

Operational Performance Guidelines for Online Instructors

Lawrence C. Ragan

The Pennsylvania State University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Demand for online education continues to grow as technology provides viable methods for the delivery of a wide range of learning experiences. The growth in online education is largely driven by learner demand for flexibility and convenience, and widespread institutional response to meet that demand. According to *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning*, (Allen and Seaman, 2007), “The number of students taking at least one online course continues to expand at a rate far in excess of the growth of overall higher education enrollments. The most recent estimate, for fall 2006, places this number at 3.48 million online students, an increase of 9.7 percent over the previous year” (p. 5). According to Allen and Seaman (2007), more than two-thirds of all higher education institutions offer online programming, the majority of which expect to see a mean-growth of 30% in enrollments (p. 11).

This growth trajectory of online learning identified in the Online Nation report is accompanied by increasing demand for individuals with the skills and competencies needed to serve as instructors or facilitators in the online environment. Online instructors need to possess or develop a new set of teaching competencies to lead the online learning events to a successful completion (Klein, Spector, Grabowski, & de la Teja, 2004, Varvel, 2007). Although the competencies may differ by delivery environment, they are similar in that they involve the pedagogical, technological and administrative roles of the instructor. Smith (2005) defines 51 competencies necessary for a successful online teaching experience. Smith categorized these competencies into those needed prior to, during and post course delivery.

What have not been well articulated in the literature are the operational performance guidelines that describe specific expectations of instructor engagement and management of the learning experiences. Operational guidelines explicitly address the tasks and duties of the

instructor in conducting the course. In the absence of these guidelines, the online instructor is left to rely on experience, trial and error, interpretation of best practices, and student input in order to establish appropriate tasks and duties that support the learning event.

BACKGROUND

Online vs. Traditional Teaching Performance Resources

Because the online environment is a relatively new teaching forum for the delivery of instruction, there is a dearth of research defining and supporting specific operational performance behaviors to guide or direct the role of the online instructor. As the acceptance of online learning has grown, the body of knowledge and research that address the pedagogical and technological dimensions of the teaching and learning environment continues to expand. The emerging literature consists primarily of strategies (best practices), techniques and methods to improve the efficiency and efficacy of online instruction.

Hints of specific guidelines regarding the responsibilities of instructors have appeared in the literature. While many online instructors begin by teaching a course previously written by a content expert, it is not uncommon for an online instructor to be required to revise or even author a complete course of instruction. In an article (2003) examining the teaching and learning foundations of a course management system Boettcher states that “faculty-mentors are responsible for designing and structuring the course experience.” This responsibility defines the role of the online instructor as both author and designer of the learning event. Other instructor performance descriptions that address specific strategies includes the work by Garrison (2006) on the principles supporting social, teaching and cognitive dimensions of the online classroom and

the work by Brown (2001) specifying strategies for improving the sense of community among students and instructor.

This body of literature is very useful, but it provides few specifics regarding the operation and management of the course events. For example, the literature lacks specific guidelines on the course delivery and facilitations, such as recommended response times, frequency of logins, rubrics for the quality and nature of responses, and strategies for efficient monitoring student progress. One source that nears the definition of specific behaviors would be the Expectations and Guidelines from the Instructor Handbook provided by the Online Learning Network (2008). This resource bridges the statement of best online instructor practices with expectations of several instructor behaviors.

Another potential source of guidelines is the institution providing the online courses. But few institutional standards have been established that define specific operational performance guidelines for the online instructor. Although performance guidelines may not exist for the face-to-face instructor, the history and tradition of this delivery mode provide an implied set of operational expectations. However, instructors, facilitators, or mentors in the online environment teach without the benefit of a history and tradition for this new environment. Additionally, online instructors can be somewhat isolated from their peers and may be teaching from a distance for a number of institutions, as opposed to teaching on one home campus. This isolation from a teaching community can impede the development or mastery of high-quality operational performance behaviors.

Most successful online instructors develop their online teaching competencies through trial and error combined with a deep desire to succeed and to help their students succeed. They develop an understanding of successful online instructor performance through the refinement of their own experiences and strategies. In the absence of institutionally mandated performance expectations, they develop their own sense of effective behaviors. They also gather insights from peers with similar experiences.

The role of faculty development within the online instructor community has been identified as a critical element in the preparation of online instructors (Hartman, Dziuban, & Brophy-Ellison, 2007). Faculty development programs typically cover the pedagogical, technological, and administrative skill sets and

competencies necessary for a successful teaching and learning experience. However, specific operational performance expectations of the online instructor are addressed less frequently. A set of guidelines for specific operational performance expectations of instructors in an online learning environment is needed.

OPERATIONAL EXPECTATIONS FOR THE ONLINE TEACHING EXPERIENCES

Much has been written regarding the skills and competencies necessary to the successful online instructor, and an entire field of applied research has developed around the definition of the best practices for online instruction (Ragan & Terheggen, 2003). These findings help to inform the teaching strategies and techniques for effective online instruction. Additionally, strategies have been collected, and continue to emerge, informing the online instructor with methods for improving the efficiencies of teaching online (Ragan & Terheggen, 2003).

Less commonly available is the institutional articulation of operational performance expectations of the online instructor—that is, an expression of the minimal instructional behaviors derived from practice or research of what is expected within their role in the online teaching and learning environment.

In the face-to-face classroom, instructors operate in a time-tested format with well-defined parameters. There is a defined class schedule and institutionally mandated syllabus that describes what course goals students need to achieve. The institution establishes the timing of the course, duration of the class period, and room location. There are familiar instructional tools such as a whiteboard, a podium, projection device and seating for the students. There is also an inherited protocol of the classroom experience—the instructor teaches and the students learn. Both teacher and learner understand the expectations of this arrangement. The course instructor is expected to show up in the designated location, and conduct the course to the best of their ability through to completion. The student takes direction from the instructor and strives to complete the course requirements successfully. The quality of the learning experience is often measured via student ratings of teaching performance or occasionally an observation by the department chair or designee.

5 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/operational-performance-guidelines-online-instructors/11956

Related Content

Strategic Design for Web-Based Teaching and Learning: Making Corporate Technology Systems Work for the Learning Organization

Brian Corbitt, Dale Holtand Stephen Segrave (2008). *Online and Distance Learning: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 905-923).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/strategic-design-web-based-teaching/27440

Simulation Followed by a Reflection and Feedback Session in Medical Education

Christiana D. Kumalasari, Julie A. Caplowand Nicole Fearing (2011). *International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education* (pp. 46-56).

www.irma-international.org/article/simulation-followed-reflection-feedback-session/53211

The Appropriation of Wiki in a Higher Blended Learning Course: A Case

Beatriz Fainholc (2010). *Cases on Distance Delivery and Learning Outcomes: Emerging Trends and Programs* (pp. 208-230).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/appropriation-wiki-higher-blended-learning/38003

A Framework for Large-Scale Automatic Fluency Assessment

Warley Almeida Silva, Luiz Carlos Carchedi, Jorão Gomes Junior, João Victor de Souza, Eduardo Barrereand Jairo Francisco de Souza (2021). *International Journal of Distance Education Technologies* (pp. 70-88).

www.irma-international.org/article/a-framework-for-large-scale-automatic-fluency-assessment/282664

Mobile Learning in Organizations: Lessons Learned from Two Case Studies

Amarolinda Zanela Saccol, Jorge Luis Victoria Barbosa, Eliane Schlemmerand Nicolau Reinhard (2013). *Learning Tools and Teaching Approaches through ICT Advancements* (pp. 136-148).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/mobile-learning-organizations/68582