DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 413 974 JC 980 031

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TITLE	Introduction to Sociology: A COMPELing Experience.
INSTITUTION	Maple Woods Community Coll., Kansas City, MO.
PUB DATE	1996-04-00
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Colleges; *Computer Assisted Instruction; Computer Uses in Education; *Educational Media; Educational Strategies; *Educational Technology; Instructional Improvement; *Instructional Innovation; Lecture Method; Media Adaptation; *Multimedia Instruction; Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

An instructor's experience teaching introductory Sociology at Maple Woods Community College demonstrates the benefits of using instructional technology to deliver standard lecture material. In order to integrate technology with each lecture, a PC was used to create an interactive text-based design through Compel, a multimedia slide presentation program. The program provided a way to quickly utilize and display information from any set of notes using navigation buttons and main menu settings. Lecture text consisted of short paragraphs with "hotwords" and interactive buttons. Definitions and new terms could be clicked on to acquire further information. Navigation buttons allowed rapid movement from screen to screen, and an "example" button provided elaboration on concepts. Color-coded words indicated information that would be covered on the tests, anticipating student questions and allowing for more discussion time. This instructional technology facilitated access to information and provided consistency among different class presentations. It also saved time by eliminating the need to write lengthy concepts on the board. Despite the possible problem of technical difficulties, students and teachers alike may benefit from the integration of instructional technology with lecture material. (YKH)

Introduction to Sociology: A COMPELing Experience

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Introduction to Sociology: A COMPELing Experience

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As the Coordinator of Instructional Support for Maple Woods Community College my primary responsibilities are focused on supporting the faculty in the integration of instructional technology into their curriculum's. This can range from teaching them how to use PowerPoint to deliver lecture material to the actual design and development of an interactive multimedia CD-ROM tutorial and everything in between.

Years ago, while working on a Ph.D. in Sociology at UC-Riverside, (I finished ABD, another story) I made a living teaching Sociology at several colleges throughout the Los Angeles Basin. Teaching Sociology was all I wanted to do, and yet after 8 years of part-time teaching and several hundred applications to various junior colleges, colleges, and universities it was clear the demand for Sociology instructors was non-existent. So, after a few more years of education at Cal State LA, I earned another MA, this time in Education, specializing in Instructional Design and Media Technology. That degree, plus several jobs and many bizarre paths, brought me to my current position.

In the Fall of 1994, the day after classes started here at Maple Woods, the Sociology instructor quit, he got a full-time gig in another part of the country. One days notice for leaving a job is not normally looked upon with great favor, but most people understood that a full-time position in Sociology is about as rare as a left-wing liberal in Missouri (we are rare indeed!). I then get a phone call asking me if I could teach two Introduction to Sociology courses on very short notice.

I had to call my "boss" to get his opinion (and blessing) on the offer. I agreed to make up the lost time from my normal duties. He agreed, with one caveat, I would have to use instructional technology somehow to deliver the materials - this would serve as a "demonstration project" for other faculty on campus as to how instructional technology can be employed to deliver standard lecture material.

When I began to think about how to teach the class and use some kind of instructional technology I realized it had to be a "just in time" development process. It would be a continual three step process; (1) read the textbook and decide what needed to be covered for XYZ lecture, (2) write the lecture notes (actually type them out using Microsoft Word) and, (3) put them into some kind of technology format. That was how each lecture would be developed. But before that I had to choose a hardware platform, software, general instructional design, an overall screen design, and navigation components.

Teaching a course like Introduction to Sociology at a community college forces one to reflect on the world from the viewpoint of the student. Realistically, Sociology is taken because it is a requirement to get an AA or AS degree, not because there is a burning desire on the part of some 19 year old to learn about Functional Theory. The students are there to get the information needed to pass the tests, and get the grades. My challenge has always been how to teach them something about the "sociological imagination" - about how to think from a sociological perspective - while serving there basic student needs.

At this time I was doing most of my development work on a PC, and since it was the only machine that was available for limited duty on a weekly basis, the PC was my platform of choice. I was lucky enough to have access to an active matrix projection panel (InFocus 3000) and a high-end overhead projector. After finding a cart that would carry everything I created my own "mobile" presentation system that I wheeled to the class.

The other two big challenges; what kind of design and what kind of software to use to create the courseware. It was clear that since this was a Just In Time design, development, and delivery process I had no time to really work in any kind of multimedia - animation, audio, video, etc. I decided on an "interactive text-based" design.

Interactivity was important because I wanted to be able to move within and between lectures at will, there were 15 different lectures (topics) and to help them study for exams and to do reviews. So I knew that a linear design using something like PowerPoint would not work. Plus I wanted to use interactive hypertext and buttons so I could click on a concept or term and "jump" somewhere else to further define and give examples.

At the time of development I had done several projects using Asymetrix's "Multimedia Toolbook" authoring language. But I quickly realized I did not need that kind of horsepower for the design I had in mind. Asymetrix had just come out with Compel, an interactive, multimedia slide presentation program. It used the "slide" metaphor that was common to software like PowerPoint and Aldus Presentation, but it added the important feature of moving around the slide show. In essence, to use a slide tray metaphor, it allows you to move within a slide tray randomly and between slide trays, seamlessly.

So finally, in basically two days, I had the hardware, software, and design defined and it was off to the races.

The design was quite simple really. The opening screen of the Compel presentation was the basic "Sociology 100" graphic. The second screen was the "Main Menu" for all of the lectures in the course. These two screens made up one complete, independent

Compel "show." From the Main Menu I would click on a button, for example: Socialization, and Compel would then "branch" to a complete different Compel "show". Once in the Socialization lecture there was a "menu" listing several topics to cover. As I would go deeper into a lecture I was always two mouse clicks away from returning to the Main Menu for the whole course and one mouse click away from the Main Menu for the current lecture - this provided me the quick and interactive access I needed to move to any lecture if it was necessary.

The actual lecture materials were made up of short paragraphs, some with "hotwords" included, and a few interactive buttons. If I displayed a definition of a concept, like Socialization, and within that text definition were new terms, those terms would be highlighted as "hotwords" and I could click on them to get more information.

At the bottom of each screen were (4) four "navigation" buttons. Left and right "pointing hands" that allowed me to go forward or back one screen (slide) at a time. The other two buttons were the real interactive buttons. One returned me to the current topic Main Menu. The other returned me to the course Main Menu.

A key interactive button in the whole design was the "Example" button. Once I had defined a term, or concept, I would ask the class for examples of the concept, say "prejudice." That time would be used for interacting with the class, getting their thoughts and input. And when we were done gathering their input I would click on the "Example" button and up would pop up several examples of the concept, taken from both the book and/or the real world, to either reinforce their examples or supplement what was discussed.

I tried to keep the amount of text that was on the screen to the minimum. There were usually two "pieces" of text on the screen at a time; the first was the definition of the term or concept, the second was some further information used to generate discussion among the students.

One of the most important lesson I learned, and I learned it the first day, is that the students will try and write down everything on the screen, which was not what they needed for the test or to even learn the concept. That very first day, in both sections of the class, I had to keep telling them to "paraphrase" or specifically what to write down. I went back to my office scratching my head, which can be painful because I have no hair on the top of my head!

Anyway it hit me, use the power of the technology to "guide" them as to what they need to write. So I color-coded the lecture notes. Anything in yellow (I always use a dark blue background) was material that was important, the kind of stuff that would end up on the test. Any text that was white was information that we'd use to further explain a topic, to generate discussion, to give examples, etc.

It worked. They were very comfortable with the color-coding. It meant they spent a lot less time writing, and more time trying to understand and discuss the topics. It was a very simple change but from both a developer of technology and an instructors point of view it solved problems for the students and me.

Another important point about using this very simple form of instructional technology has to do with teaching more than one section of a course. I was teaching two sections of Introduction to Sociology. The technology insured that both classes got exactly the same information. What they got was not dependent on my memory, it was all there on the screen, the exact same way - the consistency is important to insure that all students get the main points.

Plus, and this goes back to my early days of teaching, by having all the materials on the computer, I didn't spend time using the whiteboard to write down lengthy definitions, I used the board to draw attention to specific words or concepts, or to make a point. But all of the core lecture materials came from the computer screen.

One other caveat that more than anything else brought home the students attitudes about the technology as a delivery system. One day, not to far into the semester I fired up all of the equipment and just before the lecture began I realized that the projection image was barely visible, even with all the lights turned out. I frantically tried to switch bulbs, I reconnected the computer to the panel, rebooted the panel and the computer, etc. Nothing helped. It was hopeless and class was ready to begin. So I reluctantly turned off the computer and began to try and use the whiteboard to write down the lecture notes and lead the discussion. To say the least, it was very awkward for me, after years of teaching the "normal" way, and then having taught using the technology, I found it very cumbersome to go back to the old paradigm. But more importantly the students didn't care for the old paradigm. They demanded that I go back to the computer, and we turned off all the lights and they were able to see just enough to get the information they wanted and the lecture went on.

Oh, the problem was not with the projection panel, but with the mirror in the overhead projector. Somehow the mirror had been knocked out of its normal position, thereby affecting the image that was projected. A quick and simple realignment of the mirror and the rest of the semester went perfectly.

In summary, as I mentioned above, I taught Sociology for over 9 years using the age old paradigm of lecture and writing on the board. And it served me well, and I love to teach. But through circumstances beyond my control, and on the fly, I was strongly encouraged to use instructional technology to deliver the same kind of material I did for years but with a new tool and thus a new paradigm.

I would never teach another class without the support of instructional technology, even if it is at one of the simplest levels - interactive text. As a tool it useful for me, it allows

me to create a meaningful lecture, all my notes are on a single floppy disk (not an unmanageable stack of overheads), and I have instant access to any notes on any topic in a 16 week lecture.

The students, I am thoroughly convinced, both by their classroom activity, and evaluations later on, also receive several benefits from the use of the technology; using the color-coding they were able to focus on getting just the material they needed for passing test, maybe not the best approach but in the end quite pragmatic for their needs; rather than spending lots of time trying to write everything down, or trying to figure out what to write, the students can then focus on the broader view of the topics and this lent itself to some wonderfully stimulating discussions. The computer allows the basic information to be presented efficiently leaving more time for the essence of teaching - the vibrant exchange of ideas between myself and the students.

If I teach the course again, and have the time, I would incorporate "multimedia" elements into the production. Specifically graphics or pictures to guide instruction and the use of very short video clips (on demand) to provide a focus for discussion.

In the final analysis, instructional technology is a tool that can be used to support and enhance the teaching of any subject material. But like any tool one has to learn to use the tool most effectively and what tool to use for what occasion. You don't need a table saw to cut one board, and in turn, depending on your audience and their needs and your subject matter, you can use the lower end of the instructional technology continuum and still use it quite effectively.

Teaching Introduction to Sociology using the lower end of the instructional technology continuum was indeed a COMPELing experience. I learned a lot and my experiences were invaluable in helping create an environment on this campus where more and more faculty are beginning, cautiously, to slowly embrace the new paradigm of teaching with technology. The technology will never replace the teaching. There is no greater thrill than standing in front of a classroom trying to bring new knowledge and understanding of the world to young and fertile minds. The human interaction will always be most important, the technology is only useful as a support, a very powerful support, of the human interaction.

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