Traditional wisdom suggests it is not possible to increase the quality of the learning experience, serve more students, and also reduce the cost simultaneously. Something has to give. Many institutions in higher education strive to serve more students, but with a student price tag as high as the market will allow and with minimal attention to the quality of the learning experience.

In contrast, BYU–Idaho put the quality of the student learning experience as its highest priority in the launch of the online learning initiative in 2008. Reducing costs and serving more students were our second and third priorities, respectively. We began with a goal and the faith to accomplish all three. Working together we have accomplished much in each of these areas, but there is much more to do and to learn.

Some view online learning as an advantageous business decision, cranking out mediocre classes with hired-gun teachers simply to slash costs and serve more students, while diluting the quality of what BYU–Idaho is really all about. Improving the quality of education is not just something to which the Academic Development team (the official name of BYU–Idaho’s online organization) pays lip service. It is a paramount priority that influences each decision of the team, from evaluating the learning experience in each course, to creating new courses, to choosing and training instructors, and to ongoing course improvement. In this article we illustrate our commitment and capacity to create and deliver high-quality courses using specific examples of our approach.

Evaluation, Research, and Development

President Kim B. Clark (2011, p. 4) has explained that an essential kind of “learning occurs when we work together in systematic inquiry directed at learning.” An essential feature of our approach to learning online is systematically collecting information about the quality of the learning environment and applying the lessons we learn. In short, we are continually learning about the learning environment. Online and on-campus instructors, as well as instructional designers, regularly review each course to identify opportunities for improvement. Students evaluate
BYU–Idaho puts the quality of the student learning experience as its highest priority every course every semester. The graph below shows averages of instructor ratings from the student evaluations.

As the graph shows, these ratings have steadily increased over the past few years as they approach the average for all courses at BYU–Idaho. Student feedback informs new course development as well as improvements in existing courses. However, student-satisfaction surveys only show a partial picture of the quality of the experience. We are in the process of implementing more outcomes-based evaluations. We are also working with course councils to implement evaluations that are specific to courses and lessons.

Evaluations also influence our research and development efforts, and vice versa. We introduce new approaches in a few sections and compare the evaluation results. We then implement the approach with better results across all sections of a course or across a broad range of courses. Recent R&D projects include student group work, online teaching assistants, delivery on mobile devices, and English-language-learning analysis. Upcoming R&D projects include adaptive learning, the top ten “teach-one-another activities” and other successful course-design patterns, bounded-choice learning activities, and using text messages to promote student engagement and retention.

The information we gather through evaluation and research drives ongoing changes to the course-quality standards, templates, or modular elements for many courses. Our systematic evaluation and research will increasingly inform and support the thoughtful, collaborative improvement of learning online and integrated curricula.

Course Development

To increase the quality of the student learning experience, a team of BYU–Idaho professionals creates each online course as part of an integrated curriculum. The team includes a full-time faculty member with load reduction, an instructional designer, media developers, a remote instructor who will teach the class, and one or more additional full-time faculty. The development team may also include other campus experts such as librarians, assessment specialists, and copyright experts. The team develops each online course to be high quality based on standards and best practices, as well as to a scale to accommodate thousands of students throughout the world.

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Over the past couple of years the Curriculum Development Department has increased its capacity not only for instructional design, but also for media development, including art, graphic design, video and audio production, etc., and will continue to develop in this area to improve the student experience. The following images illustrate the course appearance before and after a graphic makeover:

BYU–Idaho has created 135 courses for online delivery thus far. In most cases the faculty teams involved with the creation process have discovered that articulating the course for online delivery has also made them rethink and improve the quality of their course for the classroom.

The Online Instructor

At its core, the quality of the learning experience is found in the hearts of the people involved. Each semester, the online instructors provide the life and heart of courses built on an integrated curriculum. The instructors, scattered across 14 states, typically work professionally in their discipline while teaching one section for BYU–Idaho. The online instructor is the course facilitator, leading and moderating learning activities and discussion among students, prompting students to check assumptions and interact meaningfully around course topics. She draws on her own experience in the field to contextualize lesson concepts for students and seeks to build confidence and testimony through feedback on assignments as well as by personal outreach outside of assignments.

Each online instructor joins BYU–Idaho through a rigorous hiring process. The flexibility of teaching a single section from home attracts a wide variety of highly-
qualified instructors. Applicants go through a rigorous five-step process to become eligible to teach, and instructors who do not meet baseline criteria do not qualify for a teaching contract the next semester. The hiring process includes an interview with the hiring coordinator from Online Learning Operations, a review by the Department Chair or Foundations team lead (a change made in 2010 in lieu of an Associate Dean review), an ecclesiastical endorsement, and a two-week evaluation course. In the evaluation course, potential instructors demonstrate their capacity to teach online as they are placed in various authentic situations such as reaching out to difficult students or inspiring personal preparation and other aspects of the Learning Model.

Originally, only remote instructors were able to teach online sections. Currently, each course lead (the on-campus faculty member assigned by the department to oversee the curriculum for a course) has the option to teach an online section once a year in lieu of a face-to-face section. Also, any BYU–Idaho faculty member or administrator can apply to teach BYU–Idaho online courses.

BYU–Idaho places heavy emphasis on online instructor development. New instructors participate in a certification course where they hone online teaching skills in the context of the Learning Model and the Spirit of Ricks. Each instructor is placed in a teaching group where they form strong bonds as they answer one another’s questions and share effective practices. Teaching groups meet live via web conference once a month, and hold ongoing discussions in a virtual community. An online teaching coach will soon be added to the team.

The online instructors provide the life and heart of courses built on an integrated curriculum.
an integrated curriculum across multiple delivery types such as face-to-face, hybrid, and online.

Within the Online Learning organization, a specially designated course improvement team supports course councils. As improvements are recommended, the online course improvement team verifies the changes against the course standards and implements the changes in current and/or future sections of the course. The improvement team also helps councils with resources to support changes or to develop new content.

This council-based approach to course improvement has allowed the online courses to be centered in departments while staying aligned with online course quality and delivery standards and approaches. However, the formal articulation of course improvements has introduced some challenges. For example, most of us are used to making changes to our courses on the fly. It is a much more time-consuming and rigorous process to articulate desired course changes to be reviewed by other faculty and instructional designers and developers. The online course improvement team is refining the improvement process so that course council members can edit course content directly, if desired, while still fulfilling the council process and centralized collection of course content needed for online course delivery. Also, starting Fall 2012, an instructional designer will be a resource to course councils even after the initial development of a course.

Conclusion

We have chosen to place highest emphasis on the quality of the learning experience. Through working together we have identified key approaches for building and maintaining a quality experience. That teamwork, combined with faith, will allow us to see ongoing fulfillment of this promise from President Clark (2011, p. 6): “If we continue to build Zion here, the Lord will bless us with new understanding of learning of every kind. With it will come new understanding of teaching, and the Lord will bless us to know how to implement what we learn.” There is still much for us to learn together. Our team approach will allow us to reach the levels of quality we seek.

Reference

Clark, Kim B. “Learning and Teaching: To Know, To Do, and To Become”. BYU–Idaho Faculty Meeting, September 6, 2011. http://www2.byui.edu/Presentations/Transcripts/MiscellaneousAddresses/2011_09_06_Clark.htm

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