

Chapter 4.9

Teaching Shakespeare Online in a Virtual Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shares the experiences from a faculty member who teaches an online course—Shakespeare’s Major Plays—and from an instructional designer who helps the faculty design the course. It also relates the effective use of course management tool—WebCT, to facilitate teaching activities and to engage student learning. This chapter concludes that a successful online course depends on two important factors (1) learner-engaged teaching and (2) effective use of technology. The balance between the two enhances the efficacy of education and technology.

INTRODUCTION

In traditional liberal arts subjects, online teaching is generally not popular among full-time faculty. Part of the reason is that tenured faculty are notoriously slow to change, but that is certainly not the only reason. Most faculty enjoy, even delight, in standing before a class to lecture, or lead discussion, or in other ways to teach the class. To give up this experience for a computer screen is hard, and if there are no compelling reasons to do so, most faculty will opt for the classroom over the computer monitor.

Faculty also fear that standards will erode. How do we know who is actually taking the class? What if I give university credit to someone's pet hamster? What if that then gets in the university newspaper? But in other ways, online instruction may seem to cheapen the university degree, and just as important rob the student from important aspects of the university experience. The faculty member sees the social as well as intellectual interaction in the classroom, and is loath to walk away from that aspect of teaching or allow the student to circumvent that part of a university education.

Another challenge for faculty is the need to learn a new technology. It takes time to learn how to work within a course management tool, which the university is using for online instruction. The time to learn this might otherwise be used for research and publication or classroom preparation. Award systems, which universities use for salary increases and even promotion, seldom address adaptability to new teaching technologies.

Despite these obstacles I foresee an exciting future for the online educational experience. There will be more experimentation and there will be more changes and options in online programs; however, the pressure for university courses and degrees almost guarantees continued growth and development of online teaching.

The University of Houston serves a very large commuter community. Parking on the campus is difficult and expensive. Traffic around the campus is congested on weekdays when classes are in session. An online class helps relieve this, and more online classes could make a noticeable difference in the vehicle population on the campus.

TEACHING

Teaching Focuses

There are many reasons for not becoming involved with online education, and those may come up in

the course of this perspective; however, I would first like to discuss the positive effects that I have noticed from online teaching. First, and I believe most important, is that students must take the responsibility for their own learning. In all my initial materials, syllabus, welcome message to the class, and first weekly messages, I stress that individual initiative is the most important quality or asset that a student may bring to my class. No student who will be successful in this class can be a passive recipient of information. And certainly putting in time, that is, faithful class attendance will not insure a passing grade. Each student must assimilate material from a variety of sources and incorporate that material in developing an understanding and concept of the subject of the class. Each student must actively work at this in his or her own time and own manner. Second is the challenge to develop a classroom community in the online experience. Most students want to have some interchange with other students to compare and share experiences with the material being studied. It is important to encourage this activity through online discussion and carefully crafted group projects.

Comprehensive Assessment System

Within these first two goals it is important to maintain strong standards by using a variety of assessment tools. Group projects, as noted previously, should be one of these tools. Online testing is clearly another. I also give grades for online discussion, and I require a weekly journal entry which addresses the subject matter being studied and technology issues that may arise. As I explain later, I also have three individual writing assignments during the semester. Two of these are short 500-750 word papers; one is a longer 1,500 word essay.

Unlike some online classes, I attempt to maintain the rhythm of a normal class. Assignments are due weekly. They may be turned in a day or two early, but they may not be turned in late, certainly

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