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Online Instruction in the University Setting: Reflections on Four Years of Practice in Distance Education

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Abstract
The development of online courses is replete with challenges for the instructor and for curriculum planners who wish to provide students the convenience of online instruction and take advantage of the power of the venue. Despite the obvious promise of technologies with seemingly unlimited potential and capability, certain inherent limitations add a complexity to their implementation. This article discusses the need for a philosophical underpinning that considers both the power and limitations of the online instructional venue.

Online education has become big business for educational institutions. Offering courses and entire programs over the Internet meets the needs of students on several fronts. Its convenience and flexibility appears to be unparalleled. Sophisticated instruction to include lecture, video, discussion and chat are easily accessible, often in an asynchronous approach that allows students to access the course at convenient times.

For instructors, online courses appear to offer the benefits of being able to design an instructional framework, post it, and then maintain it through interaction with students that is outside real time, freeing instructors by making their time (class times, office hours) more flexible. Working on the Internet has long offered this promise to workers in the corporate environment where flexible approaches to work have been enhanced by the possibilities created by email, text messaging, video conferencing, wireless communication and the increasing miniaturization of computers and computer-enhanced communication devices. Finally, the entry of private sector universities into the business of online education is providing an attractive option for students other than the university classroom, placing pressure on universities to compete in this arena. According to Brown and Corkill (2007), up to two-thirds of colleges and universities are in the business of online graduate education. In 2005, the Sloan Consortium reported that sixty-five percent of schools offering graduate courses offer some graduate courses online and that sixty-three percent of schools offering undergraduate courses offer some of that instruction online (Allen & Seaman, 2005), with a fifth of all continuing and professional education conducted online (Ashburn, 2006).

The availability of technology-driven instructional platforms makes online instruction possible for any instructor who has access to a computer. The variety of instructional platforms ranges from use of website development software with instructors designing websites to present material and interact with students, to products where instructional capabilities have been designed for the user and instructors’ work within an existing framework. The ease of using these technologies have led to the development of a wide array of technology-enhanced classes at universities with some fully online and some a mixture of online and
An example of a hybrid class is one that is web enhanced. The availability of software products enables instructors to post course syllabi, lecture material, resource material, and practice materials online leaving class time for lecture, discussion, problem-based instruction, projects and other interaction-intensive activity. The adoption of online instruction by universities embraces a wide array of options, with the degree requirements often left to programs, and the approaches to instruction left to individual faculty.

Further complicating the instructional landscape is the availability of other distance learning formats. Included among these learning formats is the use of video classes where students participate in a course that melds video technology and the submission of work by email, an asynchronous approach that is technology driven, albeit at the lower end of the technology spectrum. Another approach that has been implemented is real time instruction through videoconferences with the instructor present at one location and students at other locations. Many software applications make this type of instruction possible under a number of configurations including distance learning labs located on college campuses and, videoconferencing from remote locations using webcams and videoconferencing software.

In many ways, technology shapes the instruction. The sheer vastness of capabilities and possibilities for online instruction and other distance learning formats makes for increased complexity in planning instructional delivery. The promise of a potentially infinite number of possible communications configurations creates a virtual candy store where there is so much choice that the available choices themselves can seduce those charged with curriculum implementation into trying everything.

In dealing with changes wrought by technological innovation, the world of education is mirroring the corporate world where the rapid change of communication capabilities has leveled the field of competition among businesses of various sizes and locations. Because of the power of technology, small businesses have suddenly developed capabilities that previously were reserved to larger businesses with more resources. Technology in some ways made economy of scale obsolete when communications became so much cheaper and more available. New ways of managing production, marketing, distribution, and information made everyone with a computer a player in the global business game. The telecommunications industry was flattened early, then financial services, followed by manufacturing and the health sector. We are seeing the same revolution in communications impact politics, particularly in the coming presidential election. For aspiring political contenders, the communications revolution has meant more players, interacting in ways that are unpredictable making modern politics a field operating at the edge of chaos. The fact that communications, marketing, and shipping are so much faster and cheaper than before do not necessarily make for better politics or customer service. The ubiquity of blogging, for example, has vastly increased the volume of political discussion, but not necessarily its intelligence. The availability of online trade has made purchasing easy, but in many cases installation and implementation more difficult.

At the same time, there is that sneaking suspicion that the technologies available are not really different but only new and faster incarnations of business methods that have been implemented in earlier times: online purchasing as the latest incarnation of the catalogue for example. In the field of education, correspondence courses, televised courses, courses on tape, and courses on video were all at one time or another touted as the avant-garde. Implementing these technologies required the shaping of instruction to meet their capabilities. Although each brought new capabilities to instruction, they also brought limitations. Some of the same limitations inherent in earlier manifestations of the technological avant-garde are present in the current online teaching formats.

One of these limitations is the difficulty in providing rigorous assessment. As yet, there is no
substitution for the real-time assessment of student work by an instructor who is present with the student. Good pedagogy demands good coaching. And the truth of the matter is that coaching is much easier done in the traditional classroom. Effective classroom teachers present instruction, facilitate discussion, operate scenarios, implement group work, and assign in-class writing. During all these activities, there is tremendous opportunity to assess student performance while the action takes place and make on-the-site correction, re-orientation, or reinforcement immediately. Much is lost in coaching when it is attempted from a distance. The subtle nuances available in face-to-face communication, for instance, are lost in communication through email, chat, blog, or text messaging.

Often, online assessment consists of instructor evaluation of student products: projects, artifacts, written assignments, reflective journals, and portfolios. Evaluating these types of assignments is an appropriate and effective assessment practice. Online instructors can even shape the quality of assignments by having them submitted in pieces with the instructor returning feedback. In practical application, however, structuring the assignment submission and feedback loop in a way that is effective is time consuming. The instructor who attempts to provide high caliber coaching through online instruction, must compose feedback linked to the criteria originally established for the assignment, respond in writing to student queries asking for clarification of that feedback, and transmit the original feedback and any later clarification through the technology, adding a layer of complexity that requires time to negotiate. The same process in the regular classroom is much less time consuming in that feedback that is general in nature can be provided to the entire class, and clarification can be to individual students immediately.

As in the regular classroom, the possibility is ever-present that work product, artifacts, and writing assessed by an instructor over the Internet are not wholly that of the student. However, in the regular classroom, this issue can be mitigated through the observation of student performance during class discussion, in group work, on written assignments, and on proctored exams. In distance learning environments, this type of safeguard is difficult to implement. Un-proctored assessment through online testing presents one obvious challenge. Present solutions to this issue, including the posting of webcams in the homes of students in an attempt to create a testing environment present their own challenges and raise issues from a libertarian standpoint.

An additional limitation is that working with the logistics involved in online courses requires technological/managerial skill not required in the regular classroom. Often such skills are not intuitive, or, at least, are counterintuitive to those used in the regular classroom. The regular classroom and online environments are dissimilar and instructors, many of whom have taught for years in the regular classroom have intuition honed through years in the classroom and mental maps regarding the efficacy of certain instructional practices. These practices may be difficult to reproduce in the online teaching environment. The distance learning environment requires a whole new set of managerial skills, new types of pedagogy while it also requires the adjustment of skills honed in other teaching environments. This creates layers of complexity for instructors, the majority of whom have not been trained in the application of online instruction. This complexity increases as the distance between instructor and student increases. Using web enhancement strategies adds one level of complexity and requires increased work and time in terms of management for the instructor. Teaching through videoconferencing adds more levels of complexity, while teaching wholly online increases the complexity of course management even further.

The convenience afforded by online instruction has created a new set of expectations on the part of students. The possibility of instant communication through email, particularly given the recent wireless access revolution, makes it possible for students anywhere, anytime, to communicate their requests to instructors with a terrifying immediacy with the expectation is that the
instructor will respond immediately. This expectation creates a twenty-four hour virtual classroom where students are always surrounding the instructor desk and shouting questions and requests. Though instructors can set and enforce guidelines for such communication, the necessity to set such guidelines, enforce them, and defend them creates an additional layer of complexity for course management.

In addition to the complexity of the management/logistical issues that affect the online educator, particularly in terms of the time demanded to operate systems inherent in the online environment, the power and potential of the systems themselves affect the instruction. In the 1960s, Canadian futures thinker Marshall McLuhan became a cult figure when he declared that “the medium is the message”. In other words, the message is shaped by the technology that carries it (Van Der Meer, 2005). McLuhan’s doctrine, developed in the early pre-cable days of television anticipated the revolution in cable television, the ubiquity of broadcast throughout the day and night, and the later evolution of personal computers, the Internet, and now, wireless communication.

In the same way that television shaped the message from the 1950s through the middle of the 1980s (think of how the omnipresent and omnivorous 24 hour news networks have shaped the way everyone lives and does business), communication through the Internet is powered with and shaped by computers and software which increase in potential and capability with each new version or upgrade. The upgrades are then shipped instantly by Internet update to consumers who tinker with both the hardware and software, reconfiguring and combining them in new and innovative ways. Because the technology available to online instructors is so powerful, the potential capabilities of the technology so awesome, there is a seductiveness to the idea of applying the capabilities themselves in ways that can obscure the original objectives of the instruction itself.

In the same way that McLuhan’s medium became the message, the technology itself can become the instruction. It is easy to become enamored of the glamour of video streaming and video conferencing, the speed of chat and text, and the power of digital graphic organizers. The danger is that the delivery of the instruction can become the featured attraction rather than the instruction itself. In such a scenario, the power and novelty of the system can become the focus of the attention for both instructor and student to the detriment of learning and performance objectives, and to the disservice of the student. There is a caveat here for those who would design university curriculum.

There is no question that online instruction is exciting because of the potential it brings to connect instructors and students throughout the educational environment and to provide access to learning tools that were unavailable in the past. At the same time, this type of instruction is not unlimited because it in fact limits face-to-face instruction that has time-tested value, viability, and a power driven by the need for human interaction. The power of any distance learning technology lies in its capability to bring instruction directly to the consumer, a capability that makes it a viable tool for instruction. However, when considering the use of online instruction, curriculum designers must take into account the limitations of the medium, as well as its capabilities. Curriculum planners must ascertain if the reason for implementing online instruction is a need to remain competitive with other providers of instruction, a need to provide a wider array of service to more students, a desire to enter the high tech arena, or if the venue itself provides an instructional capability that is not provided in other instructional formats. Online instruction is a powerful instructional tool when it supports the mission and objectives of a university. Like any university initiative, its success is determined by how well it supports that mission.

References


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