

IMPORTANT LESSONS LEARNED FROM TEACHING ONLINE

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Summary

Even doubters can become believers when they try developing and teaching online courses. Personal experiences and lessons learned from actually teaching online courses can change one's opinions dramatically. Online courses can be developed while students are enrolled. Students need continual and positive feedback. Class maintenance and good record keeping are a must for a successful online course. Course evaluations are important aids to modifying online courses so that they are effective and both the instructor's and the student's time is used efficiently. It's easy to become overwhelmed when teaching an online course. Time must be allotted for rest and relaxation. There are more lessons to be learned as new online technologies become available. This is the delivery system of the future.

Introduction

If someone had told me three years ago that I would be teaching all my classes online, I would have laughed and shook my head. By Spring semester 1999, I was teaching nine separate courses online and developing a tenth one. A doubter has become a believer. Back in November of 1997, I was asked if I would consider teaching a course on virtual reality and education online. I had no idea how it could be done, but with 22 years of classroom teaching in higher education and a background in instructional design and development, I was ready for the challenge.

Course Development

I decided to develop an online textbook with modules and assignments and use a listserv for communication. I looked at examples of web-based courses on the World Wide Web, then started developing the first course, a graduate course, called 'Building and Using Graphics-based Virtual Environments for Education' (<http://eastnet.educ.ecu.edu/vr/6242/edtc6242hp.html>). Every classroom-delivered course goes through a development and modification process the first time it is taught.

Developing and teaching a new course online adds the unfamiliar delivery system component to the process, increasing the possible problem points for the developer-instructor and the student. At the beginning of the spring 1998 semester, while starting on the virtual reality course, a graduate student asked me if I could put together an online course on using the World Wide Web for research (<http://eastnet.educ.ecu.edu/vr/6242/edtclibs6060hp.html>). I thought that would be interesting, so I commenced work on that course as well. Rather than wait until I had a course ready before students were enrolled, I asked that students be enrolled while I was developing the courses. The students were told that the courses were 'under development'. Our university courses are generally taught from university-supplied outlines so students are guaranteed that course objectives will be covered no matter how the course is delivered. If a course turns out to be of limited interest, it simply won't be offered again. I used this option for several courses as they were being developed. Having students enrolled in a developing course has advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is immediate feedback. If a course wasn't going well, it could be altered 'on the spot'. I modified the online textbooks as the students went through them. I was always at least one unit ahead of the students. I could ask students how useful something was and I got an immediate opinion. To some extent, this is an advantage of any online course. Based on my experience as an instructional developer, I believe, however, that online courses can be much more easily modified than the usual classroom-delivered course. I developed a course-locator page with direct links to information that helped answer many of the questions as well as act as a table of contents page of links to course selections.

Once I had the basic outline and beginning units on the server, I thought students would just naturally know what to do. I was unprepared for the endless questions on almost everything related to a course and its content, as well as on how to use email, listservs, and the Web. Sending the answers to the listserv did not always work, especially if there were email problems. The same questions came up repeatedly. I made a note of each question and developed two formats for answering them: the course description webpage linked to the course homepage and a 'Welcome and Course Location' message sent to course members through the listserv at the beginning of a course. Even so, there were still problems. These two formats became longer and longer in length as I tried to anticipate and answer every possible question.

I was feeling very protective of my courses at that point when I happened to do some web searches using the AltaVista search engine and found out how easy it was to go right to the course units themselves. This made me realize that anyone in the world could download the courses. I had copyright notices on each unit but I didn't feel that was very adequate protection. Then, quite by accident, I discovered that someone had indeed downloaded one of my courses, substituted their name for mine, removed my copyright notice, and was teaching it as their own

course in eastern North Carolina. That was a shocking and ego-wrenching experience for me. I insisted on and received password protection for all my courses.

Record Keeping and Class Maintenance

By Spring 1999 semester I was teaching nine courses completely online, eight of them with online textbooks. Each of the eight textbooks included about 30 assignments plus four or five projects and a final exam. Some also had midterm exams. Each assignment was sent to the listserv. Projects were sent to me but could also be sent to the listserv. Email was quite heavy with over 130 students in the courses. The system I developed in the beginning turned out to work well. For each course I devised a spreadsheet matrix with rows for numbered assignments, projects, exams, and dates, and columns for student names. When I receive an assignment or project the date is noted in the proper space. The date the midterm exam or final exam location is sent to a student is also noted.

Even though the student is given the date that the exam is due back, some students do not return their exams on time. I found that I needed a date record so that I could back up any points taken off for failure to return the exam on time. I keep pertinent email correspondence as long as it is needed. I keep track of email addresses, passwords, and so forth on the printed class rolls I receive. Without good record keeping, I could never handle an online course effectively.

At first I thought that I would need to email individual students only occasionally since they would see their assignments on the listserv and would only need infrequent encouragement or correction from me. I was wrong. If I didn't react to their assignments, students worried that I hadn't seen them or recorded them, or that the assignments were incorrect. I found that I had to send a short acknowledgment, usually of a positive nature, in response to each assignment posted.

This is very time-consuming but seems to be one of the features of my online courses most appreciated by the students. I try to acknowledge assignments and projects within two or three days after they are sent. I do not acknowledge individual postings to threads of the online conference facilities in the courses that use them. I send summary or commentary notes to the listserv instead.

Course Evaluation

I developed an evaluation form to be completed by a course participant at the end of the course. The questions address areas of concern to me, such as what did you like most about this course, what did you like least, how can this course be improved. No matter where I have placed the evaluation link - embedded in the final exam webpage, at the end of the course, on the course locator page - I still have less than 100% return on the evaluations. The ones I do receive are very much to the point and have helped enormously. I consider every suggestion and comment. Many of the refinements of the courses are the direct result of the evaluations I have received. In fact, students often give very detailed suggestions on how a perceived shortcoming of a course can be corrected.

Challenges

It is easy to be overwhelmed when teaching online courses. The labor involved in developing and continuously modifying a course, as well as actually conducting a course, cannot be anticipated, and is perhaps not really appreciated by those who have never done it. Almost without a break, I just kept working on the courses and the students just kept sending in their work.

Online course materials are available to students night and day, on weekends, and on holidays and other scheduled academic breaks. In a regular classroom situation, instructors take breaks prescribed by the parent institution. The buildings are closed. The classrooms are locked. In the online world there are no enforced weekends, holidays, or locked classrooms. I found myself spending 12 hours a day in front of my computers in my office or at home, working on courses or teaching courses. Weekends and holidays were no exception. Finally I decided to impose some limits on myself. I had to force myself to take time off.

Set limits on the amount of time devoted to online classes. Set aside one or more days a week when you do other things besides answer class email and work on the course. Put a notice in your course information message that you will not usually be available then. Otherwise the course may become overwhelming and a burden instead of a joy. With each new advance in online technology, there will be new lessons to be learned. Online teaching will evolve into a sophisticated global knowledge-delivering network. One day we will be teaching individuals living and working in space colonies throughout the solar system. Lessons learned today are preparing us to be better online teachers tomorrow.