

On-Line Courses: Tips For Making Them Work

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Abstract

A number of post-secondary institutions are looking more seriously at offering on-line courses to meet the educational needs of a fast-paced, computer-literate society. For instructors who are interested in offering on-line classes, this article provides various steps and procedures for increasing their effectiveness.

On-Line Courses: Tips For Making Them Work

Introduction

A number of post-secondary institutions are looking more seriously at offering on-line courses to meet the educational needs of a fast-paced, computer-literate society. Regardless of whether the instructor develops his/her own Web pages, utilizes a Web-based system developed by a textbook vendor, or manages his/her on-line class materials with a computer-based course management system (CMS), there are procedures that can improve the course's effectiveness.

Over the past four semesters, approximately 200 students have enrolled in an on-line Computer Foundations course at Macon State College. The course includes basic computer concepts and terminology as well as instruction using MS Office 97. Although I use a CMS to manage my on-line course, many of the procedures I have incorporated can be effective in the facilitation of any on-line course.

What I would like to do in this article is share with instructors who are interested in offering on-line instruction various actions I have taken over the last four semesters to increase students' learning opportunities and improve their overall satisfaction with the course.

Article

On-line instruction can be offered in a variety of formats, and the process selected by the instructor will depend on a number of factors such as administrative support, technical knowledge and expertise of the instructor, technical support offered by the school, and the school's technical infrastructure (Cooper,1999). Regardless of whether the instructor chooses to develop his/her own Web pages; uses a computer-based classroom management system such as Topclass, Web CT, or Web in a Box; or utilizes an on-line system developed by a textbook vendor, there are steps and procedures that the instructor can take to encourage interaction among instructor and students, increase students' opportunities for learning, and improve students' overall satisfaction with the class.

Initial Class Meeting

Because on-line learning is a new experience for most students, an initial class meeting is beneficial. It provides an excellent opportunity for students to meet the instructor and each other, ask questions, and become acquainted with the course logistics (Cooper, 1999).

During the class meeting I go over information typically covered the first day of a regular class such as syllabus, textbook, instructor office hours, testing procedures, etc. One of the most beneficial handouts to both students and me is the semester calendar (also available on-line), which includes a schedule of activities, assignments, and test dates for each week of the semester. Not only does the schedule provide students with a weekly 'to do list', but it reminds students of their learning objectives and keeps all of us on task.

The initial meeting also furnishes students with an explanation of what an on-line course is and the mechanics of how 'everything works'. Because I have access to the student roster prior to this meeting, I enter all user names (students' last names) and passwords into the computer beforehand. Doing so allows students during this class session to log on with their assigned user name and actually navigate the course Web site and become familiar with the content and various features.

Because the majority of problems students encounter are computer-related, I also spend time during the initial class meeting demonstrating proper installation of a tutorial CDROM that we use, downloading and installing video player software, running a Powerpoint presentation on the Internet, and sending and receiving attachments. Should they need additional assistance with any of these operations, students are encouraged to visit the campus lab.

Because I have found that students who miss the orientation session are more likely to drop the course and because the volume of information presented during this meeting is too much for some students to process at one time, I videotape the session and make the video available to them--both in the library and on-line.

On-line Communication

An important and necessary component to successful Web-based instruction is on-going communication. The instructor must be able to communicate with the students throughout the semester, and students must be able to communicate with the instructor and receive prompt

assistance when they encounter problems or have questions. Students also need to be able to interact with one another.

Instructor/Student Communication

To maintain regular instructor/student communication, every Friday afternoon I send to the class an announcement which reviews the up coming week's activities, provides any additional information or explanations about assignments, reminds the class of test dates, and addresses any concerns students have expressed to me during the past week.

Student/Instructor Communication

Because the students do not see me on a daily basis I check my e-mail frequently and on weekends so that they are able to get prompt responses when they do have questions or require assistance. In addition, I keep specific office hours so that students can be assured that I am available at certain times should they need to reach me via telephone or e-mail. To maintain continued student/instructor communication and to prevent students from simply 'drifting off' during the semester, I ask them to e-mail me at least every other week to keep me informed of their progress.

Student/Student Communication

To encourage communication among students and to prevent them from feeling isolated in the class, students are required to participate regularly in class discussion. Using the CMS threaded discussion feature, students can make comments or ask questions and can also respond to other class members' comments or questions. Participation in discussion is very helpful as it enables them to help each other with assignments and understanding of course material. Postings made by students in the discussion mode are received by all other students in the class.

Monitoring Student Activity

Using a CMS allows me the capability to track student activity throughout the term. At any time during the semester, I can check to see which modules students have accessed and the dates on which they accessed them in addition to the modules that are being accessed more than once. Being able to do this gives me the capability of observing which students are on task and which ones might need some personal assistance or encouragement as well as which modules are giving students difficulty.

Diverse Instructional Materials

Because all students have different learning styles and respond differently to various learning activities, it is important to offer them instructional materials in a variety of formats. In addition to the basic textual modules or documents such as learning objectives, lecture notes, and answers to chapter questions, I include Powerpoint presentations to accompany each chapter or topic, automatically graded practice exams, and links to interactive Web sites. Most recently I added on-line videos of my regular class lectures. The videos have been well received by students, as they offer both a verbal explanation and visual demonstration of

information typically accessed only by text. In addition, they are usually more interesting and easier to understand than text.

If synchronous capabilities are available, interactive question-and-answer or 'chat' sessions can take place real time, an especially helpful feature during office hours or help sessions.

Additional learning resources are also available today from textbook vendors. A number of textbooks today are accompanied by CD-ROMs, which include videos, interactive exercises, glossaries, and links to a variety of Web sites. For even more interactive learning exercises and activities, vendors have created their own Web sites for students to access, and many of these Web sites will send results of student exercises or practice tests to the instructor. I include links to these sites in my course modules.

Although students may not access all learning resources, if a wide variety of materials in different formats is available for student access, the chances of reaching each student at some level is increased; therefore, the chances for learning also increase.

Student Testing

A continuous dilemma for instructors of on-line classes is whether to utilize on-line testing or require students to come to campus to take exams. Objective style on-line tests can be tedious to set up; but when they are automatically graded, they provide immediate feedback to the students and also eliminate instructor grading. Most course management systems allow the instructor to create on-line exams beforehand with date and time restrictions.

The consequence of on-line testing though is that the instructor can never be sure if the student enrolled in the class actually took the test. During the times I have utilized on-line testing, I resolved this dilemma by requiring students to come to campus for a comprehensive final exam; and I counted it a substantial percentage of their final grade.

On the other hand, when students are required to come to campus for testing, it often presents a scheduling problem for them. In addition, students often view on-campus tests as being contradictory to the major goal of on-line classes. However, on-campus testing does eliminate the need for a comprehensive exam counting such a large percentage of the final grade.

For my Computer Foundations course, I have attempted a compromise by utilizing both testing formats. For the hands-on computer exams, students come to campus. For the theory segment of the course, they take on-line, automatically graded objective tests; and although they are required to take them on specific dates, they can be taken at any time on those dates. The final exam then covers only the theory content and is administered on campus. Thus far, this strategy seems to satisfy most of the students.

On-line Course Evaluations

In an effort to continually improve my on-line course, at the end of each semester I send students an On-line Course Evaluation form as an attachment and ask them to bring it to class on final exam day. On the evaluation form they are asked to evaluate the course, its contents, availability of the instructor, on-line software features, testing methods, and interaction procedures as well as their understanding of the class organization and grading process.

Students are also asked what features they like best and least about the course and are encouraged to make practical suggestions to improve the course.

Student evaluations help determine the effectiveness of the various components of an on-line course and address areas which may need revision; they also communicate to students that their input is valuable. As a result of the student evaluations, I have made a number of positive revisions to the course.

Other Tips

Student Withdrawals

One of the biggest problems facing on-line instruction is its lack of understanding among faculty and students. Students who enrol in an on-line course often do not understand the requirements necessary for succeeding. Consequently, they drop the course when they realize they need a more structured environment. Thus, providing information to both faculty and students prior to advisement and registration is a necessary and important factor in student success.

Another step I take to minimize the number of student withdrawals is that I invite on-line class members to attend my regular class if they feel they need additional assistance. Both the on-line class and the regular Computer Foundations class follow the same schedule, which makes it easy for them to determine the classes they would like to attend.

Student Scheduling

One other approach that I have taken to meet the needs and schedules of students interested in enrolling in our on-line course is to offer at least two sessions of the class--during the day and during the evening. Because we do require students to attend class at least twice--the orientation session and final exam session--it is important that these sessions be offered at times conducive to their schedules.

Study Guides and Reviews

Because students feel that they are faced with a vast amount of information to read and do not have the benefit of hearing in classroom lectures which information the instructor emphasizes or deems most important, many students have requested exam study guides. Many have also requested review days prior to the final exam. As a result of their requests, I have added written study guides to the on-line course content and an optional final exam review session to the class calendar.

Conclusion

On-line instruction can offer to both students and instructors new challenges and opportunities. If the course is carefully planned and implemented and the instructor is open to student feedback and continuous improvement, on-line instruction can provide an effective educational environment and offer a viable alternative to traditional classroom instruction.

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