

Talking School – Online!

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Beth posts a message at 1:30 a.m., another at 2:15 a.m., and a third shortly after 3:00 that same morning. Jake responds at 6:15 a.m. and another response comes from Jessica at approximately 7:30. A group of graduate students, all teachers, is communicating with each other in their self-selected discussion group. One of them will summarize their weeklong discussion and post it to the large group public folder.

As the use of technology increases, “the effectiveness of online courses is still

hotly debated” (Davis & Crispo, 2002, p. 1) and hard questions are being asked. Does

flexibility of online instruction sacrifice student/teacher interaction?

With the proper structure, students can literally “have it all”. I taught an online

graduate level summer course over a four-week period. This article chronicles the

structuring, teaching, and evaluating of the course.

Structure Is Key

I structured the course from multiple perspectives, including my own experience in computer-mediated coursework. I began with the question: “What do I want my students to learn?” Acting on the advice of Professor Chere Gibson, a University of Wisconsin-Madison pioneer in distance education (personal communication, Feb., 2002), I decided on the following objectives:

- Participants will become familiar and comfortable with on-line format of learning and communicating.
- Participants will engage in deep-level, individually meaningful reading and learning activities.
- Participants will be open to challenging their current perspectives about teaching and learning as well as those of others in the class, including the instructor.
- Participants will share what they have learned through on-line communication and through completion and presentation of a final project. We will strive to create a collaborative learning environment, building a community of learners which supports each other intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

Because many students and faculty value face-to-face instruction for networking, observing, and listening to each other, the course was conducted in both face-to-face and online formats.

Meeting in person for the first session was vital to student success. In addition to forming groups, students spent time in the computer lab learning the university email system, using public folders, and accessing the online grading program.

A semi-structure for online conversation was provided for in several ways. I selected two texts for common reading about which students would post comments to their small group members (including me) throughout the week. Summaries of these discussions were posted weekly to the large group public folder, enabling each group to follow the discussion of other groups. Deadlines for posts, project selection and progress reports were also scheduled.

Students were expected to research a topic of their choice about education that would be personally meaningful and have a positive impact on their classroom teaching. Face-to-face presentations during the final two days of class were scheduled and posted.

Benefits and Tradeoffs

During the final week of class, I noted this in my journal:

I am overwhelmed with the positive response from my students about the format of the class, the structure, the texts, and the opportunity to learn what they choose to learn! I am especially elated that some have felt new enthusiasm about getting back to their classrooms and applying their learning! I cannot think of a better testimonial to a teacher's efforts than that!

There were two benefits to the course format I had not anticipated: the "enthusiasm factor" noted above, and the high degree of interstudent affirmation that occurred online. Several factors may account for these phenomena: choice of time to attend to discussions; anonymity in the form of body language, facial expressions, and voice; time to carefully formulate responses, more opportunity to "listen"/read carefully while not being preoccupied with one's response; age and experience of participants; and the dual format structure of the class with an emphasis on community building.

A personal benefit to me was the opportunity to be a true facilitator of learning. I was able to "listen" with more intensity than I feel able to do when facilitating a traditional classroom discussion. Giving the students choices of topics also gave them more control over their own learning.

Several tradeoffs related to the lack of personal interaction in online instruction were mentioned above. One female student expressed her concern that not coming to campus did not allow her to separate her roles of wife, mother, and student. The flexibility of the course in terms of time compromised this woman's student identity.

The time commitment can also be a tradeoff. I read just over 1000 emails during the four weeks. This, along with time spent in class, likely exceeded the traditional three-credit "seat time".

Future Changes

I propose to make only one major change to this class: extending the three face-to-face meeting times by 30 to 60 minutes. Additional time in the computer lab is necessary to better learn the electronic processes necessary to function well in the course.

Also, final presentations are currently limited to ten minutes, leaving little time for questions from the audience. Time extensions during the final two days of the course will allow more time for dialogue.

Conclusion

This class provided my students and me with authentic teaching and learning experiences. The students and I asked important questions about teaching, learning, and the school environment. Answers were discovered through independent inquiry and discovery research.

By all reports of the students, the class was as academically rigorous as any in which they had participated. Some participants indicated they spent even more time engaged in learning activities in this class than in face-to-face environments. These students' testimonials thus serve to debunk the myth of lack of effectiveness of online instruction.

References

Davis, B. J. & Crispo, A. W. (2002). Technology in the classroom: Technoism or technological tools to facilitate learning? Connexions, 14 (2), 1, 5-6.