

Distance Learning Development Site Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Cooke-Plagwitz & Hines (2001) examined the issues of planning and faculty receptiveness in training decisions. Course design and development should emphasize teaching and learning concerns. Implementation should convince faculty in a non-threatening, helpful manner of the need to upgrade course delivery systems. Course developers need to include modern real world examples (case scenarios), and provide learners with the opportunity to practice and demonstrate skills. Professional development mentors need to assist teaching faculty and provide opportunity to master the course management system in a helpful supportive manner. Novices need time to ‘learn by doing’ which we believe embraces the educational theory of progressivism.

A basic research question asked by Hislop & Ellis (2004) is does teaching online take more time? Depending upon the faculty Subject Matter Expert's (SME) experience in developing course content for delivery online, and the level of course design and development support provided by the instructional designer(s), online course development may require more time. Online teaching typically requires tasks which are not needed in an on-site class.

Within an ever-changing educational milieu, a greater emphasis has been placed on meeting student needs via distance learning on-line instruction. In the 21st century technological advances must be consistent with educational demands of non-traditional learners. Faculty and support staff, such as instructional designers, must continue to work together in updating courses to serve the numerous and diverse student populations requiring alternative access to higher education.

Prior to having a course fully functional for presentation to students, many preliminary and background steps must be followed. One of the overlooked areas, after syllabus preparation, has been the design of and use of Blackboard Course Management System development sites which provide a workspace for on-going and continuous course updates without affecting actual course delivery sites which typically must remain unchanged after course launch.

Course Development

When teaching online, all course materials must be available in digital, rather than hardcopy, format. Additionally, entering course materials into the course management system is time-consuming. Depending upon who is preparing the course management system development site, this issue may, or may not, require additional time from the faculty member. Perception is still very important, as we review instructor effort pattern across different courses. Team teaching is a new area to explore with regular full-time faculty and instructional design specialists working as a team.

Class size does not matter from our perspective in course development. A key is reinforcement/support and encouragement from both regular administrators and distance learning administrators. Many online students tend to be non-traditional students. As experienced online teachers, observed student work habits indicate a propensity to engage online course material on weekends. With a course management system it is possible to monitor students' patterns of course assignment completion and interaction with course content.

Milam (2000) addresses the issues of start up costs to develop a new course for online instruction. For some novice faculty members it can take up to 150 preparation hours to have a new course in working order. Many institutions are now reviewing faculty/staff workload adjustments in response to greater needs and demands of online instruction. Student service and advisement issues need to also be reviewed. Institutions have become aware of the need to provide the same level of student services to all students irrespective of whether the student is a traditional on-site student or an online student. True enrollment costs and amortization issues are now coming to the forefront. The issue of shared and pooled resources for online content development needs additional review. Institutions need to conduct in-house surveys to determine the percentage of faculty time being devoted to student advisement with a breakdown for on-campus and online efforts.

Cost issues need to be documented for online student expenditures including phone calls returned to students, postal mailings, duplicating of materials, computer printer cartridges, paper, and computing facilities. Practicum, independent study and field project supervision costs need to be calculated into time and effort studies, as well as administrative costs. Follow-up surveys and interviews need to be conducted with online faculty as well as students for program implementation ideas. The overall costs to prepare an online course may exceed a traditional course. Content development is initially more intensive with first time preparation. Over time, development costs decrease for online courses, and it may be less costly than a traditional section of the same course. By

providing continuous access to a course development site in the course management system, faculty time may be more efficiently utilized since development and integration of new, or revised, course content may be based upon faculty preference of time and effort. The level of institutional technical support in course development may be a larger issue for some faculty than many administrators realize.

Technical Issues

Hislop & Ellis (2004) remind us that technical support is one issue overlooked sometimes in distance learning course planning efforts. Instructor competence in regards to online instruction surfaces when the issue of technical support questions, concerns, and problems arise. Many faculty spend a greater amount of time in course development for online courses, and blended courses, than for traditional face-to-face courses. Online teaching may take more preparation time and may require more technical support. With more preparation time is the demand for greater financial remuneration by faculty. One needs to separate course development from technical support. In their review of the literature related to online teaching, Tallent-Runnells, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahren, Shaw, & Xiaoming (2006), highlight technical support as a need for distance learning courses. In most cases instructor preparation time expenditure would be self-reported.

Pachnowski & Jurczyk (2000), remind us of the importance of technical support, especially in the initial first term of novice faculty instruction. Schifter (2002) indicates that for some faculty an excellent technical support system with positive encouragement maybe the difference. Some researchers have discovered a main faculty concern is a lack of technical and follow-up support for instruction (Schifter, 2002). Special technical support services are key to overcome faculty concerns. One cannot over-emphasize people first; the human element is the most critical component in any course's success. Technical efficiency and technical support is critical in a seven to ten week distance learning (dl) term. Scheer, Terry, Doolittle & Hicks (2004), ask the important question, what is the level of technical infrastructure and student support services? Schifter (2000), mentions how do we motivate faculty to "learn new" technologies? For any academic program to thrive, faculty is a key. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation needs to be taken into consideration. What really motivates faculty to develop online courses? Tallent-Runnells et al., (2006) remind us that technical problems in any distance learning course mean a loss of time on task for both student and faculty member.

Web-based teaching may require some additional accommodations, a special technical assistance. Training sessions and encouragement from department and college supervisors and financial support need not decrease over time.

Training Sessions

According to Essex (2004), faculty have many demands on their time and therefore training sessions should be collegial and informal. Workshops should allow faculty/instructional staff the opportunity to showcase their "best practices." Pachnowski

& Jurczyk (2003), remind us that numerous training sessions are needed because of the amount of work that goes into the preparation of on-line courses being taught for the first time. These training sessions should provide supervisor encouragement and financial support continuing from the department for several semesters.

Instructional Delivery

Roberson & Klotz (2001), address the issue of designing and instructional delivery as related to course technical support. Does it really matter which course management system if an institution opts to use.

Discussion Board

Benjamin (2001) mentions that faculty discussion board responses to student postings builds a form of class camaraderie. Johnson & Summerville (2002), feel that the monitoring of discussion board components of an online class and follow-up emails may improve student course satisfaction. While Rendon (2001), believes that instructor feedback that is prompt and positive to discussion board posts goes along way in the motivation of learners. Tallent-Runnells et al., (2006) reviews the issue of classroom culture and the question of how to handle situations involving inappropriate discussion board posts. In an asynchronous discussion, students have more time for reflection and thinking before responding to posts of course colleagues and the instructor. An online course syllabus should state specific student expectations of faculty response time, as well as faculty expectations of students. Faculty should develop a rhythm for managing an online course that provides timely and consistent feedback to students. Students have a right to know when the instructor will provide feedback on assignments, or respond to questions via electronic mail or discussion threads. Faculty should explicitly provide students guidance regarding assignment due dates, assignment instructions, and rubrics which provide guidance for learner outcomes assessment.

Compensation

Schifter (2000) provides the reader with compensation models in distance education. Issues raised are why faculty teach and what motivates an individual to accept the instructional challenge of working in a new innovative program? It may be surprising to some to learn that a key may be support and encouragement from the instructional designer. The level of institutional technical support in course development may be a larger issue for some faculty than many administrators realize. A few decades back it was not uncommon for department heads to discourage off-campus faculty teaching because it was perceived as interfering with research and publication efforts needed for promotion and tenure.

Faculty compensation and incentives are issues of concern. Faculty overload pay for developing an online distance learning course varies significantly from no financial remuneration to \$5,000. Some institutions pay faculty per each student enrolled and others pay per class. Still others remunerate according to a scale with pay differentials based on instructor academic rank, some institutions also differentiate between undergraduate and graduate courses.

Conclusion

As a result of this study, one can see that the issue of distance learning course development site preparation involves a better understanding of the numerous components that make up an outstanding online program of study. Continued follow-up research and planning studies are needed for future implementation to determine student achievement.

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