

A SIMULATION EXPERIENCE IN AN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT THAT MEETS GOOD TEACHING PRACTICES AND A LOW THRESHOLD APPLICATION*

Shelly Albritton

This work is produced by OpenStax-CNX and licensed under the
Creative Commons Attribution License 2.0[†]

Abstract

As demands for online courses continue to increase and educational institutions rise to meet the needs of students, it is imperative faculty members are guided by the Seven Principles (Chickering and Gamson, 1986; Erhmann, 2003) of effective teaching as they develop online courses. This includes the judicious selection of distance learning tools to support quality teaching and learning experiences in online settings. Simulations delivered in traditional face-to-face courses have provided instructors valuable teachable moments and students with authentic learning experiences. When simulations are well designed in an online course using appropriate distance learning tools, teaching strategies can be thoughtfully developed and successfully delivered that produce quality student learning experiences.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

Chickering and Gamson (1986) introduced seven principles of good teaching as guidelines for improving student learning. Originally applied to undergraduate students, the seven principles can be considered a cornerstone for planning and designing learning experiences for all students, in all disciplines, at all educational levels from K-12 to graduate school. The seven principles of good teaching

1. encourages contact between students and faculty,
2. develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,

*Version 1.2: Jul 1, 2008 6:53 am -0500

[†]<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

3. encourages active learning,
4. gives prompt feedback,
5. emphasizes time on task,
6. communicates high expectations, and
7. respects diverse talents and ways of learning. (¶ 4)

The seven principles “rest on 50 years of research on the way teachers teach and students learn, how students work and play with one another, and how students and faculty talk to each other” (¶ 3). Furthermore, Chickering and Gamson stated that each principle is powerful on its own when applied to teaching and learning, but when all are present in the instructional design, they create “six powerful forces in education: 1) activity, 2) expectations, 3) cooperation, 4) interaction, 5) diversity, and 6) responsibility” (¶ 6). Using the seven principles of good teaching as guidelines when designing online courses and creating collaborative experiences in an information- and technology-rich learning environment, these powerful forces become building blocks for a dynamic learning experience.

Advancements in communication and information technologies now provide faculty and students numerous low threshold applications that can be used when developing collaborative projects. “A Low Threshold Application (LTA) is a teaching/learning application of information technology that is reliable, accessible, easy to learn, non-intimidating and (incrementally) inexpensive” (The TLT Group, n.d.). Gilbert (n.d.) explains that an LTA is dependent upon personal characteristics; that is, what is considered low threshold to one person may not be to another. What constitutes an LTA is dependent upon a person’s level of interest, motivation, available time, technology skills and capabilities.

Course management systems, such as Blackboard/WebCT, have become widely available to educational institutions. In the Blackboard/WebCT system, email, the discussion board, and the chat rooms are LTAs most accessible for instructors to use to facilitate collaborative projects and to build learning communities. Another LTA communication technology that has recently emerged are Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) systems that allow faculty and students in distance learning environments to speak with one another in real time as opposed to relying on typed text in traditional chat rooms. Basic online tools provide faculty the means to apply the principles of good teaching in either a totally online course or in a blended course that combines face-to-face meetings with a distance learning system. Ehrmann (2003) points out that, “Whether students come to campus every day or not at all. . . student interaction can be increased and improved” (¶ 1) by incorporating distance learning systems. Using online tools also provide students from various locations the opportunities to actively engage in collaborative projects at times that are convenient for them and in ways that support different learning styles and preferences.

An Example of a Collaborative Project and the LTAs Used

In one educational leadership program, a course called School Community Relations was delivered totally online using WebCT Campus Edition 4.1.5 and Centra, a VoIP system. The seven principles of good teaching guided the development and delivery of the course content. Class meetings were arranged where the students completed assignments on WebCT one week and met on Centra the next week. In WebCT, three content modules were created to organize the course content around three units of learning (see Appendix A). Instructions and course activities uploaded into each module contained links to course files, URL addresses, the discussion board, and the quiz tool. Students engaged in a variety of individual, whole group, and team assignments using the online tools that supported the assignment requirements. For example, using the Student Presentation Tool in WebCT, four teams were generated for small group assignments. A private discussion topic in WebCT was created for each team. Each team was assigned one of the chat rooms to use for their work. Additionally, each team had its own Centra room to use as they collaborated on projects. Assessment rubrics (see Appendix B) were used to establish expectations and provide students guidance and feedback.

In one unit of the course, students engaged in a collaborative project to explore media relations and engage in a simulated press conference. Banach’s book (2001), *The ABC Complete Book of School Marketing*, served as a guide to prepare a press kit and to conduct a press conference. Students prepared for the simulation using WebCT email and the discussion board. The final presentation of the simulated press conference occurred

in Centra. One part of the unit on media relations dealt with communicating with the media during crisis situations. Students first analyzed their individual districts' crisis communication plans and posted the analyses on an open discussion board. The analysis required recommendations for improving the plan and communicating the plan with key stakeholders. Students responded to one another's recommendations with comments and/or suggestions. Students also explored and reflected on ways to build relationships between schools and the media.

Next, a case scenario and instructions for a simulated press conference (see Appendix C) were posted on the discussion board. Students were then randomly assigned to role-play one of the parts in the simulation; some were chosen to role-play media personnel and some were chosen to role-play district personnel. Students were instructed to sign up for a portion of the press kit that would be provided to the media personnel in advance of the press conference in order to publicly address the problem posed in the scenario. Students collectively developed and compiled the press kit items and posted their contribution on the discussion board. A private discussion topic was created for those who role-played school personnel and one was created for those students who role-played media personnel. Each group studied the press kit information in advance of the simulated press conference. Those students who represented the media personnel posted questions they wanted answered by the school personnel on their group's private discussion board (See Appendix D). The students who represented school personnel used their private discussion board to develop plans for conducting the press conference and to discuss potential questions that could be posed during the press conference and to prepare their responses.

The simulated press conference was then conducted using Centra to replicate as closely as possible a face-to-face, live press conference setting in the online environment. Students were organized in Centra where the school district personnel were given presenter status. This allowed them to have control of the tools they would need during the simulation, such as granting the microphone to media personnel. The students representing media personnel were given participant status. All students had a web camera, and whoever had control of the microphone could be seen by all participants. The student assuming the role of press conference coordinator gave a description of how the conference had been planned and organized prior to the actual event. The news release and the agenda were not a part of the press kit prior to the simulation. These items were uploaded into the Centra agenda tool and were opened to all participants at the appropriate times during the simulation. The student representing the moderator detailed the press conference protocols that would be adhered to, introduced the spokesperson (the superintendent), served as timekeeper, and closed the conference. The spokesperson then gave a brief opening statement and opened the microphone to take questions. The media personnel clicked on a tool in Centra to indicate they had their hand raised, the superintendent would recognize the individual, and the moderator would give the person the microphone. The media person would then present a question and the superintendent would take the microphone and respond.

The students engaged in a discussion after the event, and then were asked to post their reflections on the WebCT discussion board. Following are samples of the students' reflections:

- At first I didn't know how all this would work out, but now that we have completed the press conference, I believe it was a huge success and I learned a great deal about working with the media. I also see the benefit of preparing a press kit.
- Using Centra for the simulation was very close to a real press conference I've seen on TV.
- As a school leader, I don't think we can have enough practice working with the media. This project let me see that with careful planning, the school can feel they have a little more control when working with the media.
- Before our press conference I watched a few on TV to see how they were managed. This helped me to get an idea how I wanted ours to be conducted.
- Dealing with the media seems intimidating, but this simulation let me see how it can be handled in a way that gives the press prior information and when a microphone is stuck in front of your face, you can have some sense of order to the whole ordeal.
- I didn't know we could do something like this online! I thought this would be a big disaster, but now

I'm pleasantly surprised how real it seemed. I think the spokesperson handled herself like a professional and she seemed very calm and prepared for the kinds of questions we asked. Great experience!

Even though simulations are conducted in artificial settings, they do provide students with valuable learning experiences in a risk-free environment. There are unique challenges in planning and delivering quality simulation experiences in traditional face-to-face classrooms, and the distance learning environment poses even more complex challenges. However, with thoughtful planning and the effective use of online tools, students are able to benefit from simulations in the distance learning environment.

Conclusion

As demands for distance education continue to increase and educational institutions rise to meet the needs of students, it is imperative faculty are guided by the seven principles of good teaching in the development of their online courses and to judiciously select LTA's to support the teaching and learning. Oftentimes, in the rush to meet the demands for online courses, traditional courses have been converted to an online format that resembles a traditional 'chalk-talk' delivery of instruction. For some instructors new to the online learning environment, they may have a limited view of strategies and online tools that can be considered for the delivery of distance learning. Simulations provide students with authentic teachable moments and when designed well using appropriate LTA tools, this valuable teaching strategy should not be ignored in online courses. Ehrmann (1996) states,

If teaching focuses simply on memorizing and regurgitating prepackaged information, whether delivered by a faculty lecture or computer, students should reach for a different course, search out additional resources or complementary experiences, establish their own study groups, or go to the professor for more substantial activities and feedback. (Technology Is Not Enough, ¶ 1)

However, online instructors should be mindful of Ehrmann's caution: "Faculty members who already work with students in ways consistent with the Principles need to be tough-minded about the software- and technology-assisted interactions they create and buy into" (Technology Is Not Enough, ¶ 2). This is an excellent reminder for faculty using online learning systems to stay centered on the teaching and learning rather than the technology. With such advances in communication and information technologies, it can be tempting to become bedazzled by the 'bells and whistles' and lose sight of what makes teaching and learning effective. Applying the seven principles of good teaching and judiciously selecting strategies and the online tools to deliver instruction can be the roadmap for meaningful learning experiences in online courses.

CLICK HERE TO ACCESS ALL APPENDICES AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS FOR USE WITH THIS INSTRUCTIONAL MODULE ¹

References

- Banach, William, J. (2001). *The abc complete book of school marketing*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Chickering, A., & Gamson, Z. (1986). Seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education. Retrieved on March 19, 2007, from <http://www.tltgroup.org/Seven/Home.htm>²
- Chickering, A., & Ehrmann, S. (1996). Implementing the seven principles: Technology as lever. *AAHE Bulletin*. Retrieved on March 20, 2007, from <http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/seven.html>³
- Ehrmann, S. (2003). New ideas and additional reading. Retrieved on March 20, 2007, from <http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/seven.html>
- Teaching, Learning, and Technology (TLT) Group. (n.d.). Retrieved March 15, 2007, from <http://www.tltgroup.org/ltras/Intro.htm>⁴

¹ <http://cnx.org/content/m17156/latest/Appendices.pdf>

² <http://www.tltgroup.org/Seven/Home.htm>

³ <http://www.tltgroup.org/programs/seven.html>

⁴ <http://www.tltgroup.org/ltras/Intro.htm>