

Increased Benefits from Using Online Class Components

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet is maturing as a delivery medium for university education. It now provides new ways to do things that typically are not done in the traditional classroom setting.

For the university, the transition to an Internet-based learning environment requires a restatement of institutional missions and priorities, a revision of conventional structures. For the instructor and student, online courses represent a shift in educational philosophy and instructional design as the emphasis moves from “teaching” to “learning”, leading to a student-centered rather than instructor-based system. The challenge for higher education is to find the best way to adjust to this paradigm. (Onay, 2002, p. 234)

It is hoped that adjusting to this paradigm will bring exploration of ways for university education developers and users to harness and optimize the emerging capabilities of the Internet to add “value” to the education experience. The definition of “value” encompassing added benefits to all parties in the process—developer, user and host.

The author hopes that universities will explore new ways of packaging, selling, and delivering education. This discussion proposes a simple business model using resources already in place for most universities. The strategy suggests that the university provides, administers, and maintains an automated online portal or “e-store” to post and sell online class components for use by students enrolled in the university, another university, or the public. It suggests examining how using the Internet can expand what is traditionally viewed as suitable class content and structure. The approach suggests exploring what users will buy to increase the value of their education experience. This plan provides financial incentive to the developer and

university—a missing component of most approaches today. Use of the Internet for online education delivery already has great value, but the benefits to all parties in the process can be increased.

APPROACHES TO ONLINE COMPONENT

In a September 2003, editorial, “A New Definition of Technological Literacy,” Dr. Geoffrey Fletcher, Interim Editor-in-Chief of T.H.E. Journal and Executive Director of the T.H.E. Institute, stated, “So the real difference between the 1980s computer literacy and today’s technological literacy is using technology to learn rather than learning about technology” (Fletcher, 2003). This statement is very representative of the evolution of the use of the Internet in education today. Fletcher’s statement also suggests how most funding has been used for online delivery to date. Focus has not been on increasing the quality of what is delivered, but on creating the infrastructure for delivery. It is now time to focus on the quality of what is delivered, not just the delivery strategy.

The following discussion is limited. The author acknowledges that there are other delivery services, organizations, and commercial portals not included. Discussion is not intended to be negative but to describe two examples of current approaches to online component delivery.

The most common delivery of online class material or components developed and posted by faculty to date is to use a “shell” service, such as WebCT (<http://www.webct.com>) or Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com>), sponsored by the university. Online content and activities are packaged and delivered in a traditional class format. The value of the Web site rests largely in the class management features, such as downloadable notes, links, e-mail, chat, and grade posting. The “shell” service is provided

using a technology fee assessed to the user by the university. Benefit for posting more than converted PowerPoint notes, word files, and links is typically found in the personal satisfaction of the developer, not in tangible reward for the extra effort.

Another strategy for delivery of online components is The Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and On-Line Teaching (MERLOT) (<http://www.merlot.org>). It is a gateway to Web-based, peer-reviewed online resources including interactive learning materials, assignments, reviews, and people. MERLOT is a national network representing discipline communities such as business, mathematics and statistics, and science and technology. Communities peer review and rate learning materials in their specific disciplines. Each individual developer/contributor is responsible for the content creation, posting, and Web site maintenance.

The MERLOT gateway routes users to online components that can be incorporated into a traditional class. This approach is similar to Jeffrey Young's "hybrid" or "blended" model of teaching that includes virtual sessions with traditional class meetings (Young, 2002). Young's approach involves supplementing the traditional education experience using online delivery, not replacing it. Once again the benefit to the developer comes from self-gratification for contributing to the body of knowledge or possibly receiving a MERLOT-sponsored award.

Based on the author's experience and observations, both of these approaches have created a user perception that online content should be free, because it typically comes bundled in a service and is delivered using the Internet. The actual worth of the content is minimized. The fairness of this perception to the developer and the effect that this will have on development of online resources in the future are the basic premise for the e-store strategy.

THE E-STORE STRATEGY

The e-store strategy evolved from the "shell" and MERLOT approaches discussed in the previous section. This strategy is university centered. The university acts as a "self publisher" for the developer, with the creation of financial incentive for both the developer and the university. The content developer receives a royalty each time a resource or component is

purchased. The university provider receives a fee for posting, maintaining, marketing, and selling the resource. Purchase is a typical online transaction using a personal credit card or charge to a specified account.

The definition of online learning components could be expanded to include items to be purchased for "convenience." This is a new concept for university education. Items such as lecture videos for someone who missed the traditional class delivery or wished to verify their notes or extra exam reviews not covered in class might be included. Charges might be considered a "service fee" or "tax" for not attending the traditional class or for reviewing "already delivered" information. The fee would be \$2.00 to \$5.00 and accumulated on the user's bursar account. All transactions would be automated and online. The user would also absorb the cost of printing or reproduction. As proven by the proliferation of commercial Internet portals built for online purchasing, this business model is very efficient, cost effective, and strongly embraces the anytime/anywhere convenience of the Internet.

The items or activities listed are possible online components that are already included or will be included in university class formats someday. A component might be required as part of the class syllabus, offered as a primary or supplementary resource, or posted for the user's convenience. Bear in mind that not only does the user purchase the component, but also the anytime/anywhere access. Many users would pay a fee for this convenience alone. The following products might be offered through the e-store:

- e-text
- interactive multimedia exercise
- interactive multimedia lab or simulation
- slide, picture or video collection
- exam review
- certification exam review
- lecture video
- informational video
- industry sponsored event or activity

University students, faculty, and administrators will view the e-store strategy differently. Some will question whether e-store items should be included in tuition paid for the class. Some will point out the potential for students to abuse the opportunity to view

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