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ABSTRACT
        This paper provides tips and suggested activities for an
online course in psychology. It describes the steps needed to start planning
an Internet course and various features that are important to the success of
the course (i.e., technical support, learning participation in discussions).
Possible problems with computer-mediated instruction are also addressed. It
is important to remember that teaching an online course is not an escape from
teaching; it is teaching in a different format. (Contains 12 references.)
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Running head: TIPS AND SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Tips and Suggested Activities for a Web Based Introduction to Psychology Class

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Abstract

This paper provides tips and suggested activities for an on-line course. It describes the steps

needed to start planning an Internet course and various features that are important to the success

of the course (i.e., tech support, learner participation in discussions). Possible problems with

computer-mediated instruction are also addressed.

Tips and Suggested Activities for a Web Based Introduction to Psychology Class

Are you designing a web-based course? If you are like many people, you are wondering, "Where do I start" and "How can I design an Internet course that is as effective that those I teach in person?" First, do you have the support of your school? Many colleges and universities are encouraging their faculty to develop on-line courses. According to one U.S. Dept. of Education study (1997), 76% of all higher education institutions with enrollments greater than 10,000 and 61% of midsize colleges and institutions are already offering distance education courses. Not all distance education programs are computer-mediated, but there is a strong trend to use the Internet as a way to meet the needs of students (as well as save money building new classrooms). But it's important to remember that, just as you need the appropriate physical infrastructure to support the traditional campus; you need to have the appropriate digital infrastructure before you can begin to design an effective course in order to succeed. This includes (but may not be limited to) funds, tools, software, servers, and tech support (Boettcher & Kumar, 2000).

After you have the appropriate support, you should determine your learning content, objectives, and goals. Remember that you are not designing a new course; you are preparing to teach it in a new environment. The web is merely a tool (Morrison, 2000). To get a feel of what the e-teaching environment is like, talk to others who have moved their courses on-line, attend conferences or seminars, or even participate in an on-line course as a student. Many universities are offering "minicourses" to their faculty to familiarize them with web-based course life (Rosenblum, 2000). If you can, start with a web-enhanced course before moving into a web-based course. Web-enhanced means that only part of the course is on the web, such as assignments or discussion groups. Place course materials such as your syllabus, readings, lecture notes, FAQs, and other class material on your web site and then build from there (Davis, 1993).

Look at other web-enhanced and -based courses to see how they are run. Does the instructor run the course in a PSI/correspondence format (read the book and take the test)? Are there different activities that the student must complete for each chapter? Is being part of a discussion group required? How are students graded? While many courses are password protected, an Internet search will reveal the many that are not. You should also talk to your textbook representative. A number of book companies are setting up basic web-based courses that you could use as a starting point for developing your own class. For example, WebCT (2000) has a number of textbook specific courses (called e-Packs) that are available for instructors. Book companies also have developed web sites for each text that contain objectives, on-line study guides, useful web sites, exercises, and quizzes (for example, see Prentice-Hall's site at http://www.prenhall.com/pubguide/). Don't forget teaching activity handbooks and instructor's guides as sources for ideas.

When you find an activity that you like, test it out on the class and get their feedback as to how to improve the assignment. Was the assignment interesting and valuable? What obstacles did they have to cope with? Look at their scores on related test questions – did this activity increase the likelihood that they understood the material? Use a variety of assignments and have the student link that material to the book. If you are having students review web sites that you have selected, if possible, find multiple links to sites that could answer the questions since web pages can be unstable. If you are using a courseware package, get to know all of its features. Knowing what it will support will make your transition to the web easier. However, don't let technology dictate your course. If the software you are using is unable to meet all of your needs, go low tech. Remember that you and your students can use the phone, faxes, or even snail-mail to accomplish tasks.

You need to have a lot of structure. Define acceptable levels of performance. Set clear objects for each chapter. When giving an assignment, ask questions that specifically target what you are interested in having them learn. If you use vague questions, you will get answers that range from two words to two pages. Model appropriate comments, participation, and behavior in discussion groups. Tell the student what you believe to be an acceptable amount of discussion. Would one or two posts a week be fine or do you expect more discussion? What makes an "acceptable" post? In addition, since there is not a structured class time, stress the importance of keeping on top of the assignments. According to the California Distance Learning Project (1997), the successful distance education student tends to be voluntarily seeking further education, is motivated, has higher expectations, is self-discipline, has a more serious attitude, tends to be older than the average student, and is an active learner (See also World Campus 101, 1999). Many students are not aware of the high amount of self-control, self-monitoring, and learner responsibility that they need in order to succeed in a class like this. This is particularly problematic with freshmen who may not have yet developed strong time management and study skills. To alleviate this problem, you might also require students to do exercises from the study guide or include links to sites that contain study tips (such as how to take notes from the book). Give due dates to help students stay on top of assignments. You need to also stress the importance of computer accessibility and that not being able to access a computer is no excuse for inability to complete assignments. Check to make sure that your students are familiar and comfortable with working with computers and they have the basic skills needed for an on-line course. Ask your students if they can perform activities such as downloading material, sending and receiving e-mail, and working with a browser. You should also warn your students that some

web access programs (such as AOL) may not be fully compatible with some web technology

(such as WebCT), so to be prepared to use a different browser.

Interaction is critical (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Since the students are probably never going

to see each other, they may feel isolated. Discussion groups make them feel more a part of the

class. You will probably see an increase in the amount of input you receive from students. In a

classroom, social pressures often keep students from speaking up, but the lack of face-to-face

interaction in an Internet course can allow normally shy students to present their views.

However, you do need to make sure that misunderstandings don't occur. Since there is the lack

of visual and verbal cues, encourage your students to use emoticons and stress the importance of

netiquette (examples of netiquette rules can be found at

http://www.horizon.unc.edu/projects/resources/netiquette). In order to encourage class

discussion, ask questions or set rules for how many times students should be posting (such as,

post to the question and then respond to two of your classmates' postings). Make sure to

highlight exceptional messages. You might also consider synthesizing the responses at the end of

the discussion in order to highlight key issues or you could get different groups in the class to do

this for a grade. Give learners varying roles during discussion, such as facilitator or evaluator

(Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000). You can also utilize a chat room for on-

line office hours or bring in an expert for a question and answer period. Just make sure you save

the transcripts for those students who were unable to attend the chat session.

One of the biggest concerns for many faculty about on-line courses is the issue of

cheating. You can give quizzes and tests on-line and some of the new web-course building tools

will even time the length of the test presentation, so if you want the student to have one hour to

take the test, then that is the length of time the test will be made available to them. Some faculty

will even change the background color of the test to discourage students from printing out a copy of the exam. Some instructors ask that the students take one or more proctored examinations. I have given take-home exams. Remember that there are different ways to evaluate student learning besides just examinations. You can grade their assignments and discussion group comments. You might also include an end-of-the-term assignment that has the student reflect over the entire semester, such as a comprehensive final, a portfolio of clippings of items that relate to psychology, or giving examples of ideas and theories they have learned this term that they can apply to their life. Other instructors have used videotapes, CD-ROMs, and computer-based simulations. Just make sure that these are relatively available for your students or set up options for students who, for whatever reason, are unable to use them.

A few final notes about teaching an on-line course. It is not an escape from teaching; it is teaching in a different format. An on-line course is not less work. The amount of time needed to prep is probably equal to the amount of time you would need to prep a new class. It is not a cost cutting measure. You will find that these classes often need to be smaller than a traditional class and there tends to be a higher withdrawal rate. The most common reason for withdrawal from the course is the high workload. Since the student is put in the role of an active learner, the student must participate in the learning environment more. While computer mediated courses are great for students whose schedules are not flexible enough to allow them to attend on-site classes, it is not for the student who doesn't have the time to go to college.

Teaching on-line can be a challenging but rewarding experience. It just requires appropriate forethought into how you will be organizing and implementing the course and assessing the students. You will occasionally feel overwhelmed and there will be days that you

struggle with the technology, but you need to remember that you will have fun (Hanna, et al.,

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