Enriching Learning, Empowering Students, and Maintaining Faculty Sanity in Online Courses

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Abstract

Two decades have elapsed since American higher education was introduced to what we know today as online learning. Be it distance, distributed, e-, electronic, or online learning or education, two constants are faculty time commitment and course quality concerns. No matter the term used to describe it, this type of learning has proven to be more time-consuming for faculty than its face-to-face counterpart. Interestingly, as new technologies become available to improve quality in learning and teaching experiences, demands on faculty time seem to grow—rather than lessen—because of the technology. However, inquiries into best practices through a case study of a graduate educational technology course have provided greater learning experiences and student engagement, encouraged students to take ownership of their learning, and enabled faculty to assume more facilitation, rather than direction, roles. In turn, faculty are returned some of their time, and greater action is expected of students in their learning.

Keywords: Online course design, student-centered learning

Introduction

Online learning presents students and faculty with a learning paradigm quite different from the campus classroom (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). The traditional lecture is an unsuitable medium for delivering online course content. For nearly two decades, students and faculty alike have been availed of an instructional evolution—a *disruption*, to reference Clayton Christensen (Christensen, 2011). This disruption created opportunities for students to learn and faculty to instruct in new, creative ways. Interestingly, those new, creative ways of the mid-1990s are now antiquated, and the new, technology-driven techniques can provide substantially enriched learning experiences. However, faculty can do only so much, and the student learning experience is sometimes compromised because of the demands placed on faculty's time. Two solutions with potential to lessen the demand on faculty time while enriching the student experience are to 1) rethink course design and 2) create an imbalance of ownership. Faculty who are willing to rethink courses altogether and relinquish some course ownership to students will find that student engagement and learning are elevated and that the faculty role makes a natural transition from that of director to that of facilitator. For this inquiry into best practice, the latter approach was take in a graduate educational technology leadership course with surprising results.

Framework

Christensen (2011) in the context of descriptive research defines a three-stage process of observation, classification, and defining relationships. Christensen's observation stage produces a description of the phenomenon under investigation after it is observed thoroughly. This is followed by the classification stage where the characteristics observed and described are then classified or categorized in order to highlight associations. Finally, defining relationships results in conclusions about correlation or cause and effect among the classified/categorized characteristics from the earlier stages.

These three stages were applied in a self-study research process. The application was further influenced by Dinkelman's (2003) work promoting reflective teaching through self-study research in teacher education. Dinkelman's context and findings were honed to reflection and reflective practice in teacher education and the impact these could have on teacher preparation when modeled by teacher educators and used as pedagogical

tools in the practice of preparing teachers. In the context of this inquiry, Dinkelman's approach was employed to push a teacher educator outside the professional "comfort zone" and embrace reflexive practices. The goal was to improve students' learning experiences in online courses while at the same time prevent an unmanageable workload of course activities and assessments for the instructor.

The Course

This study investigated practices in a master's level course that had been designed when a linear instruction model was transformed to eliminate instructor-dependent activities in order to shift interaction from instructor-student to student-student and student-content.

The course was an educational technology leadership course that introduced graduate students to the duties of school-based and district-based technology leaders. Topics included but were not limited to budgeting, grant writing, training, infrastructure, and human capital management. Prior to the transformation, most course activities required students to respond to prompts based on text readings, and a few more substantive course activities required research outside the mainstream course agenda.

In the traditional, behavioristic read and respond model, the instructor felt compelled to direct all students' learning as if the course were face-to-face. In the absence of traditional lectures, feedback was provided on students' responses to reading prompts in lieu of answering questions or providing comments during live class lectures. Reading, contemplating, and responding to prompts from 20 students in weekly discussions, sometimes with multiple discussions per week, created an overwhelming demand of time. The design also seemed to elicit programmed, copied and pasted student responses.

The instructor's observations of the old course interface, the substance of student effort, and levels of student engagement led to conclusions that the course appearance was quite linear, driven by text documents, and visually unappealing. Student effort was also often negligible with only minimum effort being exerted, and this created limited student engagement. The observations led to classifications of the course's issues: appearance and delivery. Student feedback clarified a relationship between the two, and reflections revealed the obvious: If students did not understand how to navigate a course, how could they be expected to engage in it?

Informal student feedback was vital to the instructor's comparisons of the previous behavioristic and linear design to the flipped design that was more student-focused and interactive. The instructor's intention was not so much to make generalizations about online learning course design or pedagogy; it was more to examine the utility of selected adjustments to a particular course. Those adjustments, presented as five strategies, will provide other online instructors with best practice ideas to implement in their courses and continue the academy's work to provide quality online education opportunities for students and faculty.

Five Strategies That Disrupt the Norm

For the purpose of this inquiry, linear, instructor-centered format is considered "the norm." Described in this section are five best practices for online courses uncovered in this inquiry. These practices returned time to the instructor, swayed the pendulum of course ownership from faculty to student, and yielded greater experiences for faculty and student without comprising fidelity, authority, or learning quality.

Strategy 1: Use Modular Course Design Format

Face-to-face courses are often structured by class meetings. A strict "by class meeting" design is moot in online courses; however, a natural tendency exists to structure online courses in as similar a manner as possible. In the transformed online technology course, a modular design proved to be superior to the "by class meeting" or a more traditional weekly structure.

The course outcomes were compared to the primary course topics. While the objectives were concise, the course topics were numerous. The course topics were paired down then organized into major themes, where

each theme encompassed several existing topics. Each theme became the topic of a course module, and each module included a reasonable number of readings (20-30 pages) and activities aligned with the theme, the topics within the theme, and the relevant course outcomes (Iverson, 2005; National Business Education Association [NBEA], 2011). Each module was presented in outline form (see Figure 1), and subsequent pages linked from the outline present content and activities, which allows the module to function more as a Web site with layers of pages rather than a text document with only a single layer with excessing scrolling to find information.
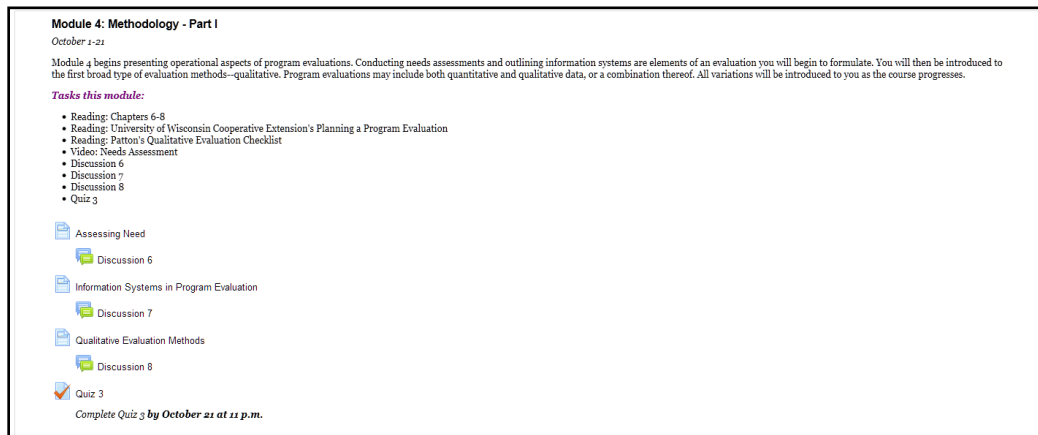

Figure 1. Modular design "index" page example

Not only did this approach streamline the general course design, but also it facilitated an organization of the course content and ideas that was superior to the linear chapter-by-chapter design of the text. Visually, it provided a palatable course appearance for students. In an informal end-of-course discussion, 50% of students made comments about the modular design versus the weekly design. According to one student, "Logging in[to] a course in January and seeing 15 weeks of material at one time was overwhelming. I dropped some courses because of the look as I believed it was too much to handle." Another student contrasted the approaches:

> I was also accustomed to being overwhelmed when I logged in each semester but really had no choice. I just dealt with my anxiety as best I could and worked through the course material. The moment I opened up [technology leadership course], I immediately thought something was missing! The course didn't look like a textbook with paragraphs that just went on and on. The mere sight of only five topics rather than 15 alleviated the anxiety I was accustomed to.
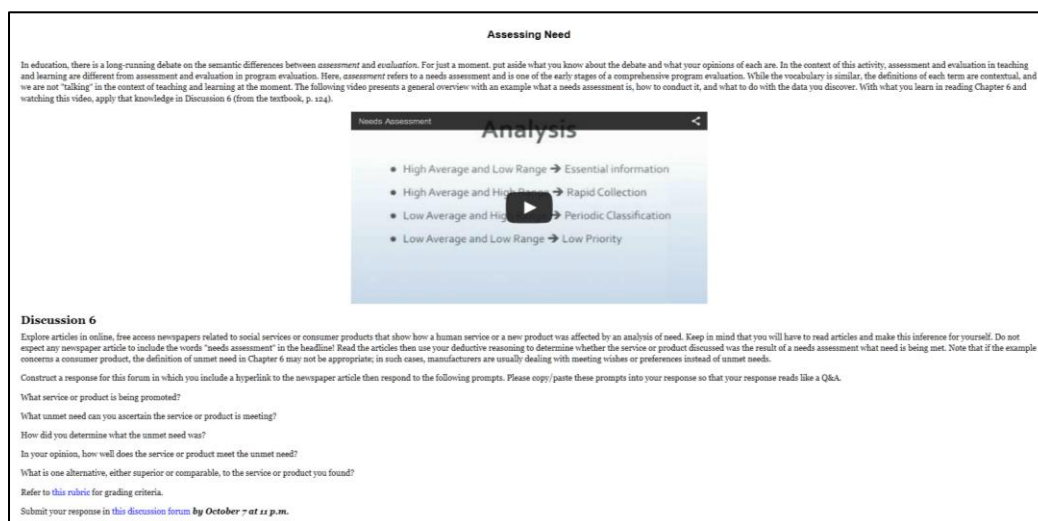

Figure 2. Module design "topic" page example

Strategy 2: Organize Partners over Groups

Groupwork was the students' most criticized element of courses. Students often felt that groupwork is tedious and inequitable with a small number of zealous students shouldering the group's work burden while fellow group members become lackadaisical in their duties. In the case of this course, partnered (or three-member teams, if necessary) activities proved to be superior to independent and group activities with more than three members assigned randomly by the instructor and changed per activity. Partner critiques and general student feedback revealed that the pairings—rather than larger groupings—created more collaborative learning experiences and provided greater student accountability (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). As one student noted, "working with a partner was far superior to working with many group members. You were held accountable to and by one classmate. No group was so large that people could disappear and neglect their contributions to the group." Another student's feedback was less logistical and more learning-centered; that student said that "working with a single classmate helped me focus and was a better method to build learning communities, especially since we worked with different partners for each assignment. I really got to know people from the one-on-one approach."

Strategy 3: Differentiate Student Learning Assessments

Best practices and bodies of empirical and anecdotal literature on the best instructional practices have honed in on differentiated instruction as a superior pedagogical model to all its counterparts. Given Howard Gardner's theory on multiple intelligences, this supposition is not surprising. However, differentiated *instruction* is usually a researcher's focus; differentiated *assessment* is a less-publicized idea (NBEA, 2011).

Considering this, if teachers exhaust efforts to differentiate instruction but continue to use a singular form of learning assessment post-instruction, have some of their efforts not become futile? If we as an educated academy can agree that any given group of students' collective learning will be elevated by differentiated content delivery techniques, should we not also agree that the assessment of that learning should also be differentiated?

To account for this contention, assessments in the technology course were differentiated, as were the techniques for delivering content, in an attempt to address diverse styles of learning. Objective, subjective, standardized, and authentic assessments were used. The learning management system's discussion forum tool was used weekly; however, the tool was used as just that—a tool. The requirements of the forum activities differed. Discussion activities included strategies such as, but were not limited to, 1) brainstorming, 2) case study analyses, 3) peer-to-peer debate, and 4) student-generated and student-moderated dialogs. Other activities included objective assessments like reading quizzes and authentic assessments like fieldwork summaries and research projects.

Student feedback codified the instructor's belief that differentiated assessments would yield more accurate results of student learning. Including three general types of assessments—partner activities via discussion forums, objective assessments, and authentic written assessments—allowed each student an opportunity to vary the types of artifacts used to demonstrate learning and allowed the instructor to assess learning and, subsequently, mastery of course outcomes more comprehensively. To ensure the fidelity of student assessment, rubrics were used to evaluate all authentic assessments so that evidence of student performance against common criteria are available, even though students were allowed to produce their own customized work.

Strategy 4: Encourage Student Inquiry

Whether a required text is used, instructors should feel compelled to supplement courses with non-text content. By their very nature, texts are dated. In disciplines like technology, some information in a text is

antiquated by the moment the first copy of a first edition reaches a student's hands. Thus, the onus for ensuring courses include current and accurate content falls upon the instructor rather than the text's author.

Faculty could spend countless hours researching course topics and collecting articles, supplemental but readily available books or manuals, and Web-based content (text, video, podcasts, etc.) to share with students. This strategy is encouraged; however, alternate strategies that promote student inquiry facilitate deeper engagement.

If we as educators want to expand students' understanding of content, do we not also want to expand their skills in acquiring that understanding? One technique that was used in this technology course was to include in each module assigned content from the text as well as Web-based content. The Web content type varied from module to module but included articles, Web sites, videos, and podcasts. For each module, though, students were expected to read widely then cite and share relevant content in course activities where appropriate. In some instances, the instructor created bibliographies per topic of content students shared. At the course's conclusion, this provided each student with references to a wide body of knowledge of the course's primary topics, and each reference in that body had been vetted by class members and many had been the topics of dialogs among students (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

When students located and contributed content to the course, they became shareholders of the course at large. It not only elicited greater inquiry on the students' parts, but also it demonstrated to them that the course was not owned and governed exclusively by the instructor. It demonstrated that all courses members, students and instructor alike, were members of a learning community where everyone had something to contribute.

Strategy 5: Remember that Theory-into-Practice Works

The philosophy of "theory into practice" can be valuable if sequenced and balanced for students. Faculty have the responsibility to inform students not only of the *what* but also of the *how* of teaching.

This broad philosophy has its place in each activity of each course as well. Students thirst to know that what they are being asked to do has a purpose, even if that purpose is not immediate.

In online courses, instructors are encouraged to embed an explicit theory-into-practice rationale for either each activity or for clusters of activities as they see fit. For example, there is an inherent lack of opportunity for immediate and real-time dialog in online courses between student and instructor. This is not to say, though, that such dialog cannot occur only that compared to face-to-face courses the dialog cannot always be immediate. In face-to-face courses, an instructor discusses an activity with all students in real-time and in the same physical space; this is replicated in one of several ways in online courses.

A question asked often by students is one of relevance. "How will this help me?" "What's the point of this assignment?" Hopefully, an instructor will have cohesive responses to these questions prepared. In online courses, though, instructors are encouraged to answer these questions before they are posed. In fact, instructors are encouraged to answer all questions before they are posed. With time and experience in teaching any course, an instructor will acquire the acumen to anticipate certain questions. To avoid confusion, angst, and wasted time in online courses, providing details in activity requirements that would address all anticipated questions (of logistics, content, and relevance) proved to reduce the number of student inquiries in this technology course.

Conclusion

Presented here are five lessons learned that resulted from a reflective experience exemplified by Dinkelman (2003) within a context of disruption (Christensen, 2011). Online learning has dominated higher education in these early years of the 21st Century; in fact, some would conclude pervaded. Consequently, faculty have been forced into this new asynchronous teaching medium where a clock does not govern when class begins or ends. Instructors who have honed their skills in online course design and delivery that is aligned to instructional minutes now find themselves in nebulous territory where time provides no parameters for their work. Typically, an instructor's first approach to the online classroom is to replicate the face-to-face classroom,

and they soon discover that approach has more challenges than opportunities. The second attempt likely results in overwhelming expectations and burn-out because the instructor struggles with balancing content delivery, student activities, and assessments while justifying how the online course is comparable in time, effort, and credit hours to its face-to-face equivalent.

These considerations—and others beside philosophical objections—are at the core of resistance to online learning. Faculty are encouraged to approach online learning slowly and to explore its potential as both the single delivery medium and as a supplement to face-to-face instruction. The five strategies discussed here are best practice suggestions for both design and delivery of online courses and online supplements to "traditional" courses. However, they are not a means to an end; they are considerations with potential for meaningful results. These practices emerged from personal reflection and, more importantly, from consumers of the service faculty provide. They are not only practical suggestions for faculty but also techniques evaluated by students.

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