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Special Report

10 Principles of Effective Online Teaching: Best Practices in Distance Education

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10 Principles of Effective Online Teaching: Best Practices in Distance Education

In the traditional college classroom today, faculty and students arrive with a certain set of expectations, shaped largely by past experiences. And although students may need the occasional (or perhaps frequent) reminder of what's required of them, there's usually something very familiar about the experience for both faculty and students alike.

In the online classroom, an entirely new set of variables enters the equation. It's a little like trying to drive in a foreign country. You know how to drive, just like you know how to teach, but it sure is hard to get the hang of driving on the left side of the road, you're not quite sure how far a kilometer is, and darn it if those road signs aren't all in Japanese.

This special report explains the "rules of the road" for online teaching and learning and features a series of columns that first appeared in the *Distance Education Report's* "Between the Clicks," a popular column by Dr. Lawrence C. Ragan, Director of Instructional Design and Development for Penn State's World Campus.

The articles contained in the report will help you establish online instructor best practices and expectations, and include the following principles of effective online teaching:

- Show Up and Teach
- Practice Proactive Course Management Strategies
- Establish Patterns of Course Activities
- Plan for the Unplanned
- Response Requested and Expected
- Think Before You Write
- Help Maintain Forward Progress
- Safe and Secure
- Quality Counts
- (Double) Click a Mile on My Connection

These principles, developed at Penn State's World Campus, outline the core behaviors of the successful online instructor, and help to define parameters around the investment of time on part of the instructor. In his articles, Ragan identifies potential barriers and limitations to online learning, and specific strategies to assist instructors in achieving the performance expectations.

Christopher Hill
Editor
Distance Education Report

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Establishing Online Instructor Performance Best Practices and Expectations

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

I was recently invited to conduct a Magna online seminar based on a research project identifying strategies to help faculty manage the online workload. Apparently this topic hit a nerve of concern for faculty, support staff and administrators alike. The response to the presentation suggested this was an important area for further exploration and development. The presentation generated many more questions than I was able to address during the program.

Helping faculty learn to survive and even thrive online is critical if we are to realize the potential of this new learning space. This column will be my attempt to tease out the most critical of the questions I received, to reflect and respond, and to share my insights on a variety of topics. I hope you will find it informative and helpful.

Communicating expectations

During the presentation, I made reference to a strategy that an institution can employ to help faculty save time online. I referred to a document created at the World Campus as the “10 commandments” of faculty performance. Simply put, it is the articulation of what our organization expects from our online instructors in order to ensure a quality teaching and learning experience. Although this may initially sound like a “heavy handed” approach—faculty being told

how to perform—I would offer another interpretation.

When we step into a physical

One senior faculty, well versed in the domain of online education, responded to my approach by saying, “if you don’t tell us what is expected, how will we know what to do to succeed?” His point was well taken.

classroom we are stepping into a time-tested model with well-defined operating parameters. There is a class schedule and syllabus that tells me when to meet with my class, for how long, and even the room location. There are a set of familiar tools such as a chalkboard, a podium and seating for the students. There is also an inherited protocol of classroom experience—I am the teacher and you are the student. We both roughly understand the dynamics of the interactions of this arrangement. My responsibility as the course instructor

is to show up in the designated location, and conduct the course to the best of my ability through to successful completion for the students. The responsibility of the learner is to meet the criteria for satisfactory course completion as measured by the instructor.

The asynchronous online classroom has little or no similarity to the classroom experience. There may be no “class schedule,” no meeting room or physical location, and, certainly in the asynchronous classroom, no defined timeframe for operation. Even the dynamics between teacher and student is challenged because online we can all appear to “be equal.” Other than a vague sense of responsibility to “teach the course,” the instructor has little definition of these new and often ill-defined operating parameters. The course instructor is left on their own to figure out what constitutes a successful learning experience.

Many years ago I was in a faculty meeting and we were discussing the issue of defining instructor performance. I was soft-selling the idea of defining these behaviors for fear of insulting our faculty. One senior faculty, well versed in the domain of online education, responded to my approach by saying, “if you don’t tell us what is expected, how will we know what to do to succeed?” His point was well taken. Although we assume that faculty know something of the face-to-face learning setting, we cannot assume that knowledge translates to the online classroom. It is our responsibility to provide the instructor with the best definition of successful performance for their success and the success of their students.

Clearly defining and communicating the expected performance behaviors for online instructors saves faculty time because it eliminates uncertainty

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about roles and responsibilities. These suggested guidelines, based on best practices gathered through experience, serve as a benchmark for faculty to gauge their online course activities and manage their online workload. The intent of the “Online Instructor Performance Best Practices and Expectations” (or “10 Commandments”) document generated by the World Campus is not meant to be all-inclusive but rather to define a baseline of online performance.

In recent discussions around this topic we acknowledged this is an evolving document based on what we and our faculty have experienced in our online activities. My intent in sharing this document more broadly is to test our basic assumptions and refine our thinking. I welcome input and insights into this document and know that it will evolve and change over time. Additionally, each institution or organization must review and consider how these expectations are interpreted within the operating context of their own online program.

The approach I will take over the next several columns will be to expand on the 10 principles outlined in the document, providing a rationale, identification of barriers and limitations, and specific strategies to assist instructors in achieving the performance expectations.

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #1 Show up and Teach

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

In the previous article, I introduced the need to effectively define and communicate for instructors what it is expected in the online classroom. This is based on the premise that, for many instructors, the online teaching and learning environment is different from the face-to-face educational setting. Often, instructors teach in the face-to-face setting the way they were taught. That is, they use similar instructional strategies as instructors as those they engaged in as learners.

This can be a good thing if they experienced sound instructional strategies during their formative years. Most would agree however, that our own learning came in educational settings that were sometimes less than optimal. So, many instructors end up repeating the same mistakes as their professors. Now, overlay the new dynamics of the online classroom.

What we know about teaching in the classroom, good or bad, may not translate well online with somewhat complicated technologies, new social orders, and media-rich resources. Without express guidance on what is expected of the online instructor, they are left to “figure it out,” leading to frustrated students and probably a less than desirable teaching experience.

The “10 principles” of online instruction were developed by Penn State’s World Campus to specifically define the performance expectations of the online instructor. This document attempts to create an expectation of the core behaviors of the successful online instructor, and serves to clear the air on how the instructor can be most effective in teaching their online course. These expectations establish a minimum set

of activities for online instructors, and help to define parameters around the investment of time on part of the instructor.

During a recent online faculty development program we engaged in the question of quality of performance by the online instructor. One individual expressed their understanding that the online instructor should be available to the students 24/7. I raised a concern about this approach with the participants because I feared this belief would inhibit good instructors from getting involved in teaching online. It was clear that, although well intended, asking the online instructor to be available, that is online, all the time was setting them up for failure and frustration. We do not expect that dedication from the face-

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to-face instructor, and nor should we expect that of our online instructors.

Principle #1: Show Up and Teach

“Students in an online course rely on the instructor to follow the established course schedule and to deliver the course within the scheduled time frame. The online instructor is expected to make schedule adjustments as needed to manage special circumstances.”

This may seem like an unnecessary statement of the obvious. The online instructor is expected to conduct the class from beginning to end and to make adjustments when necessary in order for the student to complete the learning experience. However, the necessity of this statement is borne of the misimpression that the online class “teaches itself.” Since most of the course is already authored and designed for online delivery, the instructor may believe they simply need to serve as the proverbial “guide on the side” as the students navigate the learning system.

Additional evidence of this belief was expressed early on in the development of online learning, when some educators expressed concern that the online class could be “self taught” and reduce the need for the instructor. Although there are courses designed as self-instructed modules, this is not the predominant model for the effective online classroom. The role of the instructor is actually more important than ever before. The students are looking to the instructor to serve as the guide, facilitator and “teacher” and the need for them to do so is pronounced because of the lack of face-to-face interactions.

One commonly held belief about the learning design and development of the online classroom is that the core teaching material, resources, and instructional strategies need to be in place prior to the start of the class. In

general, this is true. Whereas in the face-to-face classroom the instructor may craft the learning as the class unfolds, the online classroom generally requires more preparation and development time before the event begins. If you think of the time it takes in both the face-to-face and online classroom as roughly equal, you begin to realize one difference between the two modalities is a shift in the time and energy it takes to develop and deliver. More time may be spent prior to delivery of the online classroom with more energy in teaching once the class has begun. This approach creates a more stable and usually more enjoyable teaching experience for the instructor because they are not continuing to create course material while also providing instruction. This approach however also depends on the instructor being an active participant in the online classroom managing the learning at a distance.

Of all the responsibilities of the online instructor, the role as “teacher,” however that is defined, is the most critical. For many, the design and development of the learning space prior to delivery can be a liberating experience. For once, more attention is placed on interacting with the students around the course content than worrying about the generation of tomorrow’s slide presentation or handout materials. Faculty are free to concentrate on responding to student inquiries regarding the course content, addressing particularly difficult subject matter or discussing relevant topics in discussion spaces. Many faculty respond that they enjoy this aspect of online learning more than face-to-face because they can be more efficient and more equally reach all students.

The online classroom does however have a slight drawback in this area as well. That is, the instructor is required to “attend” to the classroom dynamics

and manage the learning experience more than in the face-to-face classroom. Students may come to depend on the instructor as their primary link to the course and demand more time and attention individually since that attention is only a click away. One strategy often employed by experienced instructors is the use of a “frequently asked questions” section and well developed syllabus that addresses many of the course dynamics most likely to generate student inquiries.

The Role of the LMS

Most learning management systems provide a rich array of tools that assist the faculty in attending to the details of course management. For example, reporting functions such as summaries of student online activity, participation in discussion groups and completion of course assignments can easily be generated and tracked. It is to the advantage of the online instructor to become familiar and competent with the learning management system in order to take full advantage of this capability.

Ultimately it is the role of the instructor to oversee the course from beginning to end. Not “showing up for class” in the online environment leads to confused and frustrated learners. The online classroom requires diligent attention to course progress. The face-to-face classroom provides a defined set of parameters including time and location for both instructor and learner. The online classroom does as well--the parameters simply need to be communicated and managed for a successful learning experience for both the instructor and the student.

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #2 Practice Proactive Course Management Strategies

By Lawrence C. Ragan

In the previous article, I discussed the first expectation of instructors teaching online as “Show Up and Teach.” The primary point of this simple statement was to explicitly define the anticipation that the instructor actively participate in all dimensions of the online classroom. Most importantly however, “Show Up and Teach” was designed to counter the misperception that, once created, the online classroom can manage itself.

Since, in most cases, the course content has been created and stored in the learning management system, some instructors may believe that their role of providing the course content is complete and therefore their role as instructors in the online experience is complete. Just as we expect in the face-to-face classroom, the online instructor is required to be visible and active in leading the learning experience. The second expectation in the list describes the type of active participation required in the online classroom and speaks to the need for class oversight and management.

Principle # 2: Practice Proactive Course Management Strategies

The online instructor can help create a successful learning experience by practicing proactive course management strategies. These strate-

gies include, but are not limited to, monitoring assignment submissions, communicating and reminding students of missed and/or upcoming deadlines, and making course

With a new course, new instructor and perhaps new students, it will be necessary to monitor and respond to student activity (or lack thereof) more proactively.

progress adjustments where and when necessary.

NOTE: The term “course management” can encompass many dimensions of the educational experience. For example, managing student rosters, assigning team structures, grading assignments and submitting grades and taking discipline action can all be part of “course management.” For the purposes of this article, “course management” is used to refer to those activities directly related to the teaching and learning activities involved in the online course.

Now I wholly expect this expectation to raise a few eyebrows and even draw a knee-jerk reaction of “I expect my students to monitor their own progress in the course, just like in my

face-to-face classroom, if they fail they fail and it’s their own fault!” In most cases, online instructors use the same philosophy toward managing the educational activities and participation as employed in the face-to-face classroom. The level of oversight and management of the educational activities is fundamentally a personal choice and reflects an individual philosophy as well as the practical limitations presented by the educational setting. The degree of course management must be balanced with the time and energy available and demands of the course structure. It is also dependent upon the age and experience of both the instructor and the learner.

Initially, a different level of course management by the online instructor may be required. This instructional oversight is necessary because the online classroom presents a significant shift in the understanding of roles and responsibilities on part of both the instructor and the student. Also, the degree of course management will evolve and become more efficient with experience. The instructor will learn how to clearly define and communicate student expectations as well as define and communicate their own performance standards. With a new course, new instructor and perhaps new students, it will be necessary to monitor and respond to student activity (or lack thereof) more proactively. Through trial and error, the instructor will develop a sense of where and when to insert course management strategies that lead to the best learning outcomes for the students positively.

The challenge for the online instructor is to find the degree of interaction and intervention that works with the dynamics of their online classroom. The goal is to structure the course management strategies so

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that the online learner is able to control their own learning experience. As may be expected, the more actively managed classroom will place more demands of time and energy on the instructor. The expectation that the instructor teach as well as manage the online classroom can place additional responsibilities onto an already busy online instructor. If the instructor is busy with sending reminders to individual students regarding missed class assignments or project completion dates they may not be spending time responding to inquiries and interactions around course content. After the course has been taught a time or two, it may be helpful to reflect on the time spent teaching the online class, the instructor may reveal “time drains” of classroom management that detract from the primary role of providing instruction.

There is an additional dimension of this performance expectation that relates to the number of students enrolled in the course. Low-enrolling courses (under 40 students) enable a higher degree of instructor oversight due to the student-teacher ratio. It is simply easier to monitor the activities of 40 students than 400. These courses are typically designed for more interaction and dialogue between course participants. Monitoring and managing student performance (or lack thereof) may happen by simply reviewing the posting log or activity records in the learning management system. A quick follow-up email can remind the student of the required class assignment, or missed homework.

In medium to large enrollment courses, a different approach to course management may be required. Typically the course activity monitoring tools within the learning manage-

ment system can serve to identify students not keeping pace with the course. An automated response may be programmed to remind those individuals of missed assignments. The general course announcement tool can be used to remind all students of important deadlines or upcoming course events. If the large enrolling course has multiple discussion spaces, other creative solutions may be required to monitor student participation.

The goal is to empower the online learner to take responsibility for managing their own learning experience and free the instructor to concentrate their time and energy on crafting a truly engaged learning experience.

The Key to Success

Regardless of the size of course enrollments, the key to a successful teaching and learning experience for both the learner and instructor is communication. Clearly defining and communicating the expectations will address the uncertainty of what role and responsibility is required of each participant. The efficiency and effectiveness of this communication will evolve with experience. Chances are it will not be perfect the first, second or maybe even third offering. Refining the course management is a continual “work in progress” that requires a commitment on part of the instructor to carefully monitor, adjust

and improve the communications of expectations to the learners.

With proper design, management, tracking and adjustments, the management of the learning activities of the online classroom can lead to a rewarding learning experience for all course participants. The goal is to empower the online learner to take responsibility for managing their own learning experience and free the instructor to concentrate their time and energy on crafting a truly engaged learning experience. Watching and learning from others, using student feedback, analyzing evaluation data and frequently asked questions can provide insights into where and how to improve the learning experience. Some are of the belief that the tools and capabilities of the online classroom can lead to a richer and more equitable learning experience than the face-to-face classroom because we can provide communications to all participants. Certainly the opportunity exists to structure a learning experience rich in interaction, student-managed and focused on addressing the needs of the students in attaining the course learning outcomes.

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #3 Establish Patterns of Course Activities

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

So far in this series we've defined several fundamental "principles" of teaching in the online classroom. Number 1: "Show Up and Teach" expressed the expectation that the instructor, although not required to be physically present in a location, be an active presence as the teacher in the online classroom. Number 2: "Practice Proactive Course Management Strategies," stressed the importance of instructor engagement in the online classroom and taking a proactive role in managing the learning activities in the virtual learning space. This article focuses on one aspect of the online classroom that benefits both the learner and the instructor, that of establishing the pace and sequence of learning events and activities.

Principle # 3: Establish Patterns of Course Activities

"Although the online classroom environment provides tremendous flexibility of time and place of study, establishing and communicating a course pace and pattern of work can aid both instructor and student and alleviate confusion of course operation. For the student, an established pattern of course activities allows for planning and management of other non-course activities around their e-learning activities. For the instructor, establishing and communicating a course schedule and pattern

of work serves to define the boundaries between the online class activities and the rest of life."

One of the most challenging aspects of designing an online classroom is working without the confines of time and location. Although this may have great initial appeal to both learner and instructor, the reality of this lack of operating parameters becomes quickly evident.

The Seemingly "Timeless" Classroom

In the beginning, the online classroom was seen as having tremendous advantage over a fixed-time course format. The "answer" for those busy adults who wanted to continue their education without leaving home, work and their community was touted as "study at your convenience, anytime and any place!" Who could disagree with the concept of getting an advanced degree without leaving home or needing to take a leave-of-absence from the workplace? As a matter of

fact, some of the early marketing materials spoke to the ease of access with phrases such as, "your degree is just a click away!" and "earn your degree on your terms!"

For the traditional-age college student the draw to take a course that did not require attending classes at 8:00 am Monday morning also had great appeal. It seemed that everyone could find a reason to like the flexibility of study based on one's personal schedule and needs. As it turns out, the potential of the "timeless" classroom was slightly oversold for the majority of online coursework. Although there are exceptions, most online courses follow a defined schedule of operation from start to finish.

One of the most challenging aspects of designing an online classroom is working without the confines of time and location. Although this may have great initial appeal to both learner and instructor, the reality of this lack of operating parameters becomes quickly evident. Courses without time and location operating parameters can become management challenges for busy students participating in online class activities while still balancing the demands of work and family life. For the instructor, the lack of time and location constraints can cause a blending of class and non-class activities. Establishing a pattern of course activity and communicating this sequence to the learner enables the learner to develop a plan of study to address the requirements of the course. This course schedule and pattern also aids the instructor to contain the course-related activities to an appropriate duration and workload.

Learner Benefits

In many ways, the operation of the

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on-line classroom resembles the face-to-face format more than it does the independent learning model of the correspondence distance education class. There are set start- and end-dates. Tasks need to be completed and assignments submitted within defined timeframes. In some cases, an actual synchronous event such as a chat session, teleconference or webinar style meeting may be required. The individual learner may progress through the course material and take self-check quizzes on their own but there are frequently group projects, presentations, and discussion forums requiring a high degree of team-work and cooperation.

The challenge for the online learner is to establish the discipline and time management skills to keep paced with the requirements of the online classroom. Some research has suggested, at least anecdotally, that traditional aged learners and younger may be more challenged in the online classroom because they have not developed these core skills.

A course with a predictable pattern of operation and sequence of events provides the online learner with the structure they need to succeed. An instructional design model with consistent pacing and course activities allows the learner more control over their online learning experience. For example, if lessons begin and end on consistent days and assignments are due on a regular schedule the learner can plan other life activities around these aspects of their online course. Where the course structure deviates from an established pattern, early notification and reminders are helpful in order to aid the learner in making the necessary adjustments.

Instructor Benefits

An unforeseen challenge for the online instructor is knowing when the

class day is “over.” The temptation to reach out and be available to the online learner all the time is hard to resist when the laptop and wireless computers make accessing the course so easy. The very advantages of flexibility and freedom of choice regarding where and when to conduct the course turns into a trap that makes the instructor feel the online classroom demands constant and ready access. The results can be an exhausted and overwhelmed instructor, even when class size is manageable. As in the face-to-face classroom, online instructors need to establish defined and reasonable work periods where course-related activities occur. These work timeframes help to confine course work to a time frame separate from other life activities (such as family time and vacations!).

Defining and communicating these work patterns also aids the learner in understanding that the instructor “has a life.” Although instructors are open to receiving emails and course communications at all hours of the day and night, the learner quickly comes to realize that the instructors’ response (except in cases of dire emergencies, of course) will be confined to a defined timeframe. Both learner and instructor fall into a comfortable rhythm of class-related activities. One well-seasoned online instructor I know shared with me that his students know exactly when he is available and when he is not and they behave accordingly.

The Key to Success

A few simple strategies for applying the principle of establishing a pattern of course activities include:

1. Establish and maintain a predictable course pattern of course-related activities. This may include such activities as “opening” new lessons, due dates and times for assignments, schedules for synchronous activities and self-assessment and online quizzes/exams.
2. Use the syllabus or course information page to communicate the schedule of course-related activities.
3. Use a dynamic communications method such as group email or the general class announcement pages to inform the class of unplanned changes to the course activity schedule. If possible, describe why the change has occurred.
4. Provide the instructor “work schedule” informing students of the time constraints of your course related activities. These may also be posted to the syllabus or welcome letter.

Summary

The many advantages of “anytime, anyplace” education can also present challenges for both learner and instructor in time management and operation. Establishing and maintaining a predictable pattern of course studies can serve the learner by providing a foundation for planning other life activities. For the instructor, a defined schedule of class activities can serve to prevent the class from interfering with other responsibilities and balance the expectations of learners who may desire 24/7 access to their “virtual teacher.”

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #4 Plan for the Unplanned

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

The 10 principles of online instructor performance have thus far focused on proactive strategies that ensure the instructor is visible and active in the online classroom. Somewhat predictably, this article addresses the need to communicate changes to the established pattern of course activities.

Principle # 4: Plan for the Unplanned

Online learners look to the instructor as their main source of course information and progress. If an instructor will be unable to log into the course for more than four business days (e.g., during professional travel), the instructor is asked to give one week's notice to the students. In emergency cases, instructors are asked to notify students as soon as possible if they will need to be away from the course and when they will provide additional course operation information.

Creatures of Habit

One of the touted advantages of the online learning space is the flexibility it allows the instructor and the learner. Because in an asynchronous online course there are no fixed meetings times or locations, the time of instruction or study is at the discretion of the participant. Although all class participants appreciate this educational freedom, it is often a re-

quirement for those who must travel and have a desire to continue the educational activities. The predictability and accountability of established patterns of course activities allow both the instructor and student the

Established course-related patterns reduce stress and frustration on the part of the learner because they provide predictable patterns of activities.

ability to plan and manage the learning sequence. Changes to these patterns can confuse and frustrate the learner when not appropriately informed.

In the online classroom, the instructor may be the primary link between the learner and the educational institution. Established course-related patterns reduce stress and frustration on the part of the learner because they provide predictable patterns of activities. When these patterns change, either by planned or unplanned circumstances, that all-important predictability is interrupted. Communicating changes to

the established patterns with the online learner serves to reduce the stress and anxiety of pattern adjustments.

Life Happens

The good news and bad news of instructing in an online course is that there are fewer technology-related excuses for not being able to continue the course operation. Travel, either local, nationally, or internationally does not typically deter course activities because a reliable internet connection is often an "internet café" away. With a little preplanning, course operation can continue without much adjustment or interruption. The bad news is there is little room for "downtime" for the online instructor! This speaks to the need to consider the pacing of the learning events during the time of course design. Carefully consider the cycle of course activities in relation to the length and duration of the required student activities, a.k.a. homework, so that the pace is comfortable and doable for both learner and instructor.

Even in the best-designed course however, "life happens." Little and large surprises can impact the pace and pattern of the course operation. If travel schedules and special events are known prior to the course offering, consider these events when designing the course syllabus. For those other small or not-so-small occasions when "life happens," having and communicating a strategy for informing the students of these changes can go a long way to maintaining course continuity. In many cases the interruptions may be brief and simply change the due date of an assignment or limit instructor access for a few days. These types of course adjustments are easily communicated to the students via the announcement

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page or whatever “all class” communication tool is used in the course.

It is not necessary (unless you want to) to share with the students what event has caused the course operation adjustment. Simply informing the students of the change with a definite “resume function” date will allow the student to adjust their course responsibilities accordingly. For example, when an unplanned event or travel may limit your ability to maintain course participation, simply stating that, “Due to an unexpected change in schedule plans I will be unavailable for the next two days for ENG 101. Due to my schedule change, the Lesson 4 assignment, Loop Design Schematic, should be completed and submitted by Friday June 20th.”

There are times when life happens larger than a simple date change or schedule adjustment. In these cases you may be unable to communicate with the class members. Planning for these events can be more challenging. If there is a teaching or grad assistant supporting the course delivery, they may be able to step in and pick up the course communications. In other cases, an effective strategy may be to provide the students an “emergency contact” such as a departmental staff assistant or colleague who has agreed to serve as a point of contact for the students. Keeping in mind that in many cases the distant student cannot “wander around the halls” seeking information on the interruption to the course activities.

Learner Benefits

Knowing how changes to the defined schedule of course events will be communicated greatly reduces the stress for the online learner when changes occur. An email, course announcement page posting or phone

message describing the interruption and when the course activities will resume, alleviates the anxiety of the learner whose primary contact is through the course instructor. Informing the students at the beginning of the course, for example through a brief statement in the

Having thought through communications strategies for both short term and long term scenarios enables all class participants to manage those times when schedules change, course adjustments need to be made, and “life happens.”

course syllabus, enables them to manage their activities accordingly. Additionally, providing contact information regarding more long term or “larger” emergencies situations can also serve to reduce student anxiety.

Instructor Benefits

Having a prescribed strategy for managing and communicating unplanned schedule changes can reduce the “panic” reaction on the part of the instructor. Clearly communicating to the students the method you will use (email, text messaging, course postings etc...) to announce course changes provides you and the students a predictable method of handling such events. Having a “back-up” plan for managing larger course interruptions can reduce your

concern should something more significant happen.

The Key to Success

A few simple strategies for applying the principle of establishing a pattern of course activities include:

1. Develop and plan a communications strategy for managing brief and more significant interruptions to the course operation.
2. Communicate to students how course interruption information will be communicated.
3. Clearly define for the students the nature of the interruption, the anticipated duration, any impacts to course operation or activities, and when you expect to resume course participation. It is up to your discretion to define the reason for the interruption.
4. Arrange with a departmental staff assistant, graduate or teaching assistant or colleague a plan for managing for larger/longer course interruptions.

Summary

For the online learner, the instructor may serve as the primary point of contact with their online learning activities. When that service is interrupted, confusion and anxiety may arise. Having thought through communications strategies for both short term and long term scenarios enables all class participants to manage those times when schedules change, course adjustments need to be made, and “life happens.”

Dr. Lawrence C. Ragan is the Director of Instructional Design and Development for Penn State's World Campus. ●

Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #5 Response Requested and Expected

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

The “10 principles” of online instructor performance have thus far focused on proactive strategies that ensure the instructor is visible and active in the online classroom. This article discusses a “reasonable” time frame for instructors in responding to student inquiries.

Principle # 5: Response Requested and Expected

Timely instructor feedback is essential for the online learner in order to manage their learning experience. Instructors are expected to provide feedback to student inquiries within one business day. If the instructor cannot provide a detailed response within one business day, the instructor is asked to respond to the student within one business day to note when a more detailed response will be provided.

Expecting a Response NOW

Much of our academic and personal lives now include some dimension of information technology. It has become the expectation that we all have, and use, email accounts and instant messaging systems for connecting with our children. We are quick to use web searches for information gathering before setting out for a vacation or purchasing a large ticket item. The impact of these communication and information tools is at first subtle but quickly becomes integral to

how we do our work and play. With the speed of our modems and penetration of broadband access, we have come to count on an immediate and ready response to our inquiries and communications. We become annoyed at the web site that takes too long to load or the colleague or family member that takes too long to respond to our email. It’s as though someone slipped a little note under our door marked “urgent reply requested” when we receive an email requiring a response. Each email seems to be marked “urgent!”

Whether we agree or not on the amount of time we expect until we get a response, we have developed individual “norms” for how long it should take before we send a second “gentle reminder” message or, finally in frustration, pick up the phone and attempt a response via the old fashion person-to-person voice method! Don’t you hate it when your inquiry goes unanswered within our expected time frame?

A delay in the response rate for the online learner is complicated by the fact that further progress in their academic work may hinge on the instructor’s reply or feedback to an idea or question. In the case of the true distance online learner, this delay of response is multiplied by the lack of contact with the learning institution. The learner is less able to stop by the instructor’s office or even to check in

with the departmental office to seek resolution to an issue. In most of the research examining student satisfaction with the online learning environment, connectedness to the instructor is frequently cited as the most rewarding and potentially most frustrating aspect of learner satisfaction.

A Reasonable Response Timeframe

The challenge for the online instructor is defining a reasonable timeframe for responding to student inquiries, assignments, or discussion postings. An instructor once stated that they fully intended to be active and responsive to their learners by checking into the course “at least once a week!” Needless to say, this response rate would be unacceptable to most participants when the entire online learning experience may be only 14 or 15 weeks long! In a course with a shorter duration, this rate of response would prove detrimental to student progress.

Left to individual instructor discretion, a “reasonable” response timeframe may vary from 24 to 72 hours. Depending on the nature of the course, content domain, expectations of the audience, course duration, and the support system provided, this range may be considered acceptable. Industry standards suggest a reasonable response timeframe of one business day (24 hours) during the week and 48 hours over a weekend. This window of response enables both the instructor and learner to establish a rhythm of interaction that supports learner progress and is manageable for the instructor. It also implies that the instructor is attending to the course activities at least once per weekday, and at least once over the weekend.

Without clearly defined guidelines and expectations, instructors are left to determine their own standards leading to wider variations between courses. If the online learner is participating in

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several online courses, this can lead to frustration and aggravation as the student accommodates each instructor's rate of response. A programmatic or institutional standard allows a more consistent expectation for both the instructor and learner.

Setting the Expectation Too High

Some instructors view the rate of response as a measure of the quality of their instruction. The quicker they respond, the higher they perceive the quality. Although this is an admirable goal, it can also set up unreasonable expectations on the part of their learners. The old adage of "the shortest time of response becomes the longest expected" can set unreasonable expectations on part of the learner. An often-told story to illustrate this point is of the instructor who, working late one evening, responded immediately to a student's inquiry at 2:00 am. The student, of course, was pretty impressed, thinking, "this teacher's available 24/7." After several hours of interaction, the instructor quit working. The student, continuing to send in assignments, assumed something had happened to the instructor when they stopped responding at 4:00 am. Finally in a panic, the student called the instructor at home to make sure nothing terrible had happened!

Establishing and communicating a plan for responding to course inquiries can alleviate much of the confusion and aggravation for all course participants. This plan of response may include the normal course "hours" for when the learner may expect a response, a method of "emergency contact information," and the intended timeframe in which the student may expect a response. This way, the student is not left wondering

why, after 4 hours, they still did not hear from their instructor. This approach also defines the responsibilities for the instructor and prevents the impression that they must be available 24/7.

Learner Benefits

For the online learner, knowing the defined response timeframe of the instructor enables them to plan and sequence their learning experience. If the timeframe described will not suffice in a given situation the student may wish to seek alternative contact with the instructor. A well articulated response plan or protocol also balances the unreasonable expectations that the instructor is available 24/7 and will respond immediately to every inquiry. The online learner must respect the need for the instructor to separate the course activities from other work and family responsibilities.

Instructor Benefits

By providing a defined acceptable window of response the instructor can plan their course-related activities, and control the expectations that they respond immediately to every inquiry. A one-business day/two-day weekend rule allows the instructor the freedom of managing their course work. It also provides an incentive to check and monitor course level activities on a daily basis. Included in their response plan may be a description for the student of the type of information they can expect a response to, and the nature and timeline of the response. In order to reduce frivolous inquiries, the instructor may indicate, for example, that the student should first consult the course syllabus for the information prior to sending the instructor an inquiry.

The Key to Success

A few simple strategies for applying the principle of establishing a pattern

of course activities include:

1. Clearly understand program or institutional expectations for instructor response rates to student inquiries, lesson assignment feedback or discussion postings.
2. Clearly describe for the learner what they may expect by way of response time. The instructor may also wish to define the course "operating hours" and other special time-related course features. For example, posting a notice that Monday evening between 6:00 and 8:00 pm EST the instructor will be available on IM for course-related consulting.
3. Monitor student inquiries carefully. If similar inquiries are received on an aspect of the course operation or content, it may suggest a refinement in the instructions, adjustment to the content, or additional clarification.

Summary

For the online learner, timely feedback from the instructor to a student inquiry serves as a vital link between learner and learning system. Establishing and communicating a response rate expectation can eliminate the guessing and frustration of not receiving an immediate response. Excessive delays, for example longer than 72 hours, may inhibit student progress in the course and will most definitely lead to student dissatisfaction with their learning system.

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #6 Think Before You Write

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

As our series on the principles of effective online teaching continues, this article introduces the importance of careful and thoughtful communications from the online instructor to the class participants.

Principle # 6: Think Before You Write

Feedback on assignments is most helpful to students when clear and concise language is used to explain the degree to which relevant course outcomes have been met. Even when student questions are vague, instructors are encouraged to stimulate a dialog that will help students understand and communicate their needs.

The Whole Package

The promise of online learning has created tremendous excitement and energy because of the richness of the media, the ability to serve learners anytime and anyplace, and the convenience of learning within the context of our daily lives. With increased broadband connections, the immediacy of “connection” via synchronous and asynchronous technologies creates a feeling of almost instant community. One of the most challenging dimensions however of the online classroom remains the aspect of human interactions. As it turns out, the technology is often not a limitation. The delicate and intricate art and science of human-to-human communi-

cations continues to prove a critical piece of the success of the online teaching and learning experience.

In today’s online classroom, student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions remain an important component of the learning experience. Increasingly studies report that this is a vitally important feature of success for the online learner. These interactions, conducted largely via text characters on a screen, may be delivered through static messages such as instructions embedded in a lesson or directions on completing an assignment, or as dynamic messages delivered via chat windows, emails, or text messaging. Regardless of the format of the messages, they each share a potential common delivery flaw, they are presented without the rich set of verbal or visual cues provided in a face-to-face exchange.

A “Simple” Text Message Sent

It is widely accepted that the spoken word is not the only message sent or received during a face-to-face communications exchange. Subtle or not-so-subtle messages are also communicated via voice intonations, facial expressions or body language. It turns out that what we hear is contextualized in how it is presented creating a complex system of meaning. In the online classroom, dependent largely on the written word, the expression of ideas, opinions, humor, criticisms or praise represents a “simpler” form of

communications stripped of other visual cues. This leaves text messages delivered open for a degree more of interpretation or misinterpretation by the receiver. Although we have an increasingly rich set of media-based communications tools such as voice delivered via podcasts or audio messages or even video, the vast majority of dialogue between sender and receiver is primarily text-based. Add to this text-based communications system the potential global reach of online learning and the cultural aspects of communications quickly becomes a factor for these online exchanges.

Most experienced online instructors can relay a variety of stories illustrating the frustration of a dialogue with a student that went awry due to a misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the intended message. These “communication lessons” temper the instructor’s next response and, through trial and error, the online instructor improves these messages to remove room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Even then, it is always interesting to experience the misuse or confusion of what appears to be a “perfectly clear” message or instructions. When these messages are intended for delivery to the entire class, the value of clear and concise text is magnified!

Taking Advantage of the Format

There are several advantages asynchronous communications provides that can help in addressing the deficits of delivering text-based messages. With forethought and planning, these advantages can turn what appears to be a limitation into a positive dimension of online communications. The most obvious is that, due to the asynchronous nature of the online course, time for crafting and reflecting on a response is more available than the immediacy needed in the face-to-

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face classroom. Another advantage allows instructors to reuse a single, well-crafted response to the more “predictable” questions or challenges that might arise in the course. Frequently a collection of these responses can be amassed and accessed on an assignment-by-assignment basis. Additionally, these messages can be improved over time based on their effectiveness. To avoid seeming “canned,” the instructor can freshen up the response with a personal reference or specific point based on an individual’s post. Various writers from Cicero to Pascal have been credited with the quote “if I’d had more time I would have written a shorter letter.” The online classroom provides the luxury of that time to craft the effective and short, concise message.

Special care is called for when crafting feedback to a student. The subtleties of humor, for example, or the use of colloquialisms can challenge the receiver to interpret the correct meaning of the instructor’s message. Simple, clear and direct (tactful and polite of course) responses will be of more help to the learner than witty sayings or sarcastic comments that may work in a face-to-face exchange but do not translate well to the online environment. The online instructor is also encouraged to engage the learner where possible, in a dialogue expanding and exposing the student’s struggles before providing feedback.

The global nature of the online classroom exacerbates the communications difficulties for students not of the same geographic location. Not only can message points be lost or misinterpreted, but also the style of writing can confuse, offend, or mislead the learner. The instructor who takes pride in the “intellectual rigor” of face-to-face debate in an online course, needs to articulate the

appropriate parameters of that same discussion in the online forum. This can be done through a thorough description of the rules for engagement and perhaps example of acceptable and unacceptable language in the exercise instructions.

The Role of Netiquette

As in any set of interactions, understanding and adhering to the rules of dialogue and interactions is critical for effective communications. This is even truer for online exchanges. Some might suggest that we have not yet, as a society, agreed upon a common set of norms for online communications. Many of the rules applied are contextual to the particulars of the online communications forum. Online etiquette rules may be provided as general guidelines at the start of the course, or in situations where special rules apply clearly defined. It is also the responsibility of the instructor and hold participants accountable to a set of engagement rules.

Although this may seem like “extra work” for the online instructor, institutional policies defining appropriate online communications behavior may already be available. Of course the instructor is also to be held accountable for adhering to and applying standards of behavior in the online classroom. Over time, the example set by the online instructor establishes the acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for the rest of the class participants.

Learner Benefits

Clearly defined communications, whether pre-written or provided spontaneously, serve to improve the learning efficiency by removing doubt, confusion, or questions that detract from the learning task. Learners benefit from a well-crafted assignment feedback that has been developed and refined over time by getting the best response possible. They will spend less time trying to decipher or

interpret the message or instructions and more time engaged in the lesson activity. In addition, language that is clear and concise aids the global learner by removing barriers of understanding local or contextualized language.

Instructor Benefits

For the instructor, the time allotted in many asynchronous learning online experiences provides the ability to craft a well-thought-out response or delve deeper into the student inquiry in order to better understand the problem. Developing a set of prepared responses to common instructional problems improves the instructional efficiency, enables the use of “best” responses, and allows the instructor time to further develop supporting materials that aid student learning.

The Key to Success

A few simple strategies for applying the principle of establishing a pattern of course activities include:

1. View student difficulties with assignments or course activities as an opportunity to refine and improve communications.
2. Establish and communicate the etiquette expectations for the course exchanges. Also establish a protocol for holding students accountable for adhering to the communications expectations.
3. Establish a “frequently asked questions” document that addresses potential areas of student confusion or inquires.
4. Establish a database of responses that may be used as feedback to student assignments. Refine and improve this database based on experience of the responses effectiveness.

Summary

Of all the dimensions of the online

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classroom, interactions between class participants remains a critical and challenging factor of success. Developing and continuously improving the static messages can greatly improve the online experience for both student and instructor.

Establishing and adhering to a set of rules for communications behavior can reduce the occurrence of misunderstanding or confusion. Finally, taking full advantage of the unique features of the online classroom including time to reflect and well-crafted responses, can lead to a more

satisfying teaching and learning experience for all class participants.

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching:

#7 Help Maintain Forward Progress

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

The 10 principles of online instructor performance have thus far focused on proactive strategies that ensure the instructor is visible and active in the online classroom. Returning assignment and exam grades in a timely manner enables the student to stay on track and make positive progress in their studies is the subject of number 7.

Principle #7: Help Maintain Forward Progress

Students in the online classroom rely on the timely return of assignment and exam grades in order to maintain progress in their studies. The instructor is asked to facilitate this process by submitting grades of all digitally formatted assignments and exams to students within two business days of receipt. Proctored exams should be graded and submitted to students and/or appropriate administrative systems (whatever is appropriate) within five business days of the completion.

Monitoring Progress

In the face-to-face classroom,

students are able to monitor their progress in the course through subtle and not-so subtle strategies. The instructor typically establishes a procedure and precedent for how assignments are graded and returned and announces when the grades will be posted to the most recent quiz or exam. If this information is withheld from the students, the constant inquiries and questions may be enough to stimulate completion of the task on the part of the instructor. Additionally, the students have immediate and ready access to the instructor via after-class discussions, office hours, or casual encounters in the departmental office. Each of these techniques serves to inform the savvy student as to their progress in the course and allow them to adjust their course workload appropriately.

The online classroom is at a bit of a disadvantage due to the lack of these subtle or not-so subtle cues for students monitoring their course progress. Although the student can send a communication requesting feedback to the instructor, the message can just as easily be ignored. Casual or

random meetings between instructor and student separated by geographical distance or time zones differences are obviously less likely to happen online. The online student is more dependent upon the instructor to post or communicate graded progress through other more formal techniques.

In many cases, course assignments are inter-related or sequential in nature, for example writing assignments constructed over the duration of the course and culminating in the final writing project. Quizzes and exams, a rich learning opportunity for “learning what and how to learn,” can be effective for providing corrective feedback to students as they progress through the course. In some cases, additional progress in the course requires feedback and completion of the first assignment or test score before subsequent work can proceed. Timely feedback in both these cases enables the student to take corrective measures if necessary in order to successfully complete the course.

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The Key to Forward Movement

The instructor plays a critical role in informing the students of their progress on assignments and quizzes or exams. An expectation of a two-business day turn-around ensures the student receives the information necessary to maintain positive forward progress. Once the student has electronically submitted the assignment for grading, it is essential that the instructor review the submission and respond within a reasonable period of time. In some institutions this time frame may be specified by policy or cultural practices. Whatever the defined timeframe may be, the communication to the students of when they may expect a response enables them to monitor and plan their course activity and if necessary, take corrective action.

Initial Instructional Design Considerations

An important design construct in the creation of any educational experience is the alignment between the course learning objectives and the assessment strategies. Alignment refers to the proper relationship between the nature of the learning objectives and the type of student performance (a.k.a. assignment or evaluation) that adequately measures student the degree of student success. Do the measurement techniques/strategies match-up to what was described as the desired learning goal for the student? Considering that match-up from the beginning can alleviate some of the potential for over-design of the assessment strategies that put undo burden on the instructor and the student!

This particular performance expectation is the most likely to raise concerns from faculty who feel the two-day turn around is unreasonable or unattainable due to a number of variables including the number students in the course, the nature of the content, and the com-

plexity of the assignments. These variables may directly impact the instructor's ability to turn around student grades in a short time frame. If it is understood from the beginning of course design that the assessment and evaluation strategies require significantly more processing time, alternative techniques may be considered. At the very least, the course author can determine the pacing and nature of the evaluation and assessment techniques that may limit the negative impact on the learners.

There will always be situations requiring assessment techniques that cannot be returned in the specified time frame. Where and when these occur, communications to the online learner as to when they can expect a response can serve to minimize the degree a delay may impede student progress.

Learner Benefits

1. Assignment and exam feedback provide enables the student to monitor progress and adjust course activities if necessary.
2. Ready feedback also serves to maintain a communication link between the student and course instructor.

Instructor Benefits

1. Planning for timely feedback of assignment and exam grades serves to establish milestones (a.k.a. deadlines) for course instructors.
2. Considering strategies for providing immediate feedback can provide a mechanism for controlling the use of assessment strategies to those critical to the course and in support of the learning objectives.
3. Providing timely feedback enables students to self-monitor course progress.

Timely feedback is generally considered a "customer service" best practice.

The Key to Success

A few simple strategies for applying the expectation of a two-business day response to assignment or quiz and exams grades.

1. Clearly define assessment strategies for determining student achievement of course and module level objectives at the time of course design.
2. Seek additional input from colleagues, instructional designers and/or students on the alignment of the stated course objectives with the student assignments and quiz/exam assessment strategies.
3. Determine if institutional policy, standards, or cultural practices exist that need to be considered when designing or delivering an online course.
4. Consider communications strategies that explicitly define the expected turn around time for feedback. If the anticipated turn-around time is greater than normal, consider providing students partial feedback in order to maintain forward course momentum.

Summary

Establishing a protocol of providing student feedback/grades on electronically submitted assignments or exams ensures student progress on course activities. A two-business day turn-around or other institutionally defined time frame ensures that students have ready access to course progress data. The alignment of the assignment and exam strategies to the stated course and module objectives can greatly reduce stress or tension of "over designing" measurement techniques.

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #8 Safe and Secure

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

As our series on the principles of effective online teaching continues, we look to the need for the instructor to use institutionally supported communications tools as the primary method of communicating with students in the course.

Principle # 8: Safe and Secure

It is highly recommended that all course-related communication between the instructor and the student occur within institutionally supported and maintained communication systems. Preferably this communications will occur within or be managed by the learning management system.

Not the same old address book!

Before the advent of email and other electronically based communications systems we had surface mail. An “address” typically referred to a physical location, street address or post box where the receiver could be located with some degree of certainty. We relied on surface mail as our primary distribution method for mass communications. Maintaining an up-to-date list of participants’ street addresses and phone numbers was tricky but not overwhelming. Occasionally people did move or change phone numbers but these were the exceptions not the rule.

Managing communications with students in today’s online environment presents a drastically different set of management issues. Not only do we not communicate in the same

“space,” we use multiple tools for different purposes. Students may maintain one address for social networking, another for self-publishing and yet a third for maintaining email contact. The frequency of access depends as well on the nature and purpose of the communication system. The concept of a permanent address no longer applies with access to new communication accounts merely a click away. The communication space of choice today may not likely be so in a year. While these systems do provide tremendous new capabilities in style and function of how we communicate, they also present a unique challenge to the online course instructor trying to maintain a current and accurate contact list for course participants.

More than an inconvenience

In most online learning spaces, instructor-to-student interactions is a critical dimension of the teaching and learning process. The need for instant and predictable access to class participants is a requirement if the instructor is to see the course through to completion. As the student navigates through lesson assignments, discussion postings, and online quizzes or exams, the need for contact with the instructor is integral to success. Not infrequently student-to-instructor communications are required to resolve issues, inquiries or disputes around various aspects of course components. In some cases these may be appropriate for all class participants to

view. A student posting to a discussion space may serve the purpose of asking a question others had on their mind. The instructor is able to address the question to all class participants with a single response. Other issues may be more individual in nature and are not appropriate for general postings. These issues or concerns may be addressing student performance, a course adjustment, or the discussion of a grade dispute. In these cases, using the appropriate communication tool is important to both parties.

In today’s communication-rich Internet, establishing an email account in one of hundreds of free email systems is as simple as filling out an online application. Typically these systems manage the email traffic quite efficiently as well as providing other ancillary services. The primary disadvantage of the use of these email systems is that the correspondence is stored and managed on a computer server external to the institution. Additionally, these external systems can change with some frequency making it difficult to track the student’s most recent account! If student-to-instructor correspondence is managed via these external email systems it may be difficult to recreate all communications thread if necessary.

Conducting institutional business

For the purposes of conducting institutional business, such as the operation of a course, it is advised that online course instructors establish the use of the email function embedded within an institutionally provided and supported learning management system (LMS). Although the institution may support the use of a pop-mail systems, where the email is pushed to the clients computer, the trail of email

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communications is harder to trace. The LMS functions as a portal to the learning content and frequently hosts the discussion spaces, quizzes and exam features as well as communication systems and class roster. When the student-to-instructor communication takes place within this environment it is easier to track and manage all aspects of the communications including number and time of posting, original posting and responses.

Most LMS applications enable the instructor to link email postings from within to an external email tool. By setting up this transfer, the instructor is sure to receive the student email or notification of an email in their general email tool while maintaining a copy of the communication within the LMS. It is recognized that other modes of communication between instructors and students (e.g., fax, phone, surface mail) may also be needed in courses. The instructor is advised to use the system most appropriate for the communication task at hand.

Establish communication protocol early and often

As in many other aspects of conducting the online course, setting clear communications expectations removes doubts and “excuse loopholes” and reduces the potential for a misunderstanding. A student response such as “I did send you an email, it must have gotten lost in etherspace!” carries less weight when the instructor is able to check for the exact time and receipt of the posting. When both parties know that all communications are being recorded and tagged, statements blaming “down systems” or bad routing are less likely to be used as a defense for a late or non-existent response.

An often-stated best practice is to define early in the operation of the course the methods by which the in-

structor will accept student input, feedback, assignments, and communications. This may be done at the same time or in conjunction with Expectation Number 3: Establish Patterns of Course Activities, where the instructor defines their own response behaviors. Using the announcement feature of the LMS or posting a reminder to the discussion space reinforces the desired communications strategies. One colleague describes how she “trains” her students to post questions to the general class list rather than individually to her. She responds to an individual posting by removing any identifying information and posting her reply to the general site. This way all students benefit from the question/answer. Usually, she reports, the students quickly pick up on the value of posting general questions to this site creating a more effective and efficient communications method.

Learner benefits

1. Using the LMS communication system serves the student by consolidating course-related information into one location making it easier to track and monitor course activities.
2. The student has a record of validation for submitted assignments, correspondence as well as email threads and communications.
3. All data is stored on institutionally managed systems ensuring confidentiality and security.

Instructor benefits

1. Using the LMS communication system serves the instructor by consolidating course-related information into one location making it easier to track and monitor student and course activities.
2. The instructor has a record of student submitted assignments, correspondence as well as email

threads and communications. This information is useful in grade or performance disputes and resolution of conflicts.

3. All data is stored on institutionally managed systems ensuring confidentiality and security.

The key to success

A few simple strategies for creating an efficient and effective communications systems within the online course.

1. Clearly define the acceptable communications methods to students for all course-related activities. Describe the appropriate method for posting general course questions as well as personal emails.
2. Define your instructor performance expectations in order to reduce follow-up emails and unrealistic expectations from students.
3. Set an example of acceptable communications methods by responding to general questions in the all-class discussion space quickly.

Summary

Establishing appropriate communications methods for the online course serves students and instructor by ensuring a safe and secure environment for course-related activities. Using the institutionally supported learning management system provides increased degrees of security and confidentiality and keeps “institutional business” within the appropriate confines. Clearly stating communications protocol as well as instructor performance expectations and adhering to these standards will eliminate confusion and reduce ambiguity in course transactions.

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #9 Quality Counts

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

The 10 principles of online instruction have thus far focused on proactive strategies that ensure the instructor is visible and active in the online classroom. Number 9 introduces the need to pay attention to and evaluate the quality of the course materials and operational environment as a regular part of course design, development, and delivery.

Principle # 9: Quality Counts

High-quality course content is essential for a successful learning experience. For this reason, instructors should monitor and address dimensions of the course that may impact course integrity, including inaccurate course content, editing errors, confusing information and instructions, broken links, and other course design issues.

The good and bad news

In the world of “things online,” we have come to embrace the idea that we can all be producers and publishers of information with a few clicks of the mouse. Increasingly accessible media delivery systems such as YouTube and blogs offer tremendous power for information distribution unrivaled in our publishing history. The low barrier-to-entry media production devices such as iPod recorders, digital video tools like FlipVideo, and cell phones enable us to record an event and publish to YouTube, iTunesU, or a public blog almost instantaneously.

Another complementary develop-

ment impacting information and media delivery is the changing nature of the Internet itself. The advent of Web-based environments that enable dynamic content modification is a far cry from the static html-based Internet we all knew and loved only five short years ago. Not only can we create and distribute our thoughts, media, and resources more easily than ever before but we can also access and modify that information on the fly!

As powerful as these two developments are, they introduce a new challenge for both the online instructor and learner. The very power instilled by these emerging technologies and capabilities of instant delivery and updating threatens the quality standards of the course materials in the online classroom. For example, in a more static Web-based environment, a technical editor may review text prior to posting. Likewise, a colleague or department head may review the course content for accuracy and pedagogical soundness. This is done to ensure the course had some level of “quality assurance” prior to being delivered to the online student. The challenge facing today’s instructor and learner is that the speed of delivery may outpace our ability to ensure a level of technical or pedagogical accuracy and quality.

The role of quality assurance

If the goal of the institution is to provide a quality experience, consideration must be given to the strategies

and methods for a reasonable level of quality assurance. Most online programs would support the belief that students who experience less-than-acceptable quality standards within their learning experience will elect not to continue with that program because it reflects poorly on their degree. In the “wide open” world of online education, increasingly transparent learning environments are becoming the norm rather than the exception. Maintaining processes, procedures, or systems that enable the dynamic generation of course-related content while maintaining adherence to institutional quality standards remains a challenge to all online programs.

Certainly where institutional resources are brought to bear on the design, development, and delivery of the online learning program, resources to conduct a quality check may be staffed at a higher level and processes instituted to ensure the course meets institutional standards. The quality check is a bit more difficult for the online course designed, developed, and delivered by the individual faculty member or in small teams. However, with some creative thought, pre-planning and preparation, the quality assurance of the online learning event can be preserved.

Quality assurance domains

One method of addressing course quality and integrity would be to consider strategies for each of the three component parts of the online learning event, content accuracy, instructional design, and overall systems performance. This makes the task of quality assurance more manageable and realistic. It may be that not all of these domains need to be addressed at the same time, but rather phased in over several offerings. Also, if resources to assist in the quality-assurance process

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are limited, a bit of creativity is called for in order to assure that the course has been reviewed by a “second set of eyes.”

Content accuracy, perhaps the most critical and visible dimension of course integrity, needs to be checked prior to the first course delivery. This includes course content prepared well in advance of the first delivery and less subject to regular updates. This information tends to be more static in nature and may include text files, slide presentations, and audio and video material. Requesting that a colleague or graduate student review the materials for accuracy can be a quick way of ensuring that the first interaction the learner has with the course is a quality experience. If errors are detected during course delivery, every attempt should be made to correct the information or, if that is not possible, to draw attention to the error and alert the students to the issue. Another creative strategy to ensure content accuracy and editing is to let the students know that input is welcome on errors they may encounter.

Issues regarding the quality of the instructional design can be a bit more challenging to identify until the course has been offered one or more times. If instructional design services are available, asking for a pedagogical review of the course by an experienced designer or another online educator may help to target potential design flaws. Additionally, using the student input from a mid- and post-course survey can yield valuable information on how to improve the design quality of the online course. Since many online courses face some revision offering to offering, the most recent instructor typically knows what worked and to what degree it worked. Requesting feedback from the instructors of a course regarding the pedagogical effectiveness of the online course

is a great way to gather additional input for improvements. Finally, the quality of the overall systems performance plays an important role in the effectiveness of the learner’s experience. This may include checking the performance of navigation buttons, embedded links, and instructions. If a course learning management system is used, then many of these features may already be accounted for through the features of the system. Requesting a colleague or staff assistant or even a family member to access your course to test the system functionality is a good way to assess the course readiness. Asking the young ones in the house to see if they can “break” the course will quickly reveal system functionality gaps.

Learner benefits

1. An online learning experience that has been thoroughly tested and reviewed for quality across multiple domains will inherently lead to better learner outcomes.
2. Involving the learner in the quality assurance process will provide direct user-evidence of course effectiveness.

Instructor benefits

1. Instituting quality assurance processes is a critical step in the design, development, and delivery of the online experience resulting in increased user satisfaction and attention to the learning outcomes.
2. Quality assurance processes will dramatically reduce the time required to address systems failures, unclear instruction, and potential user frustration.
3. Input from colleagues and users greatly enhances the overall course design and delivery resulting in a more robust and higher quality teaching and learning experience.

The key to success

Following a few simple strategies for

ensuring the quality of the online course can lead to a more efficient and effective learning system and a quality learner experience.

1. Plan and implement methods to address the quality assurance of course content, instructional design, and overall systems performance. Be creative in locating resources to serve in the quality assurance process.
2. Seeking and addressing course improvement input validates the instructors desire to craft the highest quality learning experience possible. Keeping an open mind to this input, whether used or not, sends a message that indeed, quality matters in the online course!

Summary

Establishing strategies for addressing the quality of the online learning experience from inception through to delivery is critical to ensure learner and instructor success. Considering several aspects of the online learning experience, such as content resources, instructional design strategies, and systems performance is one way of breaking the task into manageable chunks. Building relationships with colleagues, either local or from other institutions, is a great way to “shed some light” on your course and gather improvement suggestions. The learners are typically a willing and ready source of user input. Devising methods for gathering user input through mid- and end-of-course surveys, discussion forums, or random questionnaires can inform and affect the overall course success.

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Principles of Effective Online Teaching: #10 (Double) Click a Mile on My Connection

By Lawrence C. Ragan, PhD.

As we wrap-up the 10 principles of online instruction series, let's review the list as it stands to date:

- 1: Show Up and Teach
- 2: Practice Proactive Course Management Strategies
- 3: Establish Patterns of Course Activities
- 4: Plan for the Unplanned
- 5: Response Requested and Expected
- 6: Think Before You Write
- 7: Help Maintain Forward Progress
- 8: Safe and Secure
- 9: Quality Counts

This final statement rounds out the “top 10” by establishing the expectation that the online instructor adequately understands the online learning platform available to the online learner. This expectation has two primary intents. The first is that the instructor is able to functionally operate at the same level as the students taking the course. The second outcome of this expectation is that when the instructor experiences the performance and function of the delivery system from the students’ perspective, appropriate adjustments can be made to the design of the learning system, if required.

Principle #10: (Double) Click a Mile on My Connection

The online instructor needs

immediate and predictable access to the same technology as is required for student participation. Online course delivery requires access to high-speed Internet access (DSL, cable modem, or satellite). Instructors should access the complete description of the technical requirements for their program in order to ensure compliance. The online instructor is also expected to experience each functional dimension of the online course in order to assess systems functionality and performance.

Required Functionality

Most online learning systems require learner access to high-speed bandwidth for optimal systems performance and functionality. It has become increasingly difficult to access and participate in the media- and interactive-rich learning systems typically encountered in today’s online classroom. With the advent of socially constructed social and learning spaces, such as collaborative authoring documents and media rich publication systems, as well as virtual learning spaces such as Second Life and Croquet, a broadband connection, in many cases, is a requirement of participation. Today’s online learner recognizes this requirement as a cost of the advantage of the “anytime/anyplace” educational opportunity.

In order for the instructor to adequately participate in these learning systems, they too must have immediate and ready access to broadband capability. The “timelessness” nature of the online classroom creates an opportunity for anytime/anyplace teaching as well as learning. Classroom activities are no longer confined to a fixed class-meeting time frame. For the asynchronous online activities, the instructor may interact with their students on a continual basis from early in the morning through the late evening hours. Many instructors appreciated and embrace the freedom this allows for time management over the duration of the course offering. Conceptually at least, the total amount of time required to instruct the course would be equal to that of the face-to-face but is distributed over a longer period of time. This dimension of the online classroom creates an expectation that the instructor has a similar technological platform and bandwidth as the students.

The technology requirements posted by the institution as a requirement of participation for the learner can serve as a guide for the online instructor as well. Typically these requirements state the technology platform and connection rate for optimal systems performance. If the instructor determines that their operating platform is significantly different than what is required of the learner, alternative arrangements may be necessary. For example, if the instructor does not have access to broadband connection, identifying other access locations such as local libraries, Internet cafes, or educational facilities may serve as access sites.

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The Student View

It has been said that the best way to learn a concept is to try and teach it! This axiom also applies to understanding the impact of the design and development of the learning system through the eyes of the learner. In a traditional classroom, the margin of error for how the “system” functions is considerably more controlled. The room layout, light switches, desks and chairs and white/chalk boards tend to function in the expected manner when we use them. In the online classroom, the features of the system can behave in one manner for the course “editor” or author and quite another for the student. For example, setting up team spaces for projects, drop boxes or discussion boards can appear to the course editor as a simple task of employing the feature. Until a frustrated student requests help, the instructor may not realize that the permissions were not properly assigned while setting up this feature. Many learning management systems have a “student view” option that causes the system to perform as it would for a student. This feature is invaluable for identifying the systems performance from a student’s perspective.

Increasingly course authors are encouraged to create and embed multimedia elements to enrich the learner experience. The course author may embed an image file, which while small in visual size, may be large in data size causing the page to load at a painfully slow pace. If the instructor reviews all pages prior to course delivery, these types of performance deficiencies will become evident and steps can be taken to improve systems operation. It is also advisable to check links, discussion forums postings, and drop box and quiz functionality. By performing all of the

systems “tests” prior to the learners, small issues can quickly be remedied before causing undo student frustration and an endless string of support calls or emails.

Learner Benefits

1. The instructor is able to participate at the same level or higher in carrying out the responsibilities of providing course instruction.
2. Viewing the online course through the “eyes of the learner” the instructor can monitor systems performance and proactively address outstanding issues.

Instructor Benefits

1. The instructor is optimally positioned to serve the instructional needs of the students.
2. The instructor is better able to address questions of systems functionality and has an appreciation for the impact of performance learner.

The Key to Success

Following a few simple strategies for ensuring systems performance can lead to a more efficient and effective learning system and most importantly, a quality learner experience.

1. Access and monitor institutionally stated technology platform requirements. Seek to match or exceed these requirements in order to ensure instructor performance.
2. If the instructor determines that they are not able to match the stated systems requirements, alternative approaches may be required including identifying another course instructor, providing alternative methods of access and upgrading systems components.
3. Prior to course delivery “pilot

test” the course system. This may include inviting colleagues, students or family members to access and use the various system features.

4. Monitor student feedback for systems performance trends that can be adjusted or modified in order to improve performance.

Summary

As with many aspects of the online classroom, the technological infrastructure plays a critical role in determining student and instructor satisfaction. Ensuring that the online instructor has the same or higher system configuration maintains their ability to meet the instructional needs of the class participants. Devising methods for testing all elements of the course prior to delivery serves the instructor by reducing potential areas of error that generate student frustration and complaints. This strategy also serves to ensure a quality online learning experience by removing potential problem areas before they impact the learner.

Dr. Lawrence C. Ragan is the Director of Instructional Design and Development for Penn State’s World Campus. ●

Reference:

The “10 principles” of online instructors featured in this report were developed by Penn State’s World Campus to specifically define the anticipated teaching and classroom management behaviors of the online instructor. The document attempts to create an expectation of the core behaviors of the successful online instructor. These expectations establish a minimum set of activities for online instructors. It also helps to define parameters around the investment of time on part of the instructor.



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