

On-Line Course Management
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The 21st century presents many challenges to colleges and universities in terms of the continued integration of technology into the classroom. This technology has generated many improvements in teaching and learning. At the same time, the technology has also raised many questions and created some problems as there is a rush to implement its use without considering the implications of such use. One such technological advance that has produced both problems and promises is online learning.

What is online learning? It is computer-mediated education that occurs over the internet. It can use a home-written webpage and free bulletin board chat rooms or it can use packaged course management systems such as Blackboard and WebCt. It can be totally online, including tests and library access or it can be a hybrid wherein some meetings occur in the face-to-face (f2f) classroom. There are many issues associated with these hybrid courses where they are partly online and partly face-to-face. There are many resources available that discuss the philosophy of distance education, that describe how to design an online class and that lead the novice instructor through teaching that first online class

Online classes are generally asynchronous. They do not happen in real time. Because of this time lag, it can take longer to identify conflict and to reach consensus. The online classroom is an uncertain environment. You know nothing about others except what they share. The online classroom is an unstructured communication situation that relies entirely on text. There is no nonverbal to either soften words or signal potential conflict. Messages are often blunt; people are often less inhibited and exchanges can escalate quickly into flaming. There is a greater potential for misunderstanding. It can be a bit like visiting an unknown country where you don't really speak the language.

Online is not for every course, every institution, every student or even every instructor. It is not better than traditional, face-to-face classes, nor is it worse. It is merely different and is simply another tool in the educational tool belt that give us options for offering higher and secondary education to audiences that would have been excluded in the past. Online education removes the barriers of time and place, of distance and physical difficulty.

While moving a course totally (or even partially) online seems easy, it requires more than just the technological capability. Online classes are not traditional campus based classes

delivered via a computer. There are necessary changes in the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved. (Dringus, 2000). Internet or online courses require a shift from the teacher directed classroom to the truly learner center classroom where responsibility for learning is truly shared.

What makes a quality online course is not that different from what makes a quality face-to-face class. Good online courses follow the Chickering and Gamson “Seven Principles.” They incorporate the same objectives as traditional delivery models of instruction. The courses have the same requirements and rigor as face-to-face. Students must have access to the instructor and there must be interaction. Quality online courses are not merely correspondence courses delivered via the internet. Currently, a consortium of colleges and universities in Maryland are working under a FIPSE grant to develop an evaluation tool for online courses. (www.qualitymatters.org).

One of the newest variations of the online course is the hybrid course in which part of the instruction is delivered via traditional, face-to-face meetings and the rest of the week instruction is delivered via online formats.

While online delivery is not a panacea for problems in the classroom, it is a course delivery format that is here to stay as part of the academic landscape. It is important that faculty become aware of its strengths and weaknesses and evaluate their readiness to engage in this course delivery method.

Considerations for those considering a move to online teaching and learning

1. Teaching online requires you to read about online teaching and to understand its paradigms.
2. Teaching online requires far more time than traditional classroom teaching. It takes at least 1/3 more time.
3. It takes a great deal of time to create an online course. It requires a great deal of time structuring the course so that the principles of good undergraduate education are met.
3. You must also develop good computer skills. You do not have to be a technology wizard but you must know the basics of how the internet works, how to cut and paste, how to upload and download, and how ISPs work.
4. You must spend time becoming familiar with whatever course management system is being used.
5. You must be able to check into the online classroom at least every other day. While it is not necessary (and not even advisable) to be available and online 24/7, it is best to check in frequently.
6. You must be comfortable with having less control on how everything flows in the classroom.
7. You have to be patient and have a low level of frustration since technology glitches will occur.
8. You need to be creative in adapting class activities and exercises for the online environment.

Recommendations for Moving Online

1. Find a colleague who teaches online and shadow the course. Better still, take an online course somewhere. That will give you some sense of what it is like.
2. Take any training you can find on teaching online.
3. Be honest about your time and your technology skills. While you do not have to be a computer whiz, you do need to have computer skills. Get those before you try to teach online.
4. Be sure you have good equipment, including a large monitor, and preferably a cable connection.
5. Be prepared to change your view of what it means to be a teacher. Online you are more of a facilitator than a traditional teacher.
6. Develop patience as it takes a great deal, especially during the first couple of weeks of class.
7. Be flexible. Technology alone accounts for the need for flexibility. Students learning to navigate the online environment are another.
8. Finally, enjoy the ride. If you have an open mind and are willing to struggle, the online classroom can be an exhilarating experience!

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<http://illinois.online.uillinois.edu/IONresources/instructionaldesign/instructionalstrategies.asp>

Illinois Online Network - this site contains instructional strategies for teaching online. It is especially helpful for the instructor new to online teaching.

<http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/ctla/resources.html>

A comprehensive set of resources from the University of Maryland University College, a leader in online learning and teaching, related to all aspects of teaching online. It includes links to journals, teaching tips, teacher resources and much more.

<http://mason.gmu.edu/~Emontecin/disedbiblio.htm>

A distance learning bibliography from George Mason University.

<http://www.uwex.edu/disted/home.html>

The Distance Education Clearinghouse which is based at the University of Wisconsin. It contains all types of information about distance learning.

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