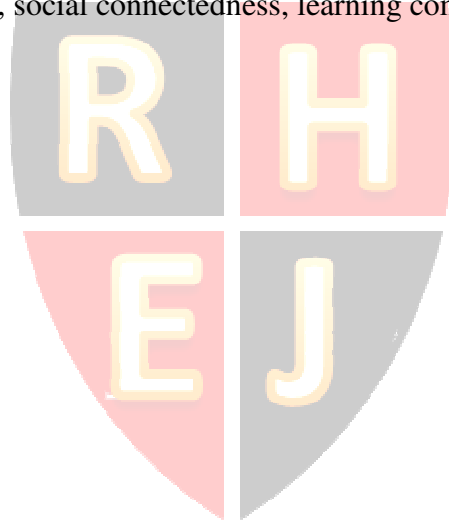# Suggestions for a smooth running online course

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ABSTRACT

Online courses present many challenges for the instructor. Students have virtually unlimited resources as a result of the Internet which can help them avoid complying with the requirements of a course. Specifically, reading the required material and preparing the required assignments. The instructors are challenged to develop courses which restrict the students' ability to venture outside the course material and requirements to prepare assignments. A major challenge for online instructors is creating and running an online course that inspires students to learn and adhere to the course requirements. Researchers have recommended several techniques. This paper will discuss some of the techniques that can be used to provide knowledge and maintain the integrity of the courses, the professor, and the students.

Introduction

The continuing growth of online courses is well documented (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Online courses are rapidly becoming more prevalent in Universities across the country. The availability of these courses has generated a great deal of interest among individuals who may have previously thought it was not possible for them to pursue college and graduate degrees. The rapid expansion of these online programs has generated a host of issues from course design and execution to student participation and assessment. Of concern is the significantly higher dropout rate for online students as compared to traditional classroom students (Carr, 2000; Levy, 2007). The dropout rate may be an indication that the course is poorly designed or ineffective. It is in the best interests of the institution to improve completion rates so as to make the best use of resources and effectively plan budgets. This paper will review relevant literature regarding several factors which may affect online courses. These factors include: student satisfaction, social connectedness, learning communities, and academic integrity.

Student Satisfaction

It is important to be cognizant of what the research has uncovered about student satisfaction as it relates to online education. Research suggests that learning style and individual characteristics influence student satisfaction in online education. Individuals who learn better through visual cues had more positive opinions of the value of online education than those who could be described as auditory learners (Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009). Students who describe themselves as risk takers with a willingness to try new things also favored online education (Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009). Student age also affects the perception of online education. Older students tend to have more favorable opinions of online education than younger students and may be more inclined to take additional online courses (Dobbs, Waid, & del Carmen, 2009).

Significant research has also concluded that the level of student satisfaction with an online course is related to the level of interactions between faculty and students (Chickering and Gamson, 1987; Chickering and Ehrmann, 1996; Roblyer and Ekhaml, 2000; Valenta et al., 2001). Arbaugh (2001) noted that immediate responses by instructors was directly related to student satisfaction in an online course. Shea et al. (2004) found that presenting a clear statement of course expectations and timely responses to students positively affected student satisfaction. Jones (2012) mentions additional factors positively affecting student satisfaction that were uncovered by researchers. These factors include minimal technical problems and good feedback on assignments. In addition, students want faculty who are truly engaged in the course. (Jones, 2012).

In a study conducted by Young (2006) seven items were discovered to affect students' perception of effective online teaching. These items included, "adapting to student needs, using meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning"(p. 65). This study also presented factors that affected student perceptions of online faculty effectiveness. Faculty that were not involved in class discussions, did not communicate frequently with students, and did not provide timely feedback were perceived to be less effective teachers.

Spangle, Hodne and Schierling, (2002) studied over 1200 student evaluations of online courses and found several factors which made for effective online instruction:

- Have good written communication skills;
- Have good course activities and generate discussion;
- Respond to students in a timely manner;
- Display a flexible attitude with students;
- Require excellent work;
- Create an atmosphere that generates interaction among all involved in the course.

Social connectedness

Another factor related to the success of an online course is social connectedness or the degree to which students in an online course feel socially connected to their classmates (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003: Kreijns, Kirschner, Joshems, & Van Buuren, 2004). Research has documented the importance of social connectedness as important for student success in online courses. (Betts, 2008; Booker, 2008; Dede, 2005; Ritter, Polnick, Fink, and Oescher, 2010; Rovai, 2002; Rovai and Jordan, 2004). It can be achieved by making students feel part of a group working towards a common goal. The creation of such a group requires smooth interpersonal exchanges. This allows for the development of appropriate group norms and roles. If students in an online course are not comfortable navigating the online communication channels, these interpersonal exchanges will not occur and a group structure cannot be created. If a group structure is absent, it becomes difficult for online students to collaborate and interact towards the achievement of goals.

The process responsible for the expansion of social connectedness is social cognition (Bartlett, 1954, Fiske, 1995). Social cognition coordinates the behavior for individuals in an interaction through the expectations individuals have of the actions and predicted moves of others. The ability to adapt in social situations is controlled by the social schema developed for handling incoming communications. Social schemas, "filter, assess, and categorize the traits of others during initial status assessments that lead to norm development and later role differentiation, each of which occurs as part of the natural development of group social structure over time." (Slagter, and Bishop, 2012:348).

The development of group structure that supports interactions occurs easily in traditional on ground courses. The creation and maintenance of this structure in an online course requires much effort on the part of the instructor. The process of creating and maintaining a group which occurs naturally and easily in a classroom environment must be reinforced and monitored by the instructor in an online course. The instructor must be a constant force providing continuous guidance, support and encouragement. This guidance begins well before the actual online course begins with serious thought given to the anticipated needs of the students.

A learning community

Social connectedness leads to the development of a learning community. This is a factor that supports greater learning in a traditional setting. It is possible to create a learning community within an online course. (Keramidas et al.:2007). Learning communities are more than interaction and connection between students and faculty. There are actually three parts. They include social, cognitive, and teaching presence. (Kranzow, 2013). "The goal in the online course

is the creation of a learning community such that it engages the cognitive realm and encourages higher levels of learning." (Kranzow, 2013:133). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) state that, "creating a climate for open communication and building group cohesion are essential for productive inquiry." (p. 168). Thus, Learning communities encourage social interaction which, in turn, encourages learning. (Vygotsky, 1978). Individuals can complete specific actions on their own but they will perform more effectively when they interact with others. The difference between what individuals perform on their own and what is performed with the assistance of others is called "zone of proximal development."(Hrastinski, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). "In an online discussion, for example, students can help each other by filling in the gaps in each other's knowledge and/or by "demonstrating" particular tasks." (Dixson, 2015:144). This is why interaction in an online course is essential to learning.

        Learning communities develop naturally in a traditional setting because of the face to face interaction of the class. Since online classes lack this face to face interaction, the instructor must help build this learning community. A good starting point would be to provide some area within the course where the students post something about themselves. This should be done at the beginning of the course. The inclusion of a photo is recommended as it would help students visualize their fellow students as they interact with them. It is also important for the faculty member to be introduced to the students. Betts (2008) suggests a video or audio introduction because it would provide a more personal introduction than one that is text based. Kranzow (2013) notes that this may not seem very academic, however, it does prepare the way for subsequent interactions. It is, therefore, important to carefully include introductions in a course.

The beginning

        Understanding and providing guidance and support for possible problems lays the foundation for the development of a feeling of social connectedness and the creation of a learning community which is essential for a successful online course. Research suggests beginning the course with an assignment that does not require a deep understanding of course content. This gives students an opportunity to reach out to others in the course and discuss the assignment.
Kranzow (2013). If the course location allows, students may choose to meet in person for group work. Kranzow (2013) dispels the impression that students in an online course do not appreciate meeting with their peers. They do appreciate such interaction. Institutions have developed creative ways for students to meet. For example, Drexel University created "virtual teas" as a mechanism for students and faculty to meet in a relaxed environment. (Betts, 2009).

        It is certainly important to have structure at the beginning of an online course. It is, however, recommended that as the course continues, students be given more choice. Although choice may seem a challenge for students who are used to being completely directed in their learning, a balance of challenge and support can help students become more autonomous and self-directed.
(Rovai, 2002).

        It is also important to encourage students to, "engage their social and Internet world with the class."(Kranzow, 2013:135). The use of collaborative documents provides more opportunities for students to work together. Such pedagogies are often disregarded yet they are associated with the human desire to be part of a community and to share knowledge. (Bruff, 2011)

The syllabus

The course should include a detailed syllabus with everything from course objectives to specific requirements as well as penalties. Everything related to the course should be spelled out in detail especially the penalties for late or missing assignments. Students should be informed that taking the necessary time to view and follow directions will make the course experience less stressful and lead to the achievement of the learning outcomes for the course. (Ludlow & Duff, 2009).

The delivery of the material in an online course should include all the information the student needs to successfully complete the course. Brown and Voltz (2005) recommend six specific elements that should be provided to students in an online course. They include the following:

1. Some sort of task that the students must perform.
2. A scenario that serves to encourage the student to perform.
3. Occasions for feedback.
4. An appropriate means of delivering the material.
5. Attention to the context of the learning environment.
6. Understanding of how these resources will affect student learning.

Murray et al., (2012:127) believe that, "applying these six design elements generates instruction materials that contribute to the totality of the learning experience."

Academic integrity

One of the major criticisms of online education concerns academic integrity. (Baron & Crooks, 2005). Specifically, the issue is plagiarism. It is recommended that there be a statement within the syllabus regarding plagiarism and other dishonest practices. The statement should include examples of what would be considered dishonest practices. (McGee, 2013). Reminding students of the consequences of academic dishonesty provides the evidence that students were informed and cannot claim ignorance. (McGee, 2013).

Keramidas et al. (2007) suggest that dishonest practices can be discouraged with carefully designed assignments that are not timed and make use of hypothetical cases. The students may feel less pressure to plagiarize.

> Real and hypothetical cases are much harder to copy and instances of academic dishonesty are more easily detected because answers submitted that are too similar are readily noticeable to anyone grading them and essay responses make it easier to recognize a match or mismatch to a learner's typical writing style. (Keramidas et al., 2007:33).

Another important point to keep in mind is that it is really not possible to design a course that completely discourages dishonest practices. There will always be some students who will continue to try to engage in dishonest practices. They do so because they have been successful in the past or they are under extreme pressure to succeed. (Keramidas et al., 2007). The importance of the grade is a significant factor. Selwyn (2008:477) argued that, "online plagiarism is just one element of a wider 'cheating culture' which is seen by some commentators to pervade the higher education systems of Western countries as university education becomes an ever more important element of individual economic success."

It is recommended that faculty receive instruction in how to detect plagiarism as well as the use of detection software. Training alone, however, does not guarantee that detection systems will be entirely accurate. The results should be considered with other information. Attention should be given to cultural differences that a detection system may not account for. (McGee, 2013).

Perhaps more important than developing methods to detect plagiarism should be developing methods to discourage students from engaging in such practices. This would involve working with students instead of against them. Selwyn (2008:477) suggests, "developing more holistic institutional approaches that emphasize a shared responsibility among students, staff and institution." Encouraging student awareness and honesty may ultimately be more effective than punishment.

Concluding remarks

The mechanics of preparing and teaching online courses is a constant learning process. There are new techniques developed every day to support instructors and students in online courses. This is what makes this particular aspect of academia exciting and challenging. The successful online instructor must be aware and comfortable with new innovative techniques designed to improve the operation of online courses. It is also important to understand the factors that affect student ability to benefit from these techniques. One such factor would be the creation of a learning community fostered by a sense of social connectedness. It is equally important to understand the various factors that affect student satisfaction with an online course. The challenges can seem overwhelming at times. The key is to always maintain a sense of humor about the process.

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