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ABSTRACT

Seven teaching and learning tools, including course handouts, threaded discussion forums, and written assignments enhance learning in online courses by enabling students to deepen their understanding of course material and reduce anxiety about the online setting and their performance in the class. These tools have been used in 24 community college sections of Lifespan Development Psychology online with 720 students ranging from 18 to 62 years of age. Student response has been favorable, as expressed in student journals, online discussion, informal email messages, and course evaluations. Additional assignments, handouts, and discussion forums are suggested to make a complete course template. The potential problems of cheating on exams and the lack of in-person contact are discussed. (Author)

Enhancing Student Learning in Online Courses

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Abstract

Seven teaching and learning tools, including course handouts, threaded discussion forums, and written assignments enhance learning in online courses by enabling students to deepen their understanding of course material and reduce anxiety about the online setting and their performance in the class. These tools have been used in 24 community college sections of Lifespan Developmental Psychology online with 720 students ranging from 18 to 62 years of age. Student response has been favorable, as expressed in student journals, online discussion, informal email messages, and course evaluations. Additional assignments, handouts, and discussion forums are suggested to make a complete course template. The potential problems of cheating on exams and the lack of in-person contact are discussed.

The online instructor is challenged to facilitate active student learning in the absence of in-person contact and in the face of student anxieties about the online setting, feelings of isolation, procrastination, poor attendance (Miller, Rainer, & Corley, 2003), and technical problems. Online faculty concerns, such as these, have not been found to differ significantly according to the type of college or university or discipline (Wilson, 1998). This paper describes seven online teaching and learning tools including the course documents, or handouts, *How to Succeed in this Class*, *Specific Learning Objectives*, and weekly *Instructor's Notes*; discussion forums with threaded discussion around course material and a threaded discussion *Lounge*; and student *Email Journals* and exams. These tools enhance learning in online courses by enabling students to deepen their understanding of course material, as well as helping them reduce anxiety about the online setting and their performance in the class. Students are given the structure and the information needed to succeed, there is regular feedback among students and the instructor, and a sense of community is created in the class.

These factors, in turn, can benefit student attendance and participation as well as online course retention, or completion, rates as “the student needs to feel like a part of a learning community or at least like a real person to the instructor. Students seem to forgive technical problems as long as the instructor is ‘there’” (C. Broughton, personal communication, April 4, 2003). Similarly, student perceptions of social presence, the degree to which the instructor and other students are perceived as “real,” has been found to relate to students’ perceived learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Method

Participants

The teaching and learning tools presented in this paper have been used and developed over the course of 12 quarters, 24 sections, of Lifespan Developmental Psychology online offered by WashingtonOnline (WAOL), a consortium of Washington state community colleges offering shared online courses, and Everett Community College. Approximately 720 students were enrolled in the course from Spring quarter, 1999 to Spring, 2003. The age range of the students was approximately 18 to 62 years. The majority of the students were women.

Procedure

Seven Teaching and Learning Tools

Instructor's Notes

The weekly Instructor's Notes handouts provide an overview of the week's topics and a short lecture from the instructor, with references. This gives the instructor a chance to present material that is not included in the text, elaborate on challenging topics from the reading, and give additional examples and definitions of concepts. A checklist of assignments for the week with due dates is provided at the end of each week's Instructor's Notes. Reminders about upcoming assignments, such as papers or exams, can also be included in the checklist.

Three to five issues and questions for the week's threaded discussion are provided. Students are asked to reflect on these and then to explore them with their assigned group for that week in the threaded discussion forum.

Examples: What are some of the positives of adolescent egocentrism? Why is death not always easily defined?

Specific Learning Objectives

The Specific Learning Objectives handout is provided as a guide to the reading and a study guide for the exams. These objectives correspond to specific information in the required reading. Students are encouraged to “answer” each objective during their reading, thus creating a study guide for the exams. Several specific learning objectives are identified in each week’s Instructor’s Notes handout as particularly important to understand, giving students an idea of the material that is most likely to be on the exams.

Examples: Describe Erikson’s psychosocial crisis of initiative versus guilt. Discuss the nature and benefits of rough-and-tumble and sociodramatic play during the play years.

Discussion Forums

Each week two groups take part in threaded discussions of course content. The discussion centers on the issues and questions posted by the instructor in that week’s Instructor’s Notes. Students are also encouraged to discuss material in the week’s reading that stood out for them and that they want to comment on, ask about, or explore further.

It works well to have 10 to 15 students in each discussion group, with the group assignments changing so that each week the groups have different configurations of students. The group discussions create a feeling of community among class members (students and instructor). A positive social dynamic is maintained to foster a spirit of openness, sharing, collaboration, exploration, and acceptance of diversity. Student

participation is active, an essential element of effective online learning (Achte-meier, Morris, & Finnegan, 2003). The instructor monitors students' participation in discussion and actively takes part in discussions (facilitating, guiding, deepening). Students have been very appreciative of this participation and it provides many opportunities for the instructor to share knowledge and experience.

Student comments: *"If I were to take this class on campus, I'm the type of student who sits in the middle of the room, takes notes, and seldom answers questions (unless I'm called on). To be successful online, you have to participate. The class made me reevaluate class participation that I know will carry me through school."*

Lounge

A threaded discussion forum called the Lounge is an area for discussions and questions that are not directly related to course content, such as computer or course website problems. Students can often answer one another's questions. This is also a place to socialize and get to know one another better. Students may ask about courses other students have taken or what a particular major is like, follow up on something from the discussion such as a parenting or career issue, or plan to meet and study. This is a good place for the instructor and students to share references for books, articles and television programs relevant to the course.

Email Journals

Four to five written assignments called Email Journals are sent by students to the instructor over the course of the term. These enable students to discuss any problems or concerns they have, to give progress reports to the instructor, and to provide specific

feedback about how aspects of the class are working for them. The specific assignments for each Email Journal are in the Instructor's Notes handout for that week.

Examples: Do you have a topic for the first paper? How did the midterm exam go for you? What do you honestly think of the textbook?

This is an excellent way for the instructor to gain feedback for course and teaching improvement and to address specific problems or concerns of students who might not otherwise contact the instructor. Email journals promote learning by enabling the instructor to stay in touch with students in a sort of ongoing dialogue, and to keep students motivated, encouraged, feeling connected to the instructor, and "listened to" (Achtemeier et al., 2003; Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Student comments: *"Thanks for the opportunity to write to you this way with any problems or comments, etc. This opens up the way of communication well, and I feel that it is very effective."*

Exams

The open-book exams are made up of application-type questions. They are a combination of short essay, multiple-choice, true/false, and fill in the blank questions to tap into a variety of student learning styles. The exams provide a learning tool for students, as they must apply the concepts and theories they have learned to answer the questions. Students are given three days to complete the exams, including one weekend day, to accommodate students' various work, school and family schedules and to reduce test anxiety.

Student comments: *"I felt that having a take-home test (only way on the internet) was actually a learning tool. It forced you to re-read material that maybe didn't sink in*

the first time. You had to really understand it and 'think' about your answers. I wish all my classes let you take home the midterm." This type of exam "just continues my learning process rather than ask me to regurgitate what I've learned."

How to Succeed in this Class

The handout, *How to Succeed in this Class*, is designed to help students minimize anxiety about the online setting, exams, and other work and develop valuable skills for the present course and others. Tips are offered for test-taking and studying, as well as successfully approaching the present online course (including how often to log into the class and how to avoid printing problems).

Examples: Have more than one place to access the internet (online classroom).
Print out all the course handouts.

Results

Student Feedback and Completion Rates

Student response (solicited and unsolicited) to these approaches has been favorable as expressed in Email Journals, online discussion, informal email messages, and course evaluations. Student retention, or completion, rates is another indicator of student success, and is the percentage of students who completed the course out of the total enrollments (which are those students who remain registered in the class after the 10th day, including students who registered but never attended or officially withdrew). Completion rates for the course described in this paper have been favorable, in comparison to the completion rates for both non-distance (on-campus, face-to-face) and other online courses.

Completion rates in non-distance courses in Washington state has stayed fairly constant from Fall 1998 to Fall 2002, at 82 to 83%, while completion rates in online courses in Washington (WAOL and non-WAOL) has risen over the same period from 65% to 72% (Washington State Board for Community & Technical Colleges, 2003). The average completion rate for the 14 WAOL sections, Fall 2000 to Winter 2003, of the Lifespan Developmental Psychology online course described in this paper was 89%, with a range of 82-100% (WashingtonOnline, 2003).

Discussion

Potential Drawbacks and Problems in Online Courses

Potential problems with online courses include the possibility of student dishonesty, the effectiveness of assessments, and the lack of in-person interaction (DeSantis). The possibility of student cheating on exams is of particular concern in the online setting. Proctored exams could be an alternative to online exams for some courses (where a take-home type exam is not appropriate), but are not always possible, practical, or desirable. Exam questions that test understanding or application of a concept, rather than factual information, can deepen and enhance student learning and bring new perspectives and understandings, as well as provide an effective assessment of learning. Essays that require students to create their own examples or solutions reduce the likelihood that students will, or can without the instructor knowing, copy from former students' exams. Revising the objective test questions each quarter also reduces opportunities for cheating.

The lack of in-person contact and interaction is sometimes considered a potential drawback by educators and students, particularly those who have not been involved in an

online course. Richardson & Swan (2003) ask if it is *really* the physical presence of instructor and students, or the interactions themselves that are important to learning. I have experienced more student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction in the online version of Lifespan Developmental Psychology than in the on-campus sections of the course. In spite of not literally seeing one another or being able to talk, online class members get to know one another better than in-class students, overall. Discussion of course content is more in depth online. There are more numerous and more thoughtful real life examples of concepts and insights about developmental issues. Participation is active, rather than passive. In addition, students and instructors have email access to one another 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Student comment: *“The discussions we have had throughout the quarter have consistently impressed me with both their depth and honesty...what people were willing to contribute.”*

A Complete Course Template

The teaching tools described above are a partial view of an online course. To make a complete course template the following are also recommended. Additional assignments (papers), handouts (course syllabus, references and recommended reading, discussion guidelines, instructions for papers, student rights and responsibilities, and a guide to classroom areas), and discussion forums (a forum for first week introductions), as well as an area for instructor announcements.

I recommend having the online classroom prepared before students gain access to the class. Post all the course handouts (except the Instructor’s Notes beyond week one) as well as an informative opening welcome announcement (with start date, required texts,

instructor contact and technical support information, and where to go next). This gives students an initial sense of how the course will work and what the expectations are, eases their anxieties about the class, and gives them confidence in the instructor. To get students to thinking about the qualities and skills that may help or hinder their success in an online course, I include a short quiz in the first week's Email Journal assignment. Quiz questions include: Do you feel that high quality learning can take place without going to a traditional educational facility? Can you dedicate 12 to 15 hours a week to participate online and read, think and write offline?

It is important to have regular feedback mechanisms to enable student success (Achtemeier et al., 2003). Prompt response to students' questions and concerns and prompt return of completed assignments, with feedback, facilitates students' learning and feelings of connection to the instructor.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could consider differences in students, such as age, learning style (DeSantis), college major, and expectations for the course, and how those tie in with learning. It could also be helpful to explore how online students are changing. Later classes may differ from early online classes as some, but not all, students gain online course, and computer, experience. There may well be a greater range of ability and comfort with the online setting among students in a class, which might impact student engagement, participation, satisfaction and learning.

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