

Chapter 4.26

Enriching and International Program Graduate Offering: A Blended Delivery Model

Vivian H. Wright

The University of Alabama, USA

Jon Beedle

Mississippi State University, USA

Ronnie Stanford

The University of Alabama, USA

ABSTRACT

Portions of an international master's program were designed for a blended, online delivery in one pilot course. This approach allowed students in Central and South America to interact with the professor and other students prior to instructor arrival on-site and after instructor departure. Student reactions to this blended approach were positive. Students indicated an increase in skills and knowledge using Web-based materials, and an increase in interaction with their peers and instructor.

BACKGROUND

Educational technology allows organizations the ability to modify courses and curriculums, and at the same time become more flexible in their delivery (Kvavik, 2002). Graves (2001) predicted that higher education is moving toward a more student-centric approach and away from the traditional instructor-focused environment. Accessibility of information electronically allows students the occasion to explore, discover, create, and communicate more efficiently than in the past (Tiene & Ingram, 2001, p. 32).

With these challenges come new opportunities to serve students at all levels and from locations around the world. The International Programs office in the College of Education at the University of Alabama offers Master's of Arts degree programs in Elementary and Secondary Education to teachers at U.S.-type schools in Latin American countries. The office was interested in using available technological tools to enhance its current course offerings, while also answering international student demands for more accessible course materials. To this end, professors within the College of Education at the University of Alabama, and a doctoral student in Instructional Leadership/Technology, focused on providing portions of a master's program online.

The College of Education International Programs office at The University of Alabama provides overseas instruction within countries in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Mexico. The advanced degrees offered are beneficial to those looking for advancement, greater professional opportunities, and increased remuneration. On-site courses typically last two weeks, providing limited time to complete instruction. The purpose of this project was to provide students with online learning materials and assignments before the instructor arrives on location, and access to appropriate materials after the instructor leaves the international site. Creating an online component through a Web-enabled course gives instructors and students a greater opportunity for interaction and learning (Dabagh & Schmitt, 1998), and provides opportunities for the students to become acquainted with the course materials and their peers in advance of the instructor's on-site arrival. It is our intent that this increased access to peers and information will provide these students with educational opportunities and learning experiences that would not have been possible without such access.

Our Approach to Course Development

WebCT is course management software used by many academic institutions to distribute resources, providing tools for online instruction. WebCT allows instructors to manage online or Web-enhanced courses, and provides tools and online help aides for the student.

One of the goals of this project was to create an improved, student-centered approach to learning by blending both face-to-face and Web-based instruction. Twigg (2003) indicated that enhanced quality of individualized education is important to faculty working to redesign courses for online use. A team approach can be valuable in creating and implementing an instructional technology-enhanced learning environment. To accomplish this team approach, all of those involved with this project are involved with progress and modifications as needed.

WebCT provides instructional designers and course instructors the ability to use electronic resources to communicate and to facilitate discussions in the form of e-mail, synchronous chat rooms, and asynchronous electronic message boards (McLean & Murrell, 2002). One of the many benefits of networks and computers for students is the ability to communicate with groups of people around the world with relatively less expense than would be incurred through telephone calls (Tiene & Ingram, 2001). Cognitive processes increase due to the frequent interactions with others and with the tools provided through the WebCT course management software. Learners gain knowledge through participation, practice, and engaging in problem-solving activities with their colleagues. Students are participative learners and not just reactive observers who respond to certain stimuli, like some behaviorists believe (Deubel, 2003).

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