

## **Online Programs in Higher Education: Strategies for Developing Quality Courses**

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### **Abstract**

With the dramatic increase in the past fifteen years in online learning in higher education, it is now necessary to develop high-quality strategies to create challenging and appropriate courses for students. With the author's extensive experience in both developing and teaching online coursework and developing online degree programs, this article will share five strategies to help improve quality online courses and degree programs. The five strategies discussed are communication, student-centered learning, feedback, forums, and technology/professional development.

*Keywords:* online education, higher education, forums, communication, student-centered learning, feedback, professional development

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Online learning has grown dramatically in Colleges and Universities in the United States over the past fifteen years as budgets have decreased and student demand has increased. Over 3 million students utilize online-only learning in higher education. According to J. E. Seaman, Allen, and Seaman (2018), “14.9% of students (3,003,080)” (p. 3) participated in distance-only programs. J. E. Seaman et al. reported increased numbers of students across the country participating in both distance and non-distance education. Students utilizing in both types of courses reached “16.7% (3,356,041)” (p. 3) of the total student population. The definition of distance education is courses that use one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students separated from the instructor (J. E. Seaman et al., 2018). Students taking distance education courses “grew by 5.6% from Fall 2015 to Fall 2016 to reach 6,359,121 students taking at least one distance education course (J. E. Seaman et al., 2018 p. 3). That means “31.6% of all students” (p. 3) are taking distance education courses (J. E. Seaman et al., 2018). With the growing demand for online programs in higher education, faculty now have the responsibility to develop quality coursework and degrees to meet the needs of students.

### **Online Students**

Online learners begin online programs because they are busy people balancing home life with work life. They need convenience and support services from an online degree program to

help them be successful. Developing high-quality, user-friendly online courses are one step toward supporting the online student in achieving his or her goals. Online courses are an appealing educational option for professionals with busy schedules, for non-traditional students, for graduate students, and for students who do not live close to a University campus (Ruffalo-Noel-Levitz, 2017). Other factors that affect students' decisions in selecting an online program are a convenience, work schedule, flexible pacing, program requirements, cost, the reputation of institution, financial assistance available, ability to transfer credits, future employment opportunities, distance from campus, and recommendations from employer (Ruffalo-Noel-Levitz, 2017, p. 17). In general, students who completed online degrees were satisfied with their experience. They would re-enroll in an online degree (Ruffalo-Noel-Levitz, 2017).

Online education does face some challenges in student satisfaction including issues such as quality of instruction, clearly defined/ well-written syllabus, faculty meeting student needs, education equaling the value of the tuition paid, and clearly defined and reasonable program requirements (Ruffalo-Noel-Levitz, 2017, p. 17). With the rapid progression of online learning, students who choose online degree programs expect and deserve a high-quality learning experience.

### **Literature**

When moving from face to face teaching to online teaching in higher education, all aspects of teaching and learning will be affected. There is a growing research base on teaching and learning in online education, and some authors conducted reviews of the literature. One of the most recent reviews of literature was conducted by Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago (2017). The authors did a comprehensive analysis of the research of online learning in higher education and culled the results into three main categories: issues related to online learners, instructors, and content development. This article will not attempt to conduct another comprehensive review of literature but does suggest reading the Kebritchi et al. (2017) article for a complete review of the literature related to online learning in higher education. The authors have conducted a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the current research on the topic. The authors went on to break each of the main categories into subcategories. The broader category of issues related to learners included the subcategories of learners' expectations, readiness, identity, and participation in online courses. Issues related to content included the subcategories of development and instructors; content and multimedia; content and instructional strategies; and content and consideration. The last category, issues related to instructors, was divided into changes in the faculty role, transition from face-to-face to online, time, and teaching styles.

The author of this article led and participated in the development of two fully online specialist degrees in educational administration and teacher leadership as well as online master's degrees in school administration and teacher leadership. The author developed and taught multiple online courses for over twenty years. Recently, the author developed online courses using the Quality Matters process. The author will discuss lessons learned from developing and implementing online courses and degree programs.

### **Communication**

How often should an instructor check in on an online course? Students have access to

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online courses 24 hours a day, seven days a week including holidays. Student expectations may be unrealistic. Students may expect an immediate response to an email or immediate feedback to a posted assignment. Does that mean the instructor is teaching 24/7? Do online instructors work weekends and holidays? What are the boundaries? Some authors suggest that teaching online increases the workload by 30% (Conrad, 2004). When teaching online, there is a substantial demand placed on instructors to respond to students immediately. Other research found that the workload increased by 14% because the faculty tries harder to do a good job teaching when the instruction is online (Tomei, 2006). When the faculty was teaching online, the workload of faculty increases due to the demands of students and the self-imposed expectations of the faculty members.

The answer to all the issues above is, the online instructor must be willing to spend a significant amount of time creating a sense of community. The online instructor must be willing to communicate with students on at least a weekly basis if not daily. Developing a teacher/student relationship where the student feels comfortable asking for information is critical to the online learning environment. The faculty must facilitate the development of that relationship. Communication is vital in all aspects of online teaching and learning. Effective communication will increase student learning and decrease faculty workload.

Online students will have questions. Some students will never ask a question while others will ask questions every day. Because online learning is more student-centered than face to face learning, it is essential that students feel that they can ask questions and receive answers promptly. Student's problems can be extremely time-consuming for the instructor. One strategy to help alleviate student emails and issues is to create a discussion forum for students to ask questions. Often, this is designed to ask questions about the syllabus but could also extend for the entire course. Creating a discussion forum is a safe, non-threatening place for students to ask questions. Students can solve each other's problems, and the instructor can answer questions as well. Online instructors can include an Announcement Forum and post information for students with the goal of cutting down on student questions.

Online office hours are another strategy to help answer questions. For example, if students know that an instructor will be available from 1 pm to 2 pm on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, then the instructor will be able to have face to face conversations with students. Faculty can host online meetings through Zoom or other conferencing software. The instructor can host a conference where one or more students can meet face to face to discuss issues.

Another good strategy is to communicate all course policies upfront with students. One way to do this is to create a course information book and post on the course page. Include information such as the instructor will grade assignments every Monday and post feedback/grades by 5 pm unless otherwise noted. It is helpful to tell students the best way to communicate with the instructor and the length of time for a response. For example, state that the instructor will respond to emails within 48 hours.

The instructor is the most critical influence on student achievement in the online environment. Developing as many positive communication channels as possible will help the instructor guide student learning. The relationship that the instructor develops with the student is the key to student achievement.

### **Student-Centered Learning**

Students have various learning styles including; visual, auditory, tactical, or kinesthetic. One of the challenges for the online instructor is to understand the learning styles of students in

the online environment. No one learning style is dominant among students in face to face or online courses. So, it becomes the responsibility of the instructor to develop course materials that work well for a variety of learning styles. One way to address various learning styles and to reach as many students as possible is to facilitate learning rather than be the sage on the stage. Allowing students to direct their education will help them develop into independent learners capable of expanding on experience. Students need the instructor to guide their learning to help them develop appropriate dispositions, knowledge, and skills. When designing an online course, it is essential to consider how students learn and that not all students learn in the same way. Students need a variety of learning opportunities.

Because online learning tends to be more learner-centered rather than teacher centered, courses often build in elements of flexibility and autonomy that require students to be motivated and have a desire to learn. It is helpful if online courses are designed to create community and opportunities for interaction in a variety of methods. The first consideration in using multimedia in online education is instructional design. Learning can occur in an online environment in a multitude of ways: videos, tutorials, games, and simulations. The caution here is not to use multimedia just for the sake of using it. As with any tool, multimedia should be used to enhance learning not only because it can. Don't add bells and whistles just because it is possible. Ask the question, do these bells and whistles add or detract from learning? Multimedia should provide students with multiple opportunities to master concepts without the instructor having to repeat information. It has the added benefit of involving the student in learning and keeping their attention focused on education.

Online courses are scholarly endeavors that use textbooks and scholarly articles. Part of being a student is learning to read and use academic texts. However, in an online environment, it is possible to go beyond the written word. In 2018, many scholarly works are now in blogs, videos, tutorials, Ted Talks, U-Tube, and other resources. Many authors of textbooks include interactive technology for students. Using interactive resources will allow students to engage with the scholarly content and gain additional learning. Students who do group projects can use technology such as Prezi, PowerPoint or Keynote to develop online presentations. Allowing students to move beyond the written word and traditional assignments of the face to face course will give students the chance to engage in innovative student-centered learning activities.

### **Forums**

One common online student-centered approach is the Forum which is designed to engage students in discussions. Forums can be somewhat useful for student learning or with improved teaching strategies can be a very effective teaching strategy. Often Forums are used in a way that only allows responses to the instructor's prompt with the limited student to student interaction. Requiring students to respond to each other is helpful but still does not get the level of the desired discussion. Assigning students leadership roles in directing the conversation on the Forum is one way to encourage more active participation. Students tend to discuss topics more freely if they think they are talking to peers rather than to the instructor.

Forums are tools used to build a community which is essential to developing a positive online learning environment. Often, in online courses, the preferred method of instruction is problem-based learning (PBL) or student-centered learning. One outcome of problem-based learning is a group presentation. Forums are reliable tools to use when developing a group

presentation which requires a deal of student to student interaction. Having an authentic reason for communication such as PBL will allow for a high level of student engagement on Forum.

Mixing a variety of communication methods into discussions such as video and audio allows Forums to be effective strategies to spur discussion. For example, students can record a two-minute elevator speech about their field of study and post it to the Forum. Interactive assessments will allow for authentic discussion between peers rather than responding to a prompt from the instructor. The same could be true for a motivational video from a giant in the field of study. Instructors must be willing to engage with students on a weekly or daily basis and provide thought-provoking ideas to help move conversations along.

### **Feedback**

As an instructor developing the most fabulous online course with all the bells and whistles is not enough, faculty must provide useful feedback to students for learning to occur. When giving feedback, time management becomes essential for the instructor. Providing timely feedback to the individual student and the group is vital in the online environment. The LMS will have built-in features to provide feedback such as exams, quizzes, or fill-in-the-blank. These types of assessment are automatic and simple. Complex assignments that require writing will take longer to grade and make providing feedback time-consuming and vital. Providing feedback directly on downloaded papers or into the textbox of the LMS is a suitable method of giving direction to students. Video can be created to provide feedback to students for all types of work, but it is a good idea when grading group-work.

The primary goal of feedback is to allow students to know if they are making adequate progress toward achieving course learning objectives. It is crucial in an online course to provide varied and frequent types of formative assessments to students. Otherwise, students may not be able to correct issues encountered in assignments before summative assessments. Giving feedback to students happens in a variety of ways including the more authentic types of assessment such as problem-based learning that allows input provided on dispositions, knowledge, and skills relating to critical thinking, problem-solving, and group work. Another type of authentic assessment that is effective in online learning is collaborative learning that allows groups of students to work together for a shared learning outcome. Portfolios and self-assessments are useful in the online environment. Portfolios can be used over an entire program of study or during an internship as the capstone of a degree program. The portfolio allows students the opportunity to incorporate technology and add depth to an assessment not possible in paper form. With online learning having a heavy focus on student-centered learning, there should be a heavy focus on self-reflection for the student. In authentic learning experiences, it is essential for the student to know where they are in the learning process. Self-reflection helps the student focus on the learning outcomes of the course.

Detailed rubrics can be an excellent form of communication in an online course. There is no better source of instructor expectations than spelling out exactly how a grade will be assigned. Rubrics are an effective mechanism for grading in the online learning environment, but it depends on the assignment and what elements of the assignment evaluation criteria. Grading some simple, direct, and straightforward assignments with a checklist are effective. Other more complex assignments will require detailed rubrics. Students will consider the elements listed on a rubric to be the critical points in an assignment. It is only fair to provide students with a clear understanding

of the assessment criteria. Basing rubrics on the learning objectives that students should demonstrate in the assignment is an effective teaching strategy.

### **Technology and Professional Development**

For an online course to be a positive learning experience for students, the instructor must have a positive attitude toward technology and a good understanding of how to use technology. The instructor should be able to answer basic questions about how to navigate the LMS and the use of any required technology. A good course design that includes tutorials about the LMS and other required technology will help immensely with technology issues. Training for faculty as well as tech support for both faculty and students is also essential for creating a positive learning environment for students. Providing training to faculty whether it is for identifying the pedagogical needs of students or for learning the elements of active online course development; is crucial to the success of student learning.

Training in up to date technology for the online instructor is essential for online instruction to be effective. Technology professional development must be a commitment on the part of both the faculty member and the University. Online faculty must be aware of technology innovations and must learn how to use new technology appropriately. One way for instructors to become acquainted with new technology is professional development through the Quality Matters (QM) program. QM is a peer review program that helps develop high-quality online courses. Also, QM also offers professional development conferences, online webinars, and other training opportunities.

Having a center on campus specifically designed to meet the needs of faculty developing and teaching online courses is essential for success. The online instructional technology experts who can troubleshoot for both faculty and students make the learning environment a positive one. If all else fails and students are unable to access technology, the instructor should provide an alternate plan for students to continue working on the course.

### **Conclusions**

With over 3 million students currently in online degree programs across the United States, it is unlikely that online learning will go away. It is time to embrace the best pedagogical frameworks to deliver high-quality online coursework and degree programs. This article discussed several issues related to developing quality online programs including online student, communication, student-centered learning, forums, feedback, technology, and professional development. The online learner, in general, is satisfied with their degree program and would recommend online learning to others (Ruffalo-Noel-Levitz, 2017). Online learning appeals to students for a variety of reasons and all students in the online learning environment deserve a high-quality learning experience designed to meet their specific needs.

When developing online courses, faculty should focus on effective communication strategies to foster a sense of community. While the growth in online learning has expanded rapidly, students may still be inexperienced with online learning in higher education and thus have unrealistic expectations. Developing a balance between the students' comfort level asking questions and getting information with faculty workload can be challenging. It is important to

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develop communication strategies up front in course development to promote the positive flow of information systematically. It is the faculty member's responsibility to foster good communication strategies with students such as announcement forums, online office hours, course information books, or zoom meetings. The instructor is the most crucial influence on achievement in the online course and should strive to develop a sense of community through effective communication strategies.

Learning to develop useful teaching materials for the online environment can be difficult. Students learn in a range of ways and determining how best to teach online to various students can be daunting. The student-centered learning approach requires the instructor to act as the guide while students take the lead in their learning. Student-centered learning in the online environment requires not only that the instructor becomes a guide but also that the instructor learns to effectively use the tools of the online course such as multimedia. Embracing the various types of multimedia in online courses will enhance student-centered learning and allow more flexibility and autonomy in education. Giving students the ability to be creative and innovative will motivate them to learn and grow in the field of study.

If used engagingly and thoughtfully Forums can be a useful tool in online learning. Forums need to be used in an advanced way to avoid the boredom of a simple question and answer format. Forums should be a tool where students take a leadership role and are responsible for the discussion. Introducing as many opportunities into the Forum for authentic discussion as possible will allow for a high level of student to student interaction. The discussion will proceed to a much deeper level if the conversation is authentic rather than an instructor provided prompt.

Feedback is incredibly valuable in online learning and incredibly time-consuming. Providing adequate and timely feedback is essential to the student for learning to occur in the online course. The fundamental goal of assessment is to provide feedback to students about whether they are meeting learning objectives. There are many types of assessments in the online environment, and many ways to give feedback. Some typical ways to provide input are recorded, written, assigned to a group, based on a rubric, and a reflection. The key to useful feedback is that it must be given consistently and frequently so that students know whether they are making adequate progress toward objectives.

The simple fact is that online learning is conducted using technology. If Colleges and Universities are going to commit to developing high-quality online programs and courses, then there must also be a commitment to technical support for both the student and the instructor. The student must be able to have access to help to solve issues with technology on a timely basis. While faculty does not have to be technology experts in every way, they do have a responsibility to gain a basic working knowledge of the technology used in the course they are teaching. The instructor should be able to answer basic questions about the LMS or technology used for assignments. Responsibility for professional development to design quality online programs and courses is twofold. The University should provide professional development opportunities, and the instructors have the responsibility to seek out professional development and design quality courses.

Faculty members and instructors of online courses must ensure high-quality learning for all students. Effectively implementing the strategies of communication, student-centered learning, feedback, forums, and technology/professional development in online courses allows the teaching and learning process to evolve and help students reach a higher level of achievement. Employing the five strategies discussed in this article will help the instructor develop a course that is both manageable and effective for student learning. Online courses and degree programs can be designed using high-quality strategies to ensure a positive learning environment for students.

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