Chapter 4.17

Integrating Classroom and Online Instruction in an Introductory American Government Course

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ABSTRACT

This case outlines the author's experience teaching a large Introduction to American Government course using a hybrid classroom/online approach. The benefit of adding a set of online modules to the course was that students were able to engage the material in ways that are more readily available in traditional, smaller sections of a course. The rationale behind each module, as well as the problems and successes that accompanied each of them, are presented. Finally, the technical and human challenges that accompany the approach and the overall benefits of adopting hybrid approaches to teaching and learning are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall semester of 2007, I implemented a new way of teaching a course commonly offered in the political science curriculum: Introduction to American Government. Usually taught purely as a lecture course, I replaced half of the lecture component with online modules that I designed. Those modules, I hoped, would provide the same opportunities for learning that are offered in regular sections of the class. The university was interested in seeing how feasible replacing classroom time with online instruction might be. Since I had experience teaching online classes and conducting research on classroom teaching, I conducted the initial trial-run of the idea.

In order to compare how the class went with what usually occurred in an Introduction to American Government class, I taught two sections; one section involved the online components, while the other was taught as a typical lecture course. I designed the half-online class with the intention of using the online modules to both provide the course material that would be missing due to the shorter lecture time, and with the intention of improving the course. Teaching what are usually large sections of a class like this one usually leaves something to be desired, pedagogically speaking: interaction is minimal, the opportunity to have students apply the material to their broader interests is difficult, and the willingness of students to ask questions or engage in a debate is rare. I saw the opportunity to add a significant online component to the class as a chance to address the usual limitations of large, introductory sections.

As I discuss below, my experience implementing this new way of teaching was generally positive, but instructive to me and to others who may wish to implement such a mode of instruction in large classes. While many of the online modules I constructed worked well, the online environment provides challenges that an instructor will want to consider before taking on a half-online class. The potential benefits that exist for colleges and universities, as well as for students, suggest that this mode of instruction is worth the attention of educators. Attention to what works and what does not work will make the job of future instructors much easier and open the door for further improvements as more institutions of higher education adopt online instruction as a major component of their course offerings.

Indications are that online teaching will, indeed, play a significant role in the future of higher education. A survey by Bonk (2001) found that online instructors expect their online teaching responsibilities will account for over 50% of their teaching by the year 2010; an expectation that lags behind trends evident in the world of corporate training (Bonk, 2002). This may well be because as demand on institutions of higher learning is peaking, those institutions lack the facilities to accommodate the demand (Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001). Online course delivery is certainly a readily available component of the solution that will have to be brought to bear on this problem. Teachers of large courses that place disproportionate demands on college and university facilities, like Introduction to American Government, would do well to prepare strategies that will allow for effective online approaches to teaching and learning.

BACKGROUND

Introduction to American Government is a class that is often required of undergraduate students in the United States. It is usually part of what is known as the "core curriculum," the set of classes that college students must take as part of their program of study, regardless of their major or areas of interest. As citizens in a democracy, one assumes, some training in the details of that democracy is a useful component of the education we give to those who will participate in -and perhaps even lead- democratic institutions. Therefore, along with introductory courses in written communication, basic mathematics, and physical education, American students often find that they must satisfactorily complete a course that outlines the institutions and processes of American government. Indeed, several states require as a matter of law that students who receive an undergraduate degree from a public institution in their state successfully complete a course in American Government.

Course Content and Goals

The class is usually structured as a lecture course, where students take notes on a lecture given by the instructor two or three times a week during the semester. An academic semester usually begins

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