MAXIMIZING THE ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCE: SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This article will discuss ways of maximizing the online course experience for teachers- and counselors-in-training. The widespread popularity of online instruction makes it a necessary learning experience for future teachers and counselors (Ash, 2011). New teachers and counselors take on the responsibility of preparing their students for real-life academic and professional experiences that will rely on communication through the Internet, social media, and virtual classrooms. To better prepare for these demands, they must be technologically literate and prepared to integrate technology, media, and differentiated pedagogies to deliver engaging lessons for students of various ages (Kelly, 2008). This article will examine the setup of the typical virtual classroom, and the ways that it can be modified to enhance student engagement, encourage collaboration among students, and provide diversified lessons to meet the needs of students with varied learning-style preferences. An example of a learning-style model will be presented to identify learning-style domains and profiles that may benefit from matching instructional strategies in online courses (Cicco, 2009; Rundle, 2006). The model will be discussed in connection with recent research studies indicating that specific pedagogical techniques utilized within the context of an online course can better accommodate individual learning needs and preferences while optimizing academic performance and overall student and faculty satisfaction. Suggestions for online educators include simple and clear presentation of course requirements, incorporating visual and auditory enhancements in lessons, using interactive course tools, and allowing for various assignment options (Cicco, 2009; Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007).

Keywords: Differentiated Instruction, Distance Learning, Learning Style, Online Course, Online Instruction, Pedagogical Techniques, Student Engagement, Virtual Classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The Online Course Experience

The increase in online course offerings among higher education programs presents educators with the responsibility and challenge to improve distance learning pedagogies. Graduate education programs have placed great trust in the effectiveness of online instruction in recent years. However, empirical evidence to document student learning outcomes may not be readily available to college and university decision-makers and student advisors (Blackmore, Tantam, & van Deurzen, 2008; Cicco, 2009). The convenience of online courses will continue to make them popular, desirable, and available to students. Faculty, students, and educational institutions recognize the economic benefits for stakeholders, as the virtual classroom eliminates the costs of commuting and the need for a set time and physical location to convene in. The virtual classroom may seem maintenance-free but in reality it is the role of the instructor to partner with institutional technology staff to make sure it is running smoothly, without technological glitches. The instructor is also expected to be fluent in the language of the course management system, whether it is Blackboard in its latest version, or WebCT, or another system. The instructor may receive training but ultimately will have to take the personal initiative to keep up with system changes and upgrades to be able to navigate through the classroom design and setup with ease. The responsibility of the instructor is not limited to remaining technologically literate. Instructors must also consider the online course as another vehicle for employing sound

pedagogical strategies that may or may not be evident in their in-class courses (Ash, 2011; Meyers, 2008).

For Educators

Instructors of online courses within teacher and counselor preparation programs may be the first role models for future educators on how to engage students of different ages and with varied learning-style preferences in the virtual classroom. Teachers of future teachers should be experts in pedagogy, and this translates to possessing a vivid recognition of the unique opportunities for learning that are available both in-class and asynchronously in online courses. These expert pedagogues, when embracing the possibility of advancing the profession through the online forum, should model the integration of technology, media, and differentiated instruction to produce engaging and stimulating lessons (Ash, 2011; Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2002).

For Students

Teachers- and counselors-in-training are likely to be faced with the complexity and diversity of student learning needs when they enter their respective professions. They will rely heavily on their academic preparation and field experiences to provide the best quality of care for their students. Therefore, it is especially of concern that these rigorous graduate academic programs successfully prepare future teachers and counselors by delivering optimal instruction of curriculum. Online courses should have the same learning objectives for students as their in-class counterparts and they should reveal equal or better learning outcomes (Blackmore et al., 2008).

Effective teachers and school counselors will help their students to prepare for the real world by offering them instructional examples that can be connected with life experiences. At some point, online courses may become part of the curriculum for elementary, middle, and high schools. Teachers who have completed online courses will have the advantage of being able to offer their students this type of instruction with an understanding of both student and instructor perspectives. Online courses rely on effective online communication of course material. The teachers that have been students of online courses have participated in a valuable and necessary learning experience that highlights the expansion of communication through technological channels, such as Internet, social media, and the virtual classroom itself. As teachers are called to instruct students of various ages online, they will need to refine their online communication skills, technological literacy skills, and their abilities to integrate differentiated pedagogies that fit the online classroom (Trepal, Haberstroh, Duffey, & Evans, 2007).

The Virtual Classroom

The basic setup of the virtual classroom relies heavily on text and icons. The classroom is typically accessible through the college or university portal. The faculty and student members will require a username and password to log in and to then open the course homepage. The course is organized with a control panel and a series of parts to select from, which may include some or all of the following or other options: announcements; assignments; course information; class roster; course documents such as the syllabus, reading materials, handouts, and Power Point presentations; course calendar; discussion board; gradebook; Web links; and course tools for instructors managing course design, files, assessments, and student submissions. At first glance, it may seem like a great deal of information to sort through. The successful online student will be able to think critically to navigate through text, multi-task, focus attention in different areas of the course, and solve initial technology problems (Yang & Chou, 2008). The way in which material is presented may make the classroom setup appear easy to become acquainted with or on the contrary, cluttered, confusing, and overwhelming. The instructor has a great deal of control as to how and when material is presented to students, and can create a smooth or difficult experience, especially for students with little or no experience in online courses (Ash, 2011; Kelly, 2008).

Enhancing Student Engagement

Online instructors are in a particularly powerful position to improve online learning experiences for their students. Modifications to the common setup of the virtual classroom begin by reducing reliance on strictly text-based instructions, assignment descriptions, and lesson plans. Even minimal changes in the design of virtual classroom

can enhance student engagement by appearing less overwhelming, allowing ample time for completion of assignments, and encouraging students to make choices among a variety of assignment options. In creating a syllabus for the online course, use of color, clear subheadings, and relevant illustrations and diagrams can make the document more attractive and less intimidating. Lessons should include opportunities for independent activities that students can complete individually, and for those that encourage collaboration among students by requiring working in a pair or small group. Diversified lessons, with actual motivation exercises, and assignment options will likely meet the learning needs and preferences of different learners. In addition, if students have more choices for how and when they will complete learning objectives, they will gain a sense of empowerment and ownership in their learning process, that will in turn increase levels of engagement, interest, productivity, and overall performance (Cicco, 2009; Fearing & Riley, 2005; Meyers, 2008).

Learning Style

Both educators and students may benefit from an awareness of their own learning styles. Learning-style domains include elements that a learner would require more or less of along a continuum. These domains, including environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological, and psychological, represent areas of the learning experience for students that would be improved by more or less stimulation. Online instructors that recognize the wide variety of learning-style preferences that students may have are likely to be more creative in utilizing instructional strategies that match a diversity of learning profiles (Drennan, Kennedy, & Pisarski, 2005; Fearing & Riley, 2005).

The Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model (Dunn & Dunn, 2006) provides a vivid illustration of learning-style domains. Sharing this model as an introductory exercise at the start of the online course experience may assist students by presenting them with a framework for planning their primary, secondary, and tertiary strategies for mastering new and challenging course content by using their learning-style strengths and preferences (Dunn & Griggs, 2003). Allowing students to complete a learning-style assessment, such as the *Building Excellence Survey* (Rundle, 2006), may also be beneficial.

The Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model (Dunn & Dunn, 2006) is depicted below.

Recent studies have examined the attitudes and preferences of students in online courses (Aisami, 2007; Cicco, 2009). Certain learning-style profiles have been clearly linked with the preference for online instruction and the stimulation it provides in terms of opportunities for working at various times of day, to experience varied sociological stimuli, varying levels of structure, and authentic internal kinesthetic learning. The internal kinesthetic learner enjoys making connections with new material, often by verbalizing new learning aloud, which is readily possible in the comfort of one's own home or office (Rundle, 2006). Students in online courses also have the possibility of working at any time during the day, and if they are aware of their best time, they can maximize the experience by logging on at this time whenever possible. They can also choose to complete assignments that match their learning preferences when they are presented with ample options by their instructors. Furthermore, when instructors and academic advisors are aware of their students' preferences, they can be helpful in advising them on how to take advantage of varied learning experiences online (Cicco, 2009; Dunn & Griggs, 2003; Fearing & Riley, 2005; McArthur, 2005). Another valuable exercise that could help students use their learning-style strengths would be to post the model depicted in Figure 1 on the online

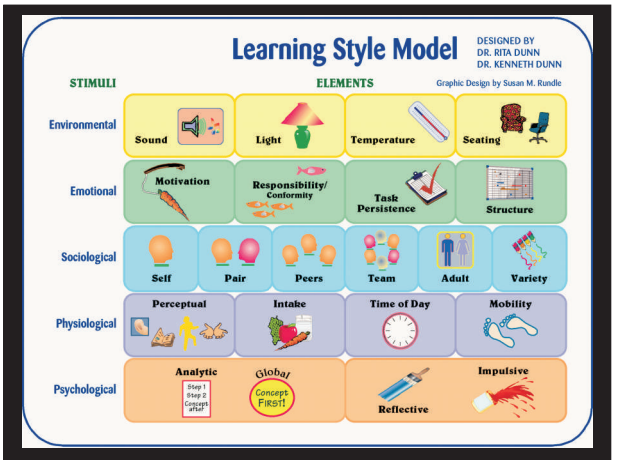

Figure 1. The Dunn and Dunn Learning-Style Model (Dunn & Dunn, 2006)

course homepage, and link each assignment or task with specific learning style preferences and then ask students to log which of their strengths and preferences are employed for separate assignments (Dunn & Dunn, 2006).

Suggestions for Educators

Instructors who remain accessible and engaged in the course content simultaneously model appropriate behaviors for successful students. The increased awareness and understanding of learning style can also be interpreted by faculty and students to make the online experience more meaningful. Many studies document the improvement in academic performance, student retention, and overall satisfaction when students' learning-style preferences are matched in the classroom (Beard, Harper, & Riley, 2004; Burke, 2000; Dunn & Griggs, 2003; Fearing & Riley, 2005). The virtual classroom can be enriched with visual, auditory, and interactive stimuli to meet the needs of learners with preferences for such types of stimulation. For example, including colorful photographs, video clips from YouTube, podcasts, and using games, assignment options, and Skype sessions can greatly enhance the presentation of the online course (Ash, 2011; Kelly,2008). Furthermore, incorporating diverse pedagogical techniques that accommodate varied learning needs and preferences is a wise strategy for educators that aim to optimize student performance and satisfaction. Faculty can also encourage student engagement, and consequently stimulate academic performance, by posing scenarios, case studies, and opportunities to review and critique peer work in their lesson plans, thereby utilizing real-life examples to exercise critical-thinking skills. Assignment options, such as group work or individual work and research paper or video presentation, should also be built into the course requirements, to ensure that students have the opportunity to master the curriculum by using their strengths and preferences (Cicco, 2009; Meyers, 2008; Yang & Chou, 2008). As can be noted in *Figure 1*, these simple enhancements would include elements found across several learning-style domains (Dunn & Dunn, 2006).

Simple and Clear Presentation

The virtual classroom should be easy to navigate and user-friendly. The writing skills of the instructor will be necessary to provide clear instructions for assignments to minimize the possibility of confusing students. Opportunities for asking questions are frequently offered through the discussion board, where students and faculty express and respond to concerns and comments. The course information, such as the actual syllabus, course calendar, description of required assignments, and motivation activities, should be clearly and logically presented, easy to locate, and readily accessible through links included throughout the course pages (Ash, 2011; Meyers, 2008).

Auditory and Visual Stimuli

The opportunities for incorporating auditory and visual stimuli are many. The simple addition of sound clips, video clips, podcasts, pictures, clip art in presentations, and color across the course homepage and documents can make the virtual classroom a more appealing and attractive place to work. Instructors should be warned that overstimulation, in the forms of text and pictures, can produce the reverse effect. Careful selection of auditory and visual aids to lessons will make the presentation more logical and tasteful (Ash, 2011; Fearing & Riley, 2005).

Tactual and Kinesthetic Stimuli

In responding to the various perceptual preferences of online learners, it is helpful to note that the use of a computer or laptop is a tactual and kinesthetic exercise. Learners that prefer hands-on experiences are particularly attracted to opportunities to become active in their learning. Kinesthetic learners may take advantage of assignment options that require visiting a specific site to observe, conduct an interview, or role-play. They may also prefer creating a presentation or video instead of writing a research paper, if they are allowed the choice (Dunn & Griggs, 2003).

Interactive Tools

Lessons that allow students to maintain interactions with each other through work in groups or in pairs respond to the varied sociological learning needs and preferences of online learners. Group projects may include exercises in brainstorming, debating, and collaborative planning in problem-solving and program design. Discussion boards respond to the needs of internal verbal kinesthetic learners

while enabling instructors to monitor student interest, comprehension, and participation. Interactive games and quizzes can be created within the course management system to provide students with clues, prompts, and almost instantaneous feedback on their work. Student interaction may also be increased by including synchronous methods in the asynchronous course to enrich student discussions, such as live chat room sessions, and Skype sessions that utilize live Webcam technology (Ash, 2011; Scheuermann, 2010).

Suggestions for Students

Students are also responsible for their own success in online courses. They should complete available tutorials on the course management system used at their college or university if they are unsure of how to navigate through the virtual classroom. Experience with online courses makes this process much easier. They should also take advantage of the knowledge of their learning-style profiles to maximize the learning experience by using their known strengths and preferences to manage time effectively, to prepare for exams, and to make informed choices on which assignments to complete when they are allowed to make such decisions. Students will increase their possibilities for deeper learning experiences, academic success, and overall satisfaction in online courses when they actively participate in the courses and maintain ongoing communication with their instructors and classmates. Online courses have the potential to meet even more learning-style preferences and needs than in-class courses when educators and students collaborate to emphasize learning objectives and engage in continuous self-evaluation (Ash, 2011; Cicco, 2009; Fearing & Riley, 2005; Scheuermann, 2010).

Conclusion

The online course experience can be maximized by educators and students when they communicate and collaborate effectively in the virtual classroom. Instructors of online courses must be present in the course to carefully monitor the course layout and student performance and participation. They can make use of their knowledge of differentiated instruction to create lessons that respond to various learning-style needs and preferences. Their conscientious design of the virtual classroom can make it an attractive and appealing place for students to learn, solve problems, and evaluate their achievement of stated learning objectives. Instructors that plan to optimize student learning outcomes will utilize the course management system tools to present user-friendly online courses that integrate auditory and visual media, interactive or live technology, and diversified opportunities and options for exercising critical-thinking skills (Meyers, 2008; Yang & Chou, 2008). As a consequence, faculty will experience expanded levels of communication with students that will make grading and course troubleshooting less frustrating, and the course overall more satisfying. Faculty that encourage student engagement and collaboration, and students that remain active participants in their own learning process, together make for an optimal online learning experience (Jung et al., 2002; Yang & Chou, 2008).

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