The Benefits for Faculty Teaching in Online and F2F Environments

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INTRODUCTION

A growing number of faculty teach courses online in addition to teaching traditional face-to-face (F2F) classes. Faculty developing course materials for both environments find they are investing more time learning about how students learn. Learning to teach online can be time consuming (Stern, 2004), and achieving mastery in both modes is quite demanding. To teach effectively in both environments, instructors must think about how to improve student learning outcomes irrespective of the particular setting. Skills needed to help ensure good student learning include the following: selecting effective and emerging pedagogical methods; drafting clear, written materials for students; designing activities that foster active learning; and using principles of sound instructional design, such as the ADDIE model (analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation; Dick & Carey, 1978). Faculty who begin their careers in the classroom are refashioning their optimal teaching methods from the F2F environment for use in online courses. As these faculty gain experience online, they often turn the strategy around, refashioning methods that succeed in the online environment to enhance their F2F instruction. For instance, faculty can integrate innovative online activities into traditional courses. (McQuiggan, 2007) The overall process is akin, both in its challenges and benefits, to mastering a foreign language. What results from this synergistic process is more versatile educators who are able to reach students—and more fully realize their own potential as teachers—by using complementary modes of instruction that interanimate each other.

BACKGROUND

The movement of faculty beyond the F2F format into the online environment stems from institutional stakeholders' desire to cater to evolving student preferences and to enroll more students (Shepard, Alper & Koeller, 2006), as well as from the development of course-management systems that facilitate online learning for teachers and students (Jafari, McGee, & Carmean, 2006). College and university leaders understand that students are accustomed to an increasingly wide array of communication modes with 24/7 access, including the cell phone, text messaging, MySpace and FaceBook. These students expect the same access to their college courses. For some, this means taking a F2F course with an online presence; for others, this means taking a fully online course.

Student expectations for flexible scheduling are one reason that deans and department chairs are asking faculty to teach some of their F2F-honed courses online. Instructors often want the same flexibility; indeed, their reasons for teaching online have begun to mimic their students' various motives for enrolling in Web-based classes. Like students, faculty want both choices and challenges. One obvious advantage of online courses for both faculty and students is the convenience of teaching and learning from home. Add to the convenience the reality that young instructors are often drawn to teaching online because they are used to communicating and learning via an array of Web-based tools. Meanwhile, veteran teachers are often attracted to online teaching as an opportunity to improve learning outcomes, and to try new teaching activities (Jorn, et al., 2003). Interestingly, new and old faculty alike are not abandoning F2F for online;

instead, they are choosing to realize the benefits of teaching in both formats.

Consequently, institutions are tapping into these expectations for flexibility by offering individual courses and entire programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in traditional, hybrid and online formats. Clearly, the challenge for provosts, deans, and instructors remains to ensure that students achieve similar learning outcomes in the online environment and in the traditional classroom. With the evolution of web-based course management systems and the onset of learner-focused education theory, online education has emerged as a viable alternative to traditional, face-to-face instruction.

Faculty discover that teaching in both environments amplifies the advantages of each. This synergy is most likely to occur when two basic principles are followed: Design instruction to maximize learning in a given environment; then recognize that accommodations made for one environment usually benefit students in both environments. For example, showing students a film with subtitles obviously benefits deaf and hard-of-hearing students; however, the subtitles also can strengthen all students' reading skills and increase their comprehension of the content. As a result all students benefit. Similarly, students of faculty who teach both online and F2F gain from their instructors' designing learning activities for students in different environments. While teaching F2F, faculty can watch their students in the classroom to identify visual signs of struggle or flagging motivation. They can clarify misconceptions on the spot, and they can meet with students individually in person. When they switch to the online environment, they can take advantage of different pluses to achieve many of the same things they try to do in the F2F mode, such as the ability to communicate frequently with students to keep abreast of their progress, to provide clear instructions for every element of the course, and to design activities that reach students with diverse learning styles.

For years the assumption has prevailed that certain learning activities can be accomplished more successfully either F2F or online. However, informal interviews with faculty teaching at community colleges, and at both public and private universities, suggest this may not be the case. Most faculty believe the online environment cannot replicate the excitement of a lively, in-class discussion. That may be true, but a compelling argument can be made that the perceived "excitement" often obscures the fact that most classes contain a number of shy, relatively passive learners who get little benefit from such discussions, and indeed may find them superfluous and distracting. The online environment may actually offer a better way to draw them into the educational experience of a course than F2F discussions because it provides them with a less socially formidable venue in which to participate (Kubala, 1998).

Indeed, the question of which activities work better in which environments is rapidly becoming trivial as increasing numbers of faculty teach in both. Faculty are developing not only an awareness and respect for the learning that can occur in each of these environments, but also a realization that the effort that goes into teaching both F2F and online results in better teaching and learning.

Chickering and Gamson's Seven Principles – How Faculty Use These Principles in F2F and Online Environments

Since they were first published in 1987, Chickering and Gamson's Seven Principles have been used to help classroom teachers design active learning environments and they are now being applied to online learning (TLTG, 2000). These seven principles provide a useful structure for looking more closely at what teaching in one format teaches faculty about teaching in the other.

1. Good Practice Encourages Contact between Students and Faculty.

Few dispute the value of out of class (OOC) communication between students and faculty. Student satisfaction is higher among students who communicate with faculty OOC (Nadler & Nadler, 2000), and faculty can learn about students' learning styles from OOC. However, faculty teaching F2F often report that they receive few visitors during office hours and have insufficient time to meet with students before and after class.

Faculty teaching in both environments have learned that they need to encourage communication from students at the beginning of the semester. Icebreaker activities – an email message, or introduction submitted through a course management system – convey to students that their teachers expect to communicate with them. Expanding communication via email, online of-

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