semester calendar (also available online), which includes a timeline or schedule of activities, assignments, and test dates for each week of the semester. Not only does the schedule provide students with a weekly "to-do" list, but it also reminds students of their learning objectives and keeps both the students and the instructor on task throughout the term.

The opportunity for students to actually log onto the course Web site and become familiar with it helps answer any questions they might have and alleviates any anxieties that they might be experiencing. An introduction to the online course content can also prevent students, when later working on their own, from wasting time and becoming "frustrated with the system to the point where they abandon it and any subsequent attempts to master its content" (Bayram, 1999).

Require Student Course Agreements

As with regular classes, students oftentimes question grading and testing policies or claim a lack of knowledge concerning course requirements at the end of the term. Requiring students to sign a course agreement form at the conclusion of the orientation session can reduce the number of such comments or complaints. The form asks students to signify their understanding of personal responsibilities as online students and their acceptance of course policies and procedures.

Provide a Variety of Instructional Materials

Since all students have different learning styles and respond differently to various learning activities, it

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