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ABSTRACT

Faculty engaged in instruction integrating the World Wide Web continue to invest time to adapt different technologies towards meeting the mandate of increased interactivity. This paper reports on what the results of these efforts show and what the payoff is for the investment of time. The results of an informal survey of students in Web-based English classes at Middle Tennessee University are reported. Findings showed primarily positive and encouraging feedback on the effects of interactivity. Faculty and administrator concerns about course completion for Web-based courses are discussed. Student outcomes are also addressed. A copy of the student questionnaire is appended. (MES)

Communities of Learners: Connecting Students to Maximize Learning

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Faculty engaged in instruction integrating the web continue to invest time to adapt different technologies towards meeting the mandate of increased interactivity. We approach this venture gladly in the name of engaging our students more meaningfully with course content, with one another, and with us; however, we need to hear from each other about what the results of our efforts show, what the pay off is for the investment of one of our most precious commodities—our time.

Communities of Learners: Connecting Students to Maximize Learning

Dr. Maria A. Clayton

Participants in the ongoing dialogue about instruction using the web are by now well aware of the many avenues available for integrating interactive opportunities in these courses—whether in traditional courses that enlist the web for expanding classroom walls or in courses that rely on it exclusively. The National Education Association Policy on Distance Education identifies two key objectives in using instructional technology: 1) "Preserve a sense of community in colleges and universities—especially among teachers and learners . . ." and 2) "Sustain or increase the quality and frequency of communication between students and teachers—and within these groups" (National, Preface 6). At their best, web-assisted and web-based courses provide "the opportunity for students to move from individual to collaborative learning, from the consideration of ideas in isolation to an examination of their meaning in a global context" (Gilbert and Green 35). Our mandate is clear—to create learning communities through interactivity. However, we faculty are also painfully aware of the substantial time required for developing, integrating, and administering interactive elements in our courses. As we continue to invest time to adapt different technologies towards this aim, all in the name of engaging our students more meaningfully with the material, with each other, and with us, we need to hear from each other about what the results of our efforts show, what the pay off is for the investment of one of our most precious commodities—our time.

Exactly how do students benefit? In my own web-assisted and web-based courses, I have been concerned over issues that traditionally plague Distance Learning courses, online formats among them: student isolation and anxiety levels, student retention, and student outcomes. While I use the web to varying degrees in all my courses, I focus here on my web-assisted, first-

semester, freshman composition course and on my web-based, first-semester, sophomore introduction to literature course. Beginning in the summer 2001 semester for the web-based literature course and in the fall 2001 for the web-assisted composition course, I have expanded the already substantial use of interactive tools to include personal homepages for students and small group features—individual group email, discussion board, virtual chat, and file exchange, all through Blackboard's CourseInfo. Would this increase have any impact on my students in these three areas of concern?

When it comes to student isolation and anxiety levels, critics of using the web in instruction point to the "distance" created by the, at least partial, loss of face-to-face contact as the primary contributor. Writing about her own experiences with her online students, Linda Peters suggests that students affected in this manner, "miss the social contact and face-to-face interaction that an institutional setting provides." However, others like Fred Hurst in "The Death of Distance Learning?" point out that often "there's more distance between the faculty member and the students in a large lecture hall than between a distance learning student and faculty member who are a mouse click apart online" (59). It seems to me that most of us involved in using instructional technology, in whatever format, realize that the presence of the teacher is key, however manifested, and that student isolation and anxiety levels can be minimized and controlled if that presence is clearly felt. *e-Learning Solutions* Manager, Karen Frankola argues that "the emotional connection between instructor and student may be even more important for online courses than in the classroom" (16); she goes on to add that online students often receive many more instances of personal recognition for their work than traditional students (16). Once personal connections are made by students through the use of technology, levels of anxiety are reduced, as they perceive themselves part of a learning community.

From my own students, I have received primarily positive and encouraging feedback through an informal survey on the effects of interactivity (see Appendix) and through evidence of increased appreciation for the resulting collaborative exchanges. For example, in my web-assisted composition course, I have grouped students for the last two semesters from each of my two sections into cross-class peer groups, using CourseInfo's small group features—email, discussion board, virtual chat, and file exchange. These students have established small communities of writers, for whom a key goal is to help individual members expand his/her concept of audience. Their rating for access to one another via email and discussion boards earned high marks—ranging from 100% to 56% in the two, most positive ratings (Critical and Useful). Learning about each other via the personal web pages was rated as primarily Nice to Have, while the virtual chat feature was fairly evenly split between the most positive and least positive ratings. These two ratings are understandable because these students do have face-to-face access to one another. In general, the increased access to peers and instructor alike (expanded classroom walls) was evaluated in positive terms in the comments provided ("Gives me access to a lot more than just the teacher"; "More opportunities to get assignments done well"; "It helps me keep up w/homework & allows me to access my peers if I have a problem"), with only a few exceptions, bemoaning the added effort expended: "there is too much to do just for writing a paper."

Similarly, the web-based introduction to literature students presented a positive attitude towards the beneficial effects of increased interactivity. In fact, not surprisingly, their rating of the value of the CourseInfo features was even higher than those of their web-assisted counterparts. For them, these features are a lifeline. With the exception of the personal web pages, which received an 88% response as Nice to Have, the other eight features listed on the

survey received between 100% and 72% in the top two ratings, with the virtual chat being the least popular. Written comments ranged from claims of being lost without the interactive capabilities to "By seeing the ideas of other students, I can reevaluate and better articulate my own." Even comments made to each other on the small group discussion area also shed light on the importance of keeping them linked. In one particularly active group, the exchange among the three peers was wonderful:

> Once again, I've enjoyed reading your comments :)
>
> I'm very glad I was assigned to this group; I think we have a terrific group here, and I am so grateful that we're able to discuss mature, somewhat painful, subjects in context of our readings. I believe written works are more meaningful when one can relate to them, and it is comforting to know that I'm not the only person who can.
>
> If you'll look at the three poems we've chosen so far, I think it tells something interesting about our group. Each of us has chosen a poem that contains some very deep meaning. We've all chosen "the stuff that makes ya *think*."

One of the other peers replied, "I also, agree that we have a great group!! This group has really motivated me to re-read and contemplate the material so that I can contribute to this insightful group. Good point about 'survivors guilt.' I find myself seeing things I hadn't seen before with every post I read!"

I found the responses to the prompts at the bottom of the survey very re-affirming. To the question about whether the interactivity tools helped dispel anxiety about the course, the combined percentages for all groups was a resounding 92% yes, 8% no. To the question about whether the interactivity tools helped develop a sense of community and dispel student isolation, the combined percentages for all groups was 85% yes, 15% no. While the preferences over the specific tools varied, the stats indicate to me that any time I invest in taming my student's feeling of isolation and level of anxiety pays off in fostering a positive learning community

One of faculty and administrators' most serious concerns about web-based instruction centers on course completion, marred by a high rate of attrition. Sarah Carr laments in "As Distance Education Comes of Age, the Challenge is Keeping the Students," "we have little national statistical support, but anecdotal evidence clearly points to lower course-completion and retention rates among distance learning formats over the traditional counterparts." She goes on to put numbers with the generalizations, reporting that some administrators "concur that course-completion rates are often 10 to 20 percentage points higher in traditional courses than in distance offerings" (Carr). Writing for *Syllabus Magazine,* Judy Baker adds that "Innovative approaches to providing instructor-student interactivity are key to decreasing online attrition rates" (26). However, she does caution us about the increased cost in terms of faculty time and suggests "small groups for the purpose of coordinating [student] communication with the instructor and each other" (27). My own experience concurs with both authors.

How have attrition rates been affected by increasing interactivity? In the web-assisted composition course, retention has improved. For fall 2001, the retention percentage was 83%, higher than the 78% rate from fall 2000 (also web-assisted), and certainly beyond the 62% rate for two traditional sections from fall 1999. Turning to the web-based literature course, the first semester of increased interactivity, summer 2001, yielded a very promising 85% rate; however, fall 2001 plummeted to a disappointing 63%. While there were extenuating, non-academic circumstances for the majority of the students that dropped, the statistic is still shocking, particularly when compared to the 78% retention rate of spring 2000, 80% of summer 2000, 76% of fall 2000, and 68% of spring 2001. Despite the one semester's weak showing, I am prone to agree with Carr's reporting that faculty opinions suggest that improved retention can be achieved by "more fully utilizing the Internet." She shares an Academic and Administrative Technology

Dean's comments, concluding that "when he switched to a more interactive Internet program that allowed him to hold regular chats and organize e-mail messages more efficiently, his course-completion rates jumped from 62 percent to 90 percent" (Carr). I'm happy to report that the retention rate for the current semester, spring 2002, is back up to 83% with one month left in the semester.

A third area of interest is student outcomes—our traditional, though not always reliable indicator of student learning. Karen Frankola suggests that following best practices in interactivity "not only creates a sense of community for participants; it also stimulates learning through discussing ideas and practicing skills . . . . [students] benefit from high interactivity with faculty and each other through exchanges like bulletin board discussions and e-mails" (16). Anytime we increase and deepen the rate of idea exchange, we move our students to improved material analysis and integration. This should be the goal of our courses based on sound educational principles.

Student end-of-course outcomes for the web-assisted composition class show an average GPA of 2.0. This GPA is in line with the 2.0 from fall 2000 (also web-assisted) but higher than the 1.81 and 1.56 from two traditional sections in fall 1999. Turning to the web-based introduction to literature course, once again, summer 2001 stands out, with a combined, average GPA of 2.72 for the two sections. Fall 2001 also has a strong showing at 2.73, but this positive result is tempered when the low retention rate is taken into account—some poor performers weeded themselves out before their GPA's could become part of the statistics. Both semesters' results offer a nice contrast to spring 2000 at 2.24, summer 2000 at 1.94, fall 2000 at 2.06, and spring 2001 at 2.66. Strong end-of-semester outcomes could become the norm.

So in response to the question, "What are we to do to combat potential problems for students in courses using the web?" We should answer, "Increase interactivity." This solution is widely available for students in web-assisted courses as opposed their counterparts in standard traditional courses and for students in web-based courses as opposed to their counterparts in other distance education formats. In both cases, building learning communities through more opportunities for faculty-student, student-student, and student-course content interaction is easily achievable.

Interactivity is the standard for effective online instruction. As we continue to invest our time redefining and refining interactive opportunities for our students, we should take heart in an interesting finding reported by the NEA in their 2000 faculty survey. They conclude that "Faculty teaching courses with more student interaction are also more likely than their counterparts with less student interaction to hold an overall more positive attitude toward their distance course . . . [They also give] their distance learning course higher ratings on meeting the goals NEA has determined are essential to a quality education" (National, "Survey" 6). It seems clear that the positive effects of integrating interactivity do not flow in only one direction.

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Appendix

Effects of Interactivity

The course I am currently taking offers expanded communication/interactivity through these tools (indicated with a check mark), and I rate them as follows (indicated with a check mark):

Course number & section: _____

Type of Tool	Usefulness Rating (select only one)	Type of Tool	Usefulness Rating (select only one)
1. ___"24/7" Course Material Availability	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful	6. ___Email	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful
2. ___Website Announcements	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful	7. ___Discussion Board	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful
3. ___Personal WebPages	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful	8. ___Small Group Discussion Board	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful
4. ___Quizzes	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful	9. ___Virtual Chat	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful
5. ___Website Grade book	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful	10.___DropBox	___Critical ___Useful ___Nice to Have ___Not useful

Does the use of these tools help to dispel anxiety about the course—meeting requirements, engaging with the material? _____yes _____no

If yes, which is the tool you found most helpful in this area? _____

Does the use of these tools help to develop a sense of community and dispel student isolation? _____yes _____no

If yes, which is the tool you found most helpful in this area? _____

How does the use of these tools contribute to the course for you as a student?

How does the use of these tools detract from the course for you as a student?

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