
DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER

20

**Confessions
of an
Early Internet
Educator**



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Confessions of an Early Internet Educator

by

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Published by the Distance Education and Training Council,
Washington, D.C.

February 2004

DETC OCCASIONAL PAPERS (formerly *NHSC Occasional Papers*) are essays intended to stimulate and encourage candid exchanges of ideas between distance study professionals. For a complete set of *Occasional Papers*, write or call the DETC



Introduction

Six years ago, Concord Law School (a division of Kaplan, Inc.) launched the nation's first totally online law school. The genesis of Concord was a business plan I had written and submitted in the fall of 1997. Perhaps the ultimate in "creating a position for yourself," I became the founding Dean of Concord because I had a vision of what an online law school should be in an established educational organization that had never previously developed degree granting programs. The last six years have been both humbling and exhilarating, much of which would make a great case study in learning as much from your students as they have learned from you. In this essay, I will attempt to reflect upon the lessons we have learned in a synopsis of what "works." Ultimately, the growth of online learning during the past few years indicates that much of what we either created or stumbled upon can be replicated in other environments.

Recently published surveys conducted by the Sloan Consortium show widespread support among academic leaders for the notion that learning outcomes from online higher education degree programs are equal to or exceed those of residential programs, and that those learning outcomes are expected to continue to improve relative to their fixed facility counterparts. Anecdotally, Internet educators already believed this to be the case, even though the Internet is a relative newcomer to the world of higher education. The surveys, however, demonstrate that the incrementally increasing knowledge in the use and deployment of distance education technologies have made a difference in the student experience. Despite the fact that research in this area is ongoing, the major contributors to this improvement in student outcomes have already been largely

identified and provide guidance to those who choose to deliver Internet education. Those major contributors include the 1) shift from institutions of instruction to institutions of learning, 2) building of the online community, 3) training of faculty teaching online, and 4) emphasis on orienting new students.

Paradigm Shift from Institutions for Instruction to Institutions for Learning

Collaboration in Creating the Learning Environment

“A paradigm shift is taking hold in American higher education. In its briefest form, the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to provide instruction. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything....In the Instruction Paradigm, the mission of the college is to provide instruction, to teach. The method and the product are one and the same. The means is the end. In the Learning Paradigm, the mission of the college is to produce learning. The method and the product are separate. The end governs the means” (Barr and Tagg, 1995, p.12,14).

Internet education has become increasingly emblematic of this shift, and its effectiveness in achieving learning outcomes reflects its success in shifting to the Learning Paradigm. Administrators and faculty from institutions that favor the Instruction Paradigm talk in terms familiar to us from decades past. They talk about delivering instruction, offering programs, the quality of the entering students, or view faculty as primarily lecturers. In the Learning Paradigm, the language of discourse is quite different. The parallel terms used by

those who have converted to the Learning Paradigm are providing learning, creating powerful learning environments, the quality of the exiting students, and viewing faculty as primarily designers of learning methods and environment.

Creating a powerful learning environment at Concord was the “elephant that led the parade.” We knew the video streaming technologies, even before broadband, could allow superior law lecturers to be beamed everywhere in the world. But imagining these lecturers “nurturing” our students in Internet classrooms, or being responsive in real-time to our students, seemed antithetical to our own law school classroom experience. Picture yourself as I picture myself, a greedy educator, wanting it all for my students. That “greed” led to a team collaboration concept for the curriculum, with expert lecturers being combined with expert curriculum developers and classroom teachers in the creation of a truly powerful learning environment necessary for the Learning Paradigm to exist.

Our parent company, Kaplan, Inc., has evolved this concept even further for their now burgeoning undergraduate and graduate programs. Faculty issues, curriculum and new program development are each handled collegially by different Deans. This unbundling of faculty roles allows faculty members to rotate to the role that is their greatest strength, and systematizes the teamwork that is necessary for creating a logically sequenced course and program. Naturally, what makes this worth writing about is that the combination (as measured by learning outcomes) ends up being greater than the individual totals of its constituent parts.

Measuring the Effectiveness of the Learning Environment

Effective Internet educators have embraced the Learning Paradigm in part because of its ability to provide corroboration for their missions; the ends justify the means. Internet programs find it difficult to compete on traditional input measures such as the number of synchronous classroom hours offered weekly, or even the quantity of hardbound volumes in the library. They have, however, been very successful in corroborating the value of the education students receive by using Institutional Assessment programs or outcome measurements. Outcomes measurement shifts the discussion to measuring student learning by their performance on licensing examinations rather than teasing out how many hours they spend in a classroom seat, or measuring student capability by assessing a portfolio that may include writing and research projects rather than counting the number of hardbound books available in the library. An ongoing program that measures the intellectual and skill development of students ensures institutional resources are spent effectively in that endeavor. On the theory that “what gets measured gets done,” online institutions have created a myriad of measurements that allow them to monitor and evaluate their programs at all levels.

Concord’s Outcomes Assessment program allows it to bridge the gap in understanding between its educators and fixed facility educators. Our experience is that it is extremely difficult for educators whose prior background is limited to fixed facility classrooms to understand the value of the Learning Paradigm over the Instruction Paradigm. Traditional educators are acculturated to believe that the “spark” for the education is the classroom teacher, and often cannot relate to a situation wherein the classroom teacher is just one constituent part of

a greater learning environment that is the catalyst for the education. Our experience suggests that these traditional educators view online classroom engagements between the classroom teacher and student as the counterpart to similar fixed facility counterparts, without understanding that such a comparison is like comparing a complete five member basketball team with just one individual.

This gap, however, can be bridged through the common denominator of Outcomes Assessment. If, as educators, we can agree that meaningful outcomes for our students are a goal of a quality educational institution, than an effective Outcomes Assessment program can communicate quality irrespective of the delivery modality of the education. Concord, therefore, can measure the performance of its part-time, working students on licensing exams (bar examinations) relative to other similarly situated students. Concord can also measure job performance skills of its students through inquiries to employers who may have had occasion to employ other law students. Student satisfaction measurements, portfolio assessments, and various other measurements can also be used to help the traditional educational community understand the value of an online education and the Learning Paradigm.

This focus on the resultant outcomes requires a greater emphasis on the student experience, since it is through their eventual work product or accomplishments that the institution will create its reputation. Consequently the quality of the exiting student and the number of successful graduates is paramount to the online school that embraces the Learning Paradigm. Retaining those students who are learning assumes paramount importance for any institution that chooses the Learning Paradigm, which requires focus on building the online community.

Building the Online Student Community and Experience

Online higher education institutions must work harder at retention than their fixed facility counterparts because their students generally have other societal responsibilities competing for their time. Greene and Greene (2002) list seven risk factors that negatively affect degree completion, including at least five that are prevalent amongst most online populations. Those five are 1) prior schooling occurred one or more years ago, 2) part-time employment, 3) financial independence, 4) having children and dependents, and 5) working full-time. Many online institutions engage adults in their curricular programs on a part-time basis, providing the educational access desired by the student but at the same time, attracting students who are more likely to be subject to the known risk factors. The 2000-2001 Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE) report indicates that institutions with higher percentages of part-time students have lower graduation rates, noting differences of up to 40%.

Powerful learning environments that retain students and are responsive to the Learning Paradigm are cohort based, wherein students are placed into groups that begin and end the terms at the same time. Cohort based learning is the foundation of an effective online learning community. Palloff & Pratt (2003, p.117) note, “the greater the interactivity in an online course and the more attention paid to a sense of community, the more likely students will stick with the course until its completion.” Early experiments that enrolled students on an “anywhere, anytime” basis have been largely abandoned to non-degree programs or continuing education programs where community building is not an integral part of the learning process.

Building interactivity begins with the learning management system and extends to the facility for students to interact with their faculty and fellow students. Two important considerations that relate to interactivity and community building include the size of the cohorts and whether any synchronous activity (wherein students and faculty interact online at the same time) occurs. Group size will vary with the level of interactivity in the course; faculty loads will need to be calibrated with the timeliness and the depth of faculty interaction with the community. We have seen cohort sizes from 15 to 40 work very effectively in different degree programs.

Synchronous activities in the form of online seminars or chatrooms are not a required feature for interactivity to exist; asynchronous activity that is constant and reflective can create the necessary interactivity for the community to form. However, both Concord and its parent, Kaplan, Inc., use synchronous classes throughout their programs. Sensitivity to the needs of working part-time students remains a central issue to the planning of synchronous classrooms; attendance requirements may be a non-starter to many. Concord plans for this by providing archived versions of all its classes. Even without attendance requirements, our experience is that at any given class, 60-75% of the entire class will attend. Thus, synchronous activity is well liked by students, and if used judiciously, can help support the mission and objectives of the program.

If a school chooses not to offer synchronous classes, popular asynchronous activities that build interactivity may include faculty led discussion threads, bulletin boards, or group assignments. The success of these asynchronous activities often depends upon the quality and timeliness of faculty and learner response to each other. However, building the dynamics of this community cannot be

overemphasized, since “development of a learning community online distinguishes this form of learning from a simple correspondence course delivered via electronic means” (Palloff & Pratt, p.26).

Establishing the proper protocols within the school to enable this community to form often begins with the training of faculty.

Training Faculty

The lateral hiring or “sink or swim” process often used by fixed facility schools is largely ineffective in the Internet environment for at least three reasons. First, Internet learning cultures are vastly different than most fixed facility environments, in that they require faculty to be much more nurturing in guiding the students than the “sage on the stage” model deployed by many institutions.

Communication styles that are successful in face-to-face settings where facial expressions can set the tone (or reset, if necessary) are non-existent in Internet settings. Second, technology training cannot be avoided; even professors who are Internet savvy may find the learning platform indigenous to the school to be daunting without the proper exposure. Carr (2000) notes that initial high drop rates in online courses reflected, in part, the lack of faculty experience in online teaching. (See also Diaz, 2002). Third, many Internet schools have a school wide pedagogy, including fixed learning outcomes for each course, often driven by their Institutional Assessment programs. Although Institutional Assessment is not unique to the online environment, many faculty members at residential schools remain disconnected from the process and find the concept of fixed learning outcomes to be largely foreign to them. Unfortunately, the inability of lateral hires to assimilate into the community was not an early epiphany for Concord; we persevered through a couple of very difficult situations as we renewed our commitment to a faculty training program.

There are three basic models for training lateral hires or new faculty members at Internet institutions, and they may be found in various combinations at online schools. The apprenticeship model requires the faculty member to perform as an assistant or adjunct for a period of time before being totally in charge of a cohort. This model may have new faculty commenting on student work but having a more senior member of the faculty reviewing the work before it is returned to the student, as well as calibrating with the junior faculty member. Apprentices may also be acculturated to the new school by answering student e-mails, again having an experienced faculty member helping them with the non-subject specific framing of the response in a manner that is consistent with the culture of the institution.

Another model provides for simulated classes with which the new faculty member may engage. In this training, other senior faculty members may engage the new faculty member in asynchronous or synchronous dialogue that would be representative of the classes the new member may teach. The advantage of simulations includes immediately engaging the new member in the learning outcomes for the course as well as the technology tools necessary for operating the classroom. Another advantage is that the constructive critiquing that ensues may generate from a variety of faculty members with different styles that would be difficult to replicate with other training models.

Finally, many institutions may adopt an approach that consists of extensive monitoring of the new hire with a senior faculty mentor. This monitoring may allow the new hire to operate the classroom with the understanding that the senior faculty member is monitoring the site and the communications. This training model's value largely depends upon the extent and quality of the monitoring that is done and the openness and consistency of the feedback between the senior faculty member and the new hire.

Once the process is in place for the faculty to understand how to build the community, it becomes imperative that students also have an understanding of how to interact within the school. In addition to the fact that prior school experiences may have been vastly different than their current Internet student experience, many students entering online degree programs have been removed from the academic process for a period of years. Therefore, orienting students to their new education experience becomes critical for their success.

Orienting New Students

Learning outcomes have undoubtedly improved because we have become better at orienting students to their newfound online tools. At a minimum, a good online orientation needs to include 1) guidance on how to use the online tools and platform provided by the program, 2) time management skills, 3) introduction to student colleagues and faculty members and ways to communicate within the community, 4) proper etiquette for communicating with colleagues and faculty, 5) guidance on possible differences between prior fixed facility learning and how learning is measured or gauged in the online program, and 6) how to get technological, academic or administrative help if needed. Vickio & Tuck (1989) note that students returning to school after some time may be apprehensive about their performance, and part of the orientation should work to reduce that apprehension. Palloff & Pratt (2003), while citing many of the factors above, also believe that Internet basics, including use of word processing software and browsers, are a necessary part of a successful orientation. They also note that technology factors can be unnecessary obstacles that end up being reflected in attrition rates unless addressed early in the program.

Some institutions effectively deliver some of this guidance through asynchronous audio or video lecture material placed on the learning platform, or downloadable reading material. Others create opportunities for face-to-face residencies or orientations that kick-off the program. In either case, the online community is not complete without a mechanism for learners to contact others in their program of study, and at the same relative stage of degree completion. Creating student rosters by class, program, year of study, or even by geographical region facilitates the ability of students to build networks and create an effective learning community.

This is a critical area where the school can learn from its students. Concord is constantly redeveloping its orientation and community creation primarily acting on student feedback. Early Concord orientations focused primarily on tips for interacting with the learning platform and how to get assistance; later versions provided mechanisms for student directories, understanding the mores and values of the profession, as well as material to accentuate student preparedness for class by enhancing their study skills. If our bottom line as educators is to educate, we need our students to stick with our programs. Faust Rossi of Cornell Law School, one of the great law lecturers of our time, once said to his students “my job is to talk and your job is to listen. It would be unseemly if you finished your job before I finished mine.” Effective orientations and community creation go a long way in ensuring that students do not finish learning before we are finished teaching.

Conclusion

Naturally, the major contributors to student learning outcomes we have discussed presume that excellent academic process within the school is already present, including quality courses and quality faculty. Given that process, Internet education has made constant strides in improving its outcomes by embracing the shift from instruction to learning, focusing on the student and the building of community, improving the training of faculty, and helping students with the transition through a complete orientation. Schools transitioning to online may bypass a decade of growing pains learned in the “school of hard knocks” by applying the lessons learned by some of us early Internet educators.

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Jack R. Goetz has been President and Dean of Concord Law School since its founding in 1998. In 2003, he was also named Dean of Graduate Studies at Kaplan College. He received a Juris Doctor degree from Boston University School of Law (1979), and a Masters in Business Administration from Pepperdine University (1990). His undergraduate studies resulted in a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from San Diego State University (1976). Dean Goetz is currently a doctoral student in the School of Education at Capella University.

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