Facilitation of Web–Based Courses Designed for Adult Learners

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INTRODUCTION

Web-based courses have currently surpassed all other forms of distance education in the higher education field. One of the main reasons in growth is the demand from adult and professional students looking for a convenient yet quality education (Kearsley, 2000). College and university faculty members are a key component in the development and delivery of online courses. Many studies have been conducted on effective course design, and student achievement and outcomes (Kearsley, 2000, p. 46), but less research is available on the instructional techniques necessary to facilitate an online course.

New Web-based education programs are being developed at a staggering rate. In the 2000-2001 school year, 43% of two four-year-degree granting institutions offered distance education via the Internet. Of those, 88% planned to increase the number of Internet courses (Waits & Lewis, 2003). Course management programs such as WebCT and Blackboard are being utilized in several of the colleges and universities in the United States and around the world. Web-based instruction offers a variety of benefits. It is fairly inexpensive in comparison to other distance education methods such as satellite. It offers easy access via the Internet and can be used at various levels, supplemental to the traditional course, mixed method, and completely online.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) conducted a series of case studies to determine best practice techniques for Web-based instruction. Twenty-four benchmarks were established for institutions delivering online instruction. Four of those benchmarks applied specifically to course implementation. They include: student/teacher interaction, timely feedback, instruction of proper research methods, and assessment of resources. The implementation of these benchmarks, along with the commitment to high standards applied to Web-based instruction, have proven essential for successful learner experience.

Adult Learners

One demographic area in which Web-based instruction is being utilized is adult learners. Adult and professional degree programs are on the rise, and Web-based instruction seems to be a natural fit in adult education. Generally, adults seek convenience, but are highly motivated. Adults are self-directed and prefer practical educational experiences that are relevant to their life (Zemke & Zemke, 1984).

Facilitator

The historical role of a higher education instructor was that of content transmitter. This entails identifying content to be covered, organizing content in units, sequencing the units, and determining the best transmission method to be most successful in delivering the content of each unit (Knowles, 1975). The facilitator takes on a much different role. According to Knowles, the facilitator must do the following: set the climate for learning, plan, diagnose needs, set goals, design a learning plan, engage learning activities, and evaluate learning outcomes (p. 34). The task of the facilitator is then to get the students on board with this "different" way of learning and teaching.

The term "facilitator" is a purposeful departure from the typical terminology used to describe an instructor. Facilitators generally practice a democratic, student-centered approach to instruction (Brookfield, 1986). Facilitators avoid lecture and assist students in the process of self-actualization. Facilitators recognize the following about learning: learning is personally meaningful, positive and non-threatening, self-initiated, self-evaluated, and feeling centered (Wittmer & Myrick, 1989). A classroom facilitator generally has specific personality traits that lend themselves to the facilitation process. Those include being attentive, genuine, understanding, respectful, knowledgeable, and communicative.

The facilitation of a Web-based course requires the utilization of computer and Internet technologies to maintain the key components of a facilitative environment (Berge, 1995). The Illinois Online Network (2003) cites seven basic criteria for a successful online facilitator. The criteria are: broad life experience in addition to academic credentials, openness and flexibility, comfort with communicating in writing, acceptance of the facilitative model as being equal to traditional instruction, advocate of critical thinking, appropriate credentials to teach a particular subject, and well trained in the online learning arena. The criteria for online facilitators cross over the general characteristics of a classroom facilitator, with the addition of communicating by writing and training in the online arena. Online facilitators need to employ a variety of different strategies to meet their students' needs and effectively utilize the online environment as a delivery method.

WEB-BASED FACILITATION STRATEGIES

Interaction is the key to any learning experience. Berge (1995) points out two types of interaction: interaction with content and interpersonal interaction. Interpersonal interaction includes learner-instructor and learner-learner (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Both of these types of interaction need to be at the forefront in designing Web-based courses. Keeping in mind the delivery method is vastly different from traditional instruction, the interaction is also different.

The following considerations are vital in creating an online course: pedagogy (andragogy), social, managerial, and technical (Berge, 1995). The facilitator of a traditional class typically considers the first three, but now must develop a plan for the technical aspect.

Online facilitators are often faced with the tasks of converting traditional courses to an online environment, creating an effective online syllabus, building an online classroom, preparing appropriate student activities, and developing creative evaluation techniques (Ko & Rossen, 2004). In addition, classroom management takes on an entirely different perspective online in a Web-based environment (p. 223).

Web-Based Course Design

Most course design begins with the establishment of goals and objectives, followed by the creation of the syllabus. Course facilitators vary in the depth and breadth of their syllabi, depending on the course and subject matter being taught. In a Web-based environment, the syllabus is a road map to the course. Detail is essential, and expectations need to be clearly defined (Ko & Rossen, 2004). The syllabus may also act as a contract between instructor and student.

The syllabus of a Web-based course should cover the following: class participation and grading, policies, expectations, a schedule, and course rules for communications and participation (Ko & Rossen, 2004).

Course activities, assignments, and evaluations should incorporate different types of learning opportunities to meet different learning styles. Case studies, group projects, peer partnering, guest speakers, cross-cultural exchanges, and lab assignments are just a few activities that can be effectively implemented in a Web-based course (Ko & Rossen, 2004).

Following the design and implementation of the course, the instructor must then facilitate the course using a variety of strategies. Typically the communication tools for a Web-based course are e-mail, discussion board, and chat (Kearsley, 2000). E-mail and discussion boards are asynchronous communications that can be accessed at the convenience of the student. Chat or real-time conferencing is synchronous, which means all participants must be online at the same time. It is these communication methods that a facilitator must effectively utilize to encourage all forms of interaction.

Communication Tools

Communication is essential for a meaningful learning experience in a Web-based environment. To ensure communication tools will be utilized effectively and appropriately, it behooves the facilitator to establish firm guidelines for usage and etiquette.

E-mail is the most utilized Web-based communication tool (Kearsley, 2000) and is cost effective. In the classroom setting, e-mail can be utilized to communicate messages or questions to the entire class or an individual. E-mail can also be a supplemental communication tool for informal discourse and assignment clarifica-

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