

Best Practices With Online Courses

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The popularity and rise in online courses have somewhat taken the author by surprise. Starting as a college instructor three years ago, the author has witnessed the tremendous interest in online programming. In fact, it is the fastest growing enrollment at the kindergarten—12th grade and higher educational levels. At the university level, administrators are directing the design of online courses, faculty members are being drawn to develop these types of courses and students are strongly requesting these courses. However, even though there is this strong movement for online programming, it is relatively new and unfamiliar to most university administrators and faculty members. There is a pressing need to acquire hands-on, practical knowledge, skills and materials for these online courses. Consequently, university faculty is scrambling to find more information, materials and resources to fulfill these online programming interests and needs. This paper will present an overview, teaching/learning techniques, exemplary assignments and activities, and assessment tools for online courses. A literature review, along with best practices associated with online education, is incorporated in the following sections of this paper.

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What Just Happened While We Were in Class?: Growth of Online Courses

Online programs and courses in the schools are one of the most dominant forces to come on the educational scene in the last two decades. From the start of online programming just over a decade ago, the number of students participating in these courses has dramatically increased with the number of institutions offering online courses having tripled. In the academic year 1999-2000 alone, the number of students who took at least one online course increased by 57% (Community College Review, 2008). More recently, 66% of the 4,160 two-year title degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the nation offered college-level distance education courses. The overall percentages include 97% of public two-year institutions, 18% of private for-profit two-year institutions, 89% of public two-year institutions, 53% of private not-for-profit institutions and 70% of private for-profit four-year institutions (Community College Review, 2008)

A good example of the online programming growth is illustrated at Penn State University. Dr. Alan Turgeon, professor at Penn State University, offered the first online course in 1998 and the Penn State World Campus has grown from 15 students in Dr. Turgeon's original class to more than 5,000 students from all 50 states and more than 40 countries (Chute, 2007).

The most rapid increase in online course has come in the last few years. Between 2003 and 2007, the number of students taking online courses doubled to 3.9 million, outpacing the growth in traditional college settings by a 12% margin (Retrieved from <http://www.onlinecourses.org>). The Sloan consortium has monitored the expansion of online programming more than any other organization. According to the Sloan Consortium,

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approximately 20% of college students took an online course during the fall semester of 2006, which equates to 3.5 million students. In addition, the Sloan consortium research found that the enrollment in online courses is growing at a rate significantly faster than the standard-growth rates (Retrieved from <http://www.communitycollegereview.com>).

A number of governmental institutions have gotten involved in the push for online courses. Both at the national and the state levels, there has been a concentrated effort to encourage online programming. The U.S. Department of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education Report in 2006 stated the following in the summary section.

We recommend that America's colleges and universities embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement by developing new pedagogies, curricula and technologies to improve learning... Do more to support and harness the power of distance learning to meet educational needs of students, adult learners and workforce development (ecampusoregonstate, 2007).

Many governmental actions have taken place at the state level, such as (former) Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and David Olson, Chair of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board of Trustees, announcing a plan to make 25% of their State's University System's courses available online by 2015 (Retrieved from <http://www.blog.scholarship.com/news/minnesota-colleges-online>).

In addition to the governmental agencies strongly encouraging the online programming, the schools' top officials are, also, providing the impetus to move online courses. For example, University of Maine President Allyson Hughes Handley told the University of Maine's Board of Trustees, "offering more classes online and making online options more attractive are some ways to attract a wider range of students".

Students at the University of Maine's seven campuses took 10% of their credit hours online during 2008-2009 academic years, according to the University System in Bangor, Maine. This is up from 7% during the 2007-2008 academic year and 6% in 2006-2007. Furthermore, one of the most telling moves is that President Handley recommended that all University of Maine System professors be trained to teach online (Stone, 2009).

Valdosta State University announced a record increase in online enrollment. During the fall semester of 2008, more than 350 new students chose online graduate programs. This provided a 50% increase in online graduate program enrollment, now at about the new collaborative Masters of Education programs and 44 are in the Valdosta State University's new Doctor of Public Administration program, which was launched last fall (Retrieved from <http://www.valdosta.edu/news/releases/enrollment>).

Oregon State University's Extended Campus online undergraduate degree programs have seen an impressive enrollment boost, boosting an 18% increase in the number of degree seeking undergraduates that complete their coursework online and off campus (Retrieved from <http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/on-the-news>).

The final example of this growth is found at the University of Houston. In 2007, 1,410 University of Houston-Victoria students exclusively took online courses. The number of students taking these courses grew 17% from the spring of 2008 to the fall semester of 2008 (Victoria Advocate.com, 2008).

All this growth in online courses points to the changing future of universities and colleges, and every indicator in the higher education's marketplace shows that this trend will continue. More and more courses and programming are being developed for the virtual classroom to provide a flexible learning solution for today's student. This growth is happening so quickly that school officials are being totally surprised by this change in student enrollments, leaving the face-to-face classroom and entering the virtual classroom. Students and faculty

alike are asking the question, “What just happened, while we were in (the face-to-face) class?”.

This Is Not Your Parents’ College Course!: Teaching and Learning Tools in Online Courses

Faculty members who teach online cannot apply the same instructional techniques, give identical activities and assignments and assess students’ work in the same ways as face-to-face classes. An online course must contain new and specially developed instructional techniques and resources in order to fully engage and enrich the student learner.

There are several instructional techniques which serve online learners very well. The techniques are: (1) discussion boards; (2) blogging; (3) simulation/case studies; (4) wiki; (5) video tapes; and (6) e-portfolio. Each of these online methods offers different teaching features and produces distinct learner outcomes.

Discussion Boards

Discussion boards are a great way for students to write an assignment and then post it online for other students in that class to read and react to it. Discussion boards should not be confused with live chat. Live chat is synchronous communication, while discussion board is asynchronous communication. That means the students do not have to be online at the same time to participate in discussion boards, as in the case of live chat or instant messaging.

Once a student has written their assignment, the student then posts this assignment online. Instructors can ask that all students post their assignments sometime during the same day. When all the assignments are posted, students then read each assignment and take notes. The purpose(s) in reading each assignment may vary: The first purpose may be to critique and analyze the content; The second purpose may be to summarize the various papers and draw conclusions; and The third purpose may be to compare and contrast the different papers written. Subsequent to reading/note-taking, students who are members of the same discussion board will respond with their own comments over a period of time. The students’ comments will be directed to the postings.

This tool is a great technique to encourage students to be analytical in their thinking. By reading others’ thoughts and opinions, students can compare and contrast ideas, develop pros and cons concerning an issue, or take a position and support it logically. Also, students can learn from reading the responses and reactions of others who have reviewed their assignments and papers.

Blogging

Blogging can many times be simply an online personal diary. However, an instructor can take an approach with a more pedagogical slant in which students must reflect and then coherently and clearly express themselves regarding a specified subject area or issue. The instructor can provide the topical area and related content. The students, in turn, will provide “blogging” commentary on that particular topic. The student blogging on this subject will include text, images and links (to other blogs and Web pages). The ability to leave comments in an interactive online format is one of the important parts of blogging.

Simulation/Case Studies

The student generally likes the simulation activities when working online. Over the years, instructors have incorporated case studies into their courses, but what seems to engage students is the use of a simulation activity. A simulation is an enhanced and extended case study. It is reenactment of various events and actions in “real life” situations, and a scenario played out in a simulated environment and the learner is asked to make choices and decisions on how to act in the simulation. Thus, simulations containing video/audio presentations of “real life” events and actions can be great learning experiences online. A simulation can produce a variety of teaching/learning purposes: training, analysis, problem-solving and prediction.

Wiki

This tool allows student users to freely create and edit Web page content via a Web browser. Through a wiki, the entire class of students can become totally involved in the creation and editing of Website. This “open editing” encourages collaborative learning and democratic use of the Web and promotes content composition by non-technical users.

A single page in the wiki Website is referred to as a “wiki page”, while the entire collection of pages, which are usually well interconnected by hyperlinks is “the wiki”. A wiki invites a student or students in the class to create the initial pages within the wiki Website, and then other students to edit existing pages, and in addition, create new pages. It can become an ongoing and collaborative group process that constantly changes the Website landscape.

To illustrate how a wiki could be developed provides the students with a problem or issue. For example, the issue could be the “poor morale among the teachers” in a building. Through the use of group processing exercises (the fishbone diagram, nominal group technique, affinity diagram, pyramidal process and smart goals), a group of students could breakdown the problem’s causes with the fishbone diagram, then brainstorm possible solutions through the nominal group technique, decide on the final solutions via the pyramidal process and outline this final solution to improve teacher morale on a smart goals chart. Each one of these group processing stages could be handled by different groups of students in the class and plotted on wiki Web pages.

Video Tapes

This commonly used instructional tool is easily adapted to online activities. Video tapes can be valuable teaching/learning tools to provide information and knowledge, demonstrate a skill, and/or reinforce previously taught materials. A considerable number of students are primarily visual learners, so the incorporation of video tapes to aid in learning is advantageous. Video tapes are one major way of passing along information and resources to students, other than the more traditional approaches, such as textbook chapters and journal articles.

E-portfolio

An e-portfolio is a collection of electronic evidence assembled by the student user. Specifically, it is a learning record that provides evidence of work and achievement. E-portfolios, like traditional portfolios, can facilitate students’ reflection on their learning, leading to more awareness of learning strategies and needs. When these portfolios are developed online, they become dynamic and living documents displaying learning happening over a period of time. A developmental e-portfolio is a record of learning that has occurred over a period of time, and generally is directly related to learner outcomes and/or rubrics. There is also a reflective side to these e-portfolios that shows the student’s personal reflection on the course content and what it means for the student’s learning development.

Show Me the Assignments!: Exemplary Assignments to Use With Online Courses

The assignments given in online programming are the centerpiece of these types of courses. Course assignments should be specially developed for online education.

The online assignment should require the students to conduct a considerable amount of research, make contact with professional educators and think in more analytical ways which may be quite different from the traditional face-to-face classes. By conducting the research for the assignments through the Internet and other publication sources, the student will be able to show these research efforts in the actual assignment papers. Some of the recent criticisms of online classes have been the lack of interpersonal contacts for students in comparison to face-to-face classes. Thus, another teaching strategy would be to incorporate these interpersonal

contacts by requiring in online assignments that the student make contact with educators and other individuals to help answer and complete the assignments. All online assignments should contain this requirement to meet and conduct discussions with individuals in order to complete the assignment. Finally, students should be required to take an analytical approach towards these online assignments. Analytical thinking and reasoning can be part of these assignments by a student expressing personal comments and reactions, comparing contrasting and making recommendations in answering the assignment.

In summary, online assignments should be embedded with these key components: (1) research supporting the answer and narrative in the assignment; (2) discussions with educators, and/or other individuals to retrieve the information in developing the answers for the assignments; and (3) analytical thinking built into each assignment's response.

An online assignment and a troubled youth case study are included in the appendix.

What Are We Looking for?: Assessment Rationale and Tools

With online teaching, the learning outcomes achieved on the part of the students are the major foci. From the beginning of the course, whether face-to-face or online, the students should know what is expected of them to be successful with the course's assignments and activities. It is especially important in online courses for these expectations to be outlined and spelled out, because of limited and direct contact between the instructor and students to make this point.

Table 1

Rubric to Evaluate Assignments

Major standards in assignment	Unacceptable (1 point)	Minimal (2 points)	Excellent (3 points)
Narrative that answers the question(s)/assignment	None or little narrative in the answer(s) does not answer question(s) for the assignment	Some narrative in the answer(s) falls short in answering the questions and/or assignment	Extensive amount of narrative in answer(s) responds to all questions and/or assignment's directions
Analytical thinking and comments Take a position and support it with reasoning Compare and contrast pro's and con's Personal reflection Sound logic Insightful comments	None or little analytical thinking and comments in the answer(s)	Some analytical thinking and comments in answer(s)	A good amount of analytical thinking and comments in the answer(s)
Evidence of research and references included Books Journal articles Internet articles/Websites Interviews with people Video/audio productions	No references included in the assignment	One or two references included in the assignment	Three plus references included in the assignment
Total points			

As stated earlier, the online assignments are the centerpiece of the teaching and learning process. The assignments are evaluated according to the NAR (narrative/analysis/research) rubric. The NAR rubric was developed to measure three essential areas on an assignment (see Table 1). Those areas are: (1) a narrative that responds completely to the question(s) and/or assignment's directions; (2) analytical thinking and comments

embedded in the narrative; and (3) evidence of research and references included in the narrative.

Each one of the assignments built into online course's format that has the NAR rubric aligned next to the assignment's instructions. In this way, it reminds students of the expectations and outcomes of that assignment.

Online courses can offer a much greater opportunity than face-to-face classes for students to write in a reflective manner, analyze information and materials and conduct research. This rubric maintains the student's focus for learning on these three areas.

Where Do We Go From Here?: Implications for the Future

Online programming and courses are gaining steam at a rapidly developing pace in universities throughout the world, and this movement will continue to expand at an even greater rate. As university administrators and faculty members, we need to be prepared for this "snowballing" movement. Professional development for faculty to design and teach these online courses must be accelerated on the campuses to keep up with this demand. These professional development programs must provide specially designed instructional techniques, activities, assignments and assessment tools to teach in these online courses. University administrators must recognize this technology reality and take actions to put their universities in a position to capture the current and future generations of adult learners; if not, these schools may not survive in future years.

If universities are not prepared to handle the demand for online programming, students will look elsewhere... even going globally to find a higher institution that offers online courses to fit their interests and academic goals. The university landscape is changing before our eyes because of the students' interest in online learning, and as university staff, we need to be prepared to adapt with this current and next generation of online learners in the 21st century.

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Appendix: A Troubled Youth Case Study: An Example of an On-Line Assignment

A 13-year-old student presents himself at your middle school for enrollment accompanied by his single parent mother. Joe is moving to your district from an adjoining, inner city district. Joe's mother brings along a copy of his birth certificate and his immunization record. She provides you with Joe's most recent grade card. His grades are terrible!

Once you have collected the demographic information and gained all the signatures for the exchange of records, you make an appointment for Joe and his mother to return the next day, so that you can collect the academic information from his former school. The former school sends you a fax so that you can get started with registration, and will follow up with the hard copy of official records in a day or two.

The counselor from the school informs you that Joe has some difficulty with Juvenile authorities and suggests that you contact the Probation Office about Joe. The counselor believes that there is an “open case” involving Joe, but does not have details. You decide to talk with the assistant principal to gain more details. The assistant principal informs you that Joe has not had a major problem at school, but is part of the “black trenchcoat” group. The assistant principal does not have additional information about the court case, and suggests a name for you to contact at the Probation Office. You make that call and leave a voice mail.

The next morning, Joe and his mother return. You interview Joe and mom and bring up the issue of the court. Mom informs you that Joe was involved in some vandalism outside of school with some of his “friends”. Mom tells you that she moved to your district in hopes of getting Joe away from these “friends”. She also drops the information to you that Joe has been spending a lot of time on-line and seems to have a fascination with weapons. She assures you that there are no weapons in their home, and she further tells you that Joe has no access to weapons anywhere that she knows. However, she expresses concern that Joe has become sullen, secretive and defensive. He is an only child and she has never been married. There has never been a consistent “father figure” in the home. The court mandated Joe counseling a year ago when he first got into trouble with vandalism. Joe and his mother went a “couple of times” then stopped. However, Mom assures you that Joe is no danger to anyone, and she is sure the black clothing, black fingernails, and body piercing are just a phase. Mom feels certain that once he “makes new friends” at your school that a lot of this outward appearance will change.

Mom is presently unemployed and will be living with her mother in your district. Mom wants Joe to start today, but Joe seems not to care one way or the other. You have not heard back from the Probation Office.

Questions:

What decision do you make regarding Joe attending school today?

What instructional, behavioral and other provisions will you make long term?

What do you tell your staff?

What resources and people might you involve outside of school?

What legal issues are involved here?

Before answering these questions, do some research by sitting down with a special education educator, counselor and a principal to get their insights and input on what to do in this case study? Once you have completed this discussion, then: (1) respond to the questions at the end of the case study with well-developed answers; (2) make sure you do your literature research in writing up the narrative and analytical points; (3) list the references incorporated in the assignment; and (4) identify the key learning points for you in this particular assignment.