Going Online — Challenges and Issues

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning in the 21st century not only utilize various technologies, but they also take place anytime and anyplace. During the last decade, higher education institutions equipped many of their classrooms with the latest computer hardware and software applications, and trained their faculty and staff to use the technology. With the technological advancements and the changing needs of institutions and students, more faculty members are teaching online.

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ONLINE

Faculty choose to teach courses online for a variety of reasons. Teaching online provides faculty with an opportunity to:

1. get more involved with technology
2. use technology more innovatively to enhance teaching and learning
3. meet the needs of students at a distance
4. increase flexibility in working hours and locations
5. respond to students' requests for online educational opportunities
6. interact with students more frequently
7. respond to administration's initiative (McKenzie, Mims, Bennett & Waugh, 2000)

As they prepare to teach their courses online, faculty face numerous challenges that can be classified into four areas: online course design, technology tools and course management systems, faculty development, and finally technical and administration support (Berge, Muilenburg & Van Haneghan, 2002; Levine & Sun, 2002).

Online Course Design

Teaching online and at a distance is different from teaching face-to-face (Cyrs, 1997). Good teaching practices, however, work in either situation. Hacker and Niederhauser (2000) suggest five instructional practices that have been shown by current research to promote learning in both online and face-to-face environments:

1. asking students to construct deep explanations, justifications, and reasons for what they think and do
2. grounding learning through effective use of examples
3. using collaborative problem-solving strategies
4. using appropriate and adequate feedback throughout instruction
5. embedding motivational components that enhance self-efficacy

These practices are also aligned with the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Furthermore, Cyrs (1997) argues that teaching in distance learning environments not only requires sound pedagogical practices, but additional skills in course planning and organization, and collaborative teamwork among colleagues.

A systematic and thoughtful approach to online course design is essential (Beaudin, 1999; Kearsley, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). McLellan (1999) recommends that instructors design online courses that communicate the course purpose, identify learning activities and course requirements, explain the role of the instructor and the student, provide an orientation to resources and the online learning environment, and reinforce the value of forming an online learning community.

In addition, online course design should incorporate teaching strategies. For example, the use of guided didactic conversations as a strategy for instruction at a distance can simulate a dialogue between the student and the faculty member (Morrison & Guenther, 2000). The dialogue that takes place in an online discussion forum usually leads to students' better understanding of the instructional materials.

Technology Tools and Course Management Systems

Technology plays a vital role in teaching and learning. Technology tools may enable student-centered learning activities and facilitate learner interaction at any time and any place. Based on their function, technologies can be grouped in several categories such as communication, organization and presentation, and course management systems (Zhu & Kaplan, 2002). As instructors prepare online courses, it is critical for them to understand different uses of technology and have access to appropriate tools for teaching online.

Many online and distance learning courses are delivered through course management systems (CMSs) such as WebCT or Blackboard. Faculty often have to use the available CMS in their institution to teach online courses. Many CMSs have functions that allow students to access course syllabi, announcements, assignments, and schedules of activities; and to have discussions with peers using asynchronous or synchronous communication tools. Although a CMS can help instructors implement certain teaching strategies, the system itself does not necessarily embody teaching strategies for an online environment. Faculty should not plan teaching to fit into a course management system, but to take advantage of a system's functions to support teaching activities that facilitate student learning.

Hardware and software standards, scalability, security protocols, functions, adaptability, and usability are important for CMSs. Difficulties in using a system can limit its full benefits. Students' responses to a CMS's features can also increase or decrease a faculty member's use of a system in online teaching. A course management system loaded with bells and whistles seems to negatively impact faculty's decision to use it. Some faculty members were reluctant to use such a CMS due to students' lack of skills beyond e-mail, Internet surfing, and instant messaging (Morgan, 2003). Also, it is necessary to have an array of technology tools for teaching online to meet varied students' technology needs and diverse learning styles.

Faculty Development

Online teaching provides an opportunity for faculty to change the way they deliver instructional materials and engage in educational processes. The online teaching environment provides ample opportunities for student-centered teaching, interactive discussion, collaborative learning, and activities that are based on real-world problems. This type of learning environment aims to involve students actively in constructing knowledge. The online environment encourages faculty to rethink or reexamine their current teaching practices. Faculty members who plan to teach online will gradually relinquish the role of "sage on the stage" and assume one as "guide on the side," leading students through information gathering, practice, and knowledge construction.

Online teaching involves collaboration among many individuals such as an instructional designer, Web developer, graphic designer, network engineer, distance education coordinator, faculty development specialist, and librarian. Online teaching requires additional skills. Instructors can gain the skills and develop the abilities that are necessary for successful online teaching gradually. They can first integrate technologies into face-to-face courses and become familiar with the online teaching environment before taking on the challenge of teaching totally online (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Zhu, Payette & DeZure, 2003). As part of the faculty development process, instructors who are interested in online teaching can learn more through workshops or individual consultation and coaching. Some researchers suggest that institutions require training for online teaching and that some part of that training be conducted online (Ko & Rossen, 2001) in order to give faculty the experience of being online learners.

Faculty training for online teaching should include the following: software programs, online syllabi development, course management, similarities and differences of online teaching (vs. traditional teaching), the online instructor's voice (i.e., the need to add more of a personal touch to lecture notes, instruc-