Institutional challenges facing online Education

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To stay competitive, universities are accumulating a long history of practicing courses delivered via online technologies. As the Internet becomes a major player in education, higher education in the U.S. is increasingly turning to distance education technologies to deliver the curriculum at all levels. This trend is forcing universities to examine closely how to offer distance education courses effectively and efficiently. One reason for the popularity of online-based courses is the flexibility for the student to choose the time and place to study. Today, Students, and especially adult learners, are struggling to balance their educational needs with a job, family, health issues, and financial worries, as well as other daily occupations. Internet classes allow them to learn at a pace that is comfortable to them, at a place of their choosing, and at a time when there are least interruptions. According to Berker (2003) the main reasons given by adult learners in a research study were: to gain skills that will help them get further in their careers, to enrich their lives with more knowledge, to complete a degree or other credential, and to fulfill the requirements of their employers to take educational courses.

Today distance education has become an alternative method for delivering academic course work to students anywhere in the world. Ryan et al (1999) wrote “The current paradigm shift in higher education is from traditional classroom settings to distance education program delivery via the World Wide Web (WWW)” p.272. Furthermore, distance education eliminates the barriers of time and distance by offering instructional material instantaneously and continuously (Piskurich, 2003 & Bullen, 2003). Merriman (2006) wrote “Online education is entering the mainstream, according to some higher education analysts, and its growing popularity with employers is part of the reason” p.79.

This trend makes it essential that universities examine closely how to do best and take advantage of the new opportunities offered by distance education technologies. However, depending on the format, distance education offered through online can often create challenges that may impact the quality of the whole system.

Whenever we consider institutional challenges relative to the delivery of online education courses, it is necessary to note that there are multiple factors to consider for a good implementation and a best practice of online courses. In the case of this chapter, seven major challenges groups are described. The challenges and some suggestions are discussed in the following,

1. Infrastructure and Space Allocations

Developing and maintaining the necessary infrastructure to support online teaching-learning process constitutes the first challenge. This involves developing or purchasing the necessary computer bandwidth, instruction development hardware and software, faculty support (IT personnel and instructional designers), as well as providing multiple opportunities for training. This is not simple, nor is it inexpensive. Universities have to be successful in attracting a significant amount of government support and external funding to develop the necessary infrastructure for online delivery.

In short, a good quality online education necessitates the transition of instruction from face-to-face to distance delivery that can be quite expensive, requiring major investments in hardware, software, multiple technology applications, as well as a change in faculty habits, practices, and perceptions. However, there is often another interesting outcome for this transition; the actual need for space declines as fewer and fewer students choose not to attend on-campus courses. In some cases, this has the net effect of programs losing physical space even with significant growth in enrollments and increasing the cost of equipping classes with new communication technologies. Therefore, the use of
a hybrid course, also known as web-enhanced/assisted, blended course, offers opportunities to transit completely from face to face to online teaching-learning. Hybrid course is a course that combines elements of face-to-face instruction with elements of distance teaching (Lorenzetti, 2004)

2. Faculty Training

Research suggests that faculty as a whole see online delivery of classes as a good thing. However, many teachers have had no prior experience with this method of teaching and the only solution offered to them in most cases was in-service training (Wonacott, 2001). Among the influences to faculty’s resistance to teach distance education courses are: a perceived lack of institutional support and training as well as lack of technical training (Clark, 1993).

Online teaching comes in different shapes. This is similar to face to face teaching where teachers use different teaching styles and methods. The following are some steps that may help in faculty training as this is very important to the success of online teaching. Assume this is your first online course. A lot of ideas come to your mind by asking yourself this question: I never taught online before? Yes, I was in that situation ten years ago. You need to start with six things:

First, you need to identify the overall goal of your course. What will your students know and be able to do by the end of the course?

Second, do a learner analysis prior to designing an on-line course. This can be done by sending an e-mail to your students to assess their computer literacy skills and collect other information.

Third, you need to specify the learning objectives. List as many objectives as you may think of. Select those objectives that can be achieved through distance learning.

Fourth, adopt a learner-centered approach teaching style. A learner-centered approach would suggest that students progress through a course in a non-linear fashion with more control over the sequence of course material. Blend audio, visual, and kinesthetic activities into your course to address various learning styles of your students.

Fifth, choose a Web-based instructional delivery and management platform (such as WebCT or Blackboard) that uses common features such as e-mail, chat rooms, discussion board, digital drop box, grade book, attendance tracking, course documents, audio links and other features.

Sixth, the next step involves selecting appropriate content presentation tools, communication tools, and other features that will aid in attaining the overall goal. You may use Chickering and Gamson, seven principles. Consider them as you select your tools. A tool that:

- Promotes teacher-student interaction
- Promotes student-to-student interaction.
- Encourages high expectations
- Provides rich, rapid feedback
- Promotes active learning
- Facilitates time on task
- Addresses different learning styles

You may select the white board as a communication tool to facilitate teacher-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction. You may also use selective or controlled release of materials to allow students to learn at their own pace, which in turn supports the principle of promoting active learning as well as time on task.

It is important that the instructor select e-mail as the main communication tool with students. While it is very crucial to respond to communication from online students immediately, circumstances such as class size and course load will make this task more cumbersome. It is essential to respond to students’ e-mails immediately. I recommend acknowledging the receipt of the message by replying to student “I have received your message and will reply soon” If you don’t do this, the sender will assume that you didn’t get it. The consequence will be more messages on your screen. I always include in the syllabus my office hours with an 800 number for students to call and set aside specified days and times to respond to students’ e-mails. When I receive the same question from two or more students I usually send the answer to all the students.

A free e-newsletter should be available that contains important University announcements to help students start and complete their distance courses. Technical support must also be provided to students. Peer course review, student evaluation as well as evaluation by instructional designers regarding the design and management of the course will help faculty better incorporate the online pedagogy.

3. Faculty Workload

Being new, distance education creates an extra workload for faculty. Several authors agreed that web-based courses require more time and effort on the part of faculty in comparison with classroom courses of comparable size, content, and credit (Tomei, 2005; Visser, 2000; Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz & Marx, 1999). According to Dibiase et al (2005) an increase from 18 students in a class to 49 students increased course-related workloads from 47.5 hours to 116.7 hours.
As faculty become more involved with online methods the workload tends to increase as many interactions with students become one-on-one interaction. So instead of one teacher teaching a lesson to 30 students simultaneously, that same teacher may have hundreds of interactions with the same 30 students to deliver the same amount of instruction and provide advisement as well.

4. Student Preparedness

Lack of preparedness has been a concern for the faculty who reported that they often found that some students, especially traditional undergraduates were not prepared to better deal with online learning. Very little in their educational experiences to date prepared them to deal with the autonomy and responsibility of online instruction. Faculty need to anticipate where students might have difficulty and ensure that the students are using the material and learning on their own. Otherwise the faculty member can expect frustration and a flood of e-mail messages.

Instructors must assume the responsibility of making sure that students are participating in the class, be very accessible, provide progress updates on regular basis, and encourage students to respond to each other’s questions and comments.

5. Academic Honesty

Academic honesty is another challenge in online education. The internet houses a wealth of information ready to be copied and pasted, and often presented as the learner’s own work. This can attempt some students who feel they are not doing well enough, or who simply don’t have the skills to do the work themselves. This places a different role on the instructor;

To prevent the problem, faculty must develop a section in the syllabus that explains academic dishonesty and be proactive in the matter. Faculty must also use technologies that detect plagiarism.

6. Copyright

Another significant challenge is the use of copyrighted material for Internet based courses. The university should make sure that the instructors understand the issues of copyright when they use materials and information from the internet. A distinction between academic only usage of the material and information and other usages must well explained to faculty as this raises a lot of questions. The question is what is permissible and what is not. Not all the data and information on the internet can be used without proper approval or proper referencing. The instructor may also have materials that are available for nonprofit educational institutions but can not be posted to the Internet by the instructor. This would require the instructors to look elsewhere for pertinent materials for the class (Wonacott, 2001). Copyright laws were amended in 2003 to include these issues.

References

