

Chapter 4

A Tale of Two Courses: A Case Study of Transition from a Traditional to an Online Course

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ABSTRACT

In this case study, the researchers detail the transformation of a traditional, face-to-face, graduate-level seminary course into an online offering. The course, Biblical Studies 1: Torah and Former Prophets, part of the core curriculum at a Midwestern seminary, was adapted into a distance learning course. The first group of students enrolled in the online course for the spring 2009 term. Previously, the course was offered to first-year seminarians enrolled in traditional, face-to-face, degree and non-degree programs. This was the first course offered online at the graduate institution. This study provides a description of the process of adaption of the course to a distance learning option, and contains an analysis of student assessment outcomes for assignments required in both course formats. From the analysis of student outcomes, recommendations for future instructional practice are made.

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of the Internet, courses offered in distance learning formats have gained an exponential increase in popularity. The Department of

Education formally defined distance education as the “process in which the student and instructor are not in the same place. Thus instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous, and it may involve communication through the use of video, audio, or computer technologies, or by correspondence” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009, para.

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1). Gilbert (2001) noted that by 1999 between 85 and 90 percent of colleges and universities with enrollments of 3,000 to more than 10,000 students offered at least one distance learning course option. Currently, 12.2 million students are enrolled in distance education courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Because of the popularity of distance learning courses, even traditional, brick-and-mortar institutions are providing students the option of enrolling in online courses at an increasing rate.

This study details the conversion of a single course taught in a traditional brick and mortar graduate institution into an online course. The first cohort of students were enrolled in the online course for the spring 2009 term. Previously, the course was offered to first-year seminarians enrolled in traditional, face-to-face, degree and non-degree programs. This was the first course offered online at the graduate institution. This study provides a description of the process of adaption of the course as a distance learning option, and contains a quantitative, cross sectional analysis of student assessment outcomes for the identical assignments required in both the face-to-face and online course, and provides recommendations for future instructional practice based on analyzed data.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

For this study, the following research questions were used to guide the inquiry:

1. What were the factors that prompted seminarian leaders to offer an online course?
2. How was the traditional course adapted to fit the online course format?
3. How do assignment grades for students in the fall semester traditional course compare with grades for students in the spring semester online course?
4. What recommendations can be made based on data gathered about the transition from the traditional course to the online course?

BACKGROUND

Since the inception of the Internet, online programs have grown exponentially in higher education. In 1990, only 15% of households owned a computer in the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999). In 2005, that number had jumped to 78%, with an estimated 88.9 million U.S. households owning a computer. Of those, 81.4% had Internet access (Carol, Rivera, Ebel, Zimmerman, & Christakis, 2005). By 2002, almost 2 million students had taken at least one course online. One quarter of those students were enrolled in completely online programs (Shelton, 2005). With the growth of online access, universities and colleges across the country vie to meet consumer demand for online programs (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Thompson (2009) noted, "information technology has revolutionized the way many people work and interact, but the evidence is that many further education and skill training providers need to pick up the pace of adopting new [online] developments" (p. F4). Fully two-thirds of colleges and universities assert that online education is the most significant development in higher education, as it offers students flexibility and convenience, while a minority indicate that distance learning programs are inappropriate and inadequate substitutes for traditional, face-to-face instruction (Shin & Lee 2009).

With the growth of online programs, the demand for faculty willing to teach distance education programs has also increased. A study by Dickenson, Agnew, and Gorman (1999) indicated that 75% of faculty surveyed had received no training for the purpose of teaching online and 88% were given no reduction in workload or increase in compensation for adding online classes in addition to their current teaching load. More

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