

MANAGING DISTANCE EDUCATION CLASSES BY CERTIFYING INSTRUCTORS

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ABSTRACT

When developing online classrooms it is necessary to ensure that all learners will be successful in the course. This paper outlines the dilemmas faced by one university in its struggle to improve retention rates in their distance education courses. The case study will also serve as a justification for instructor certification for online courses at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. While these courses span multiple facets of higher education such as technology, criminology, mathematics, business, and general studies, the core competencies to develop a structurally sound online learning environment remain unchanged. The need to have faculty who are trained both in the pedagogy of an online learning environment and the tools to deliver content will improve student success. The intent of this paper is to identify the need for such a certification by looking at recent trends in both online and face to face education at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Data gathered for online courses compared to the same course that is offered in a face to face setting. Incorporating strategies of instruction in an online course to mirror those of a traditional course are essential to maintain consistency and satisfy all students.

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KEYWORDS: Instructor certification, online course design, distance education pedagogy, enrollment and retention

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the importance of online pedagogy that can be utilized to make the online course development successful. Specifically this paper focuses on the courses being offered at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (I.U.P). Like other institutions I.U.P has a diverse student body and must take into account different learning styles. This research study opens with a review of related literature that details the challenges facing online educators and developers. The paper then focuses on the recent history of online and traditional retention rates at I.U.P. The paper will finally outline what is meant by instructor certification for online education and recommendations for future research.

Correspondence courses, training files, radio, television, and most recently the Internet have all played a key role in the history of distance education (Blake, Blackwell, & Gibson 2005). The Internet has changed the face of education as traditional institutions are now in a rush to offer online courses. The number of programs and online students has increased dramatically over the last decade. Over the past decade the Internet has changed the face of distance education. The number of programs offered as well as the number of online students has skyrocketed. As the Internet has grown, programs are becoming more advanced, telecommunication speeds are increasing, and interactive applications are more readily available. During this time online institutions have searched for methods to increase enrollment and retain students. As applications and programs become more advanced the face of online learning should follow suit. Advances in online platforms, programs, and interactive tools are providing online educators the opportunity to design courses as if the instructor was in the room. As Salter, Richards, and Carey note: "Current educational literatures stresses the importance of a task based approach to instruction, rather than an emphasis on content delivery. However as institutions attempt to meet the demand for online courses, many offerings still focuses on presenting online content resources with minimal opportunity for interactions and active learning".

The launching of new systems, technology tools, and applications has created enthusiasm among educators and academic programs offering technology courses. This enthusiasm and need to stay abreast of new technology may sometimes blur good judgment when introducing the most recent technologies into the classroom. While the inclusion of new technologies into the classroom can be beneficial in many ways, the rush to update the curriculum and increase online enrollments may produce unforeseen and unplanned dilemmas.

Furthermore, distance education courses may need to balance between the practical use of technology as well as knowledge of the concepts behind the technology. Denning (2001) argues that Learning the techniques and strategies associated with a specialty information technology is as important as learning the intellectual core of computing. The mark of success lies in an ability to balance the two. The current academic tendency is to downplay skill-specific training that does not fit a profession. Training should include practices as well as descriptive knowledge. It must include training as well as general education.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section the relevant literature is presented. The following two sections discuss the data utilized and the results. The paper closes with some concluding comments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existence of online education is a hot debate on many traditional college campuses. These debates not only involve the quality of education, but also the tools, platform, and programs that can be used to deliver quality instruction (Singh & Pan, 2004). While academic institutions are competing against pure online universities for enrollment, many faculty have mixed opinions on online education. Diaz (2002) notes that instructors had conflicting attitudes about distance education. While they expressed a willingness to teach distance learning courses, they rated the courses as equal or lower in quality than traditional courses taught on the same campus.

One could argue that this negative stigma on online education could spill over into the online classroom design. If faculty believe that these course do not match up to traditional courses could they be led to believe that less time is needed to develop and online class? Online development may also not be for every instructor. While technology faculty have an understanding on the technology and tools available, the same cannot be said for non tech savvy faculty. Hannay and Newvine (2006) agree that online instructors must have a special skill set. They must not only be computer literate but must also be flexible and responsive. Instructors must be able to think differently about presenting course materials online and be able to create an appropriate learning environment. Additionally, they need to be life-long learners who have a desire to update their skills and incorporate new technologies. Finally, they must be able to communicate in writing effectively be able to actively and regularly communicate with students.

The reasoning behind an instructor certification is twofold. This certification is meant to not only accustom the faculty member with the technology available to deliver an online class, but also the pedagogy involved with designing and delivering an online course. Online classes can be developed using tools such as e-mail, instant messenger, company intranets, or through online platforms. While each platform will have a different look and feel, the content, communication methods, and tools used to deliver the material will be similar. Stow (2005) notes that a major problem in distance education is the use of a single type of interaction. In many cases the student interacts with the class content in a manner similar to an independent study course. The student interacts with the course material, finishes assignments and turns them in for grading. Despite potentially being well executed, this interaction might be one-dimensional. The interaction does not necessarily promote learning, thus potentially causing an increase in transactional distance. Educators should incorporate multiple methods of interaction in order to keep dialogue and structure at an appropriate level.

As technology advances, the virtual classroom must change accordingly. Technological advancements drive distance education to go beyond simply posting text and assignments in the course room (Kachel & Henry & Keller, 1005). Online material should be in small manageable pieces that will hold the learner's attention while effectively delivering the necessary content. The online learning environment offers a means to share information twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week regardless of the learner's location. As a result the course designer must make careful decisions regarding the methods and tools used to facilitate this continuous learning process.

There are numerous tools that faculty can incorporate into an online class to enhance a virtual classroom. Customized tools such as Flash interactive programs, screencasts, Web casts, simulators, and virtual labs enhance distance education classrooms. These tools provide unlimited possibilities when moving traditional classes into an online environment. An ongoing instructor certification programs would insure that faculty are abreast of new educational technology trends as faculty who wish to teach online would need to keep their certification updated.

DATA

In the fall of 2008 a request was made on the author's behalf to I.U.P's Planning and Analysis Department. The data sought was a head to head comparison of online courses that are also taught in a face to face environment. Classes offered only online or only face to face were not used in this study. The data retrieved was broken down first by the grade earned by the student and the withdrawal rate. In addition this data was also categorized by the class level of the course offered. The data gathered shoed results from the 2003 through 2008 academic years. In addition the results of each course were also provided so that specific classes and trends could be analyzed.

Traditionally drops rates are higher for online classes as compared to traditional face to face courses. As noted by Diaz (2002) that: "Drop rates for distance education classes have been consistently higher than those of traditional classes and, according to some researchers, tend to suggest academic non-success."

RESULTS

The data used in this study were gathered by the research Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment at IUP. While the dataset could not be obtained for this study, the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment were able to provide all of the statistics requested for this research study. Table 1 shows grades assigned in traditional courses by class level for the years 2003-2008. Table 2 shows grades assigned in online courses during the same time period.

An examination of Tables 1 and 2 show that online undergraduate students are more likely to drop out of an online class as relative to the same traditional face to face course. Students were more than twice as likely to drop a course taken in an online format as the undergraduate withdrawal rate of traditional courses was 6.36% as compared to 9.78% in the same online courses. Tables 1 and 2 also show that the graduate withdrawal rate of online classes were also much higher relative to face-to-face classes. It was found that online graduate students are more than 53% likely to drop out of an online class as compared to the same traditional face to face course. While it can be argued that some blame can be placed on the student, management and faculty cannot ignore the fact that they must also share some of the responsibility for the high withdrawal rates.

Table 1: Traditional Course Grades by Student and Class Level 2003-2008

GRADE	A	B	C	D	F	W	W %	Total
PANEL A: GRADUATE								
500 and above	861	289	48	0	5	29	2.35%	1232
Total	861	289	48	0	5	29	2.35%	1232
PANEL B: UNDERGRADUATE								
100-199	23650	20598	14586	6432	8279	5175	6.57%	78720
200-299	4162	4551	4028	2106	2010	2043	10.81%	18900
300-399	5272	5020	3246	998	702	771	4.82%	16009
400-499	1691	1293	706	142	100	133	3.27%	4065
Total	34775	31462	22566	9678	11091	8122	6.36%	117694

This table shows grades assigned to students in traditional courses.

Table 2: Distance Education Grades by Student and Class Level 2003-2008

GRADES	A	B	C	D	F	W	W %	Total
GRADUATE								
500 and above	863	172	23	0	12	56	4.97%	1126
Total	863	172	23	0	12	56	4.97%	1126
UNDERGRADUATE								
100-199	2288	1293	589	226	524	487	9.01%	5407
200-299	413	448	392	236	292	413	18.82%	2194
300-399	1096	1464	850	271	259	324	7.60%	4264
400-499	1010	652	298	82	87	82	3.71%	2211
Total	4807	3857	2129	815	1162	1306	9.78%	14076

This table shows grades assigned to students in distance education courses.

SUMMARY

As programs and applications continue to advance, educators must stay abreast of the technology changes available in designing their online courses. This study outlines the dilemmas facing online education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (I.U.P.) and methods being discussed to improve the pedagogy of online classes. The study also explained the recent history of online classes at I.U.P. and their attempts to address the challenges of designing and delivering a class in the online world.

While the focus of instructor certification is still in the discussion phase at U.I.P., additional variables are also being examined. Some of these variables include the University changing from WebCT to a new online learning platform, and possible union and University conflicts with mandating such a certification. A follow up study is required to assess the effectiveness of the planning and the delivery of this certification, thus additional reviews and audits during the discussions will continue.

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BIOGRAPHY

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