

ONLINE LEARNING:
EXTENDING THE BYU-IDAHO EXPERIENCE

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In his inaugural response, President Kim B. Clark said:

I see ahead a great season of creativity and innovation, a season of powerful new ideas and new curricula. In a day not far from now, we will be able to break down the barriers of time and space...and create outstanding, interactive educational experiences [where] students will teach one another in new and powerful ways.... The capacity to educate effectively across time and across space will allow us to leverage the capacity of the university and reach many more young people.¹

Since the launch of the online initiative in 2008, teams of BYU-Idaho faculty working together with curriculum development and media development teams have created more than 30 new online courses. New BYU-Idaho instructors, living all across the country, are teaching these new online courses in a way that actively engages students in learning and in teaching and serving each other.

Key elements of this online learning effort include remote instructors that extend the BYU-Idaho experience and an integrated curriculum based in the BYU-Idaho Learning Model.

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ONLINE INSTRUCTORS

Teaching has long been of paramount importance in building up and establishing Zion. The Lord has also employed many different settings and technologies to teach his people throughout the ages. Enoch taught “standing upon the hills and high places” (Moses 6:37). King Benjamin spoke from a tower, “and they could not all hear his words because of the greatness of the multitude; therefore he caused that the words which he spake should be written and sent forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice, that they might also receive his words” (Mosiah 2:8). Faithful Paul also used artful communication to teach at a distance, saying, “The salutation of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write” (2 Thessalonians 3:17).

And so it is in this era that we employ online forums, discussion boards, podcasts, and wikis—with each in their turn sounding perhaps as foreign to many as our day must have seemed to Paul in his vision of us. Yet, we are charged to extend the BYU-Idaho experience to more students than ever before using tools of “curious workmanship” (1 Nephi 16:10). And

how is this accomplished? By employing those who have been prepared for many years to become instructors in this new environment.

Among our ranks of prepared instructors we have Michael Cleverly of Reston, Virginia, who will be teaching American Foundations in the Winter 2010 semester. Brother Cleverly's perspective as a 30-year veteran of the Foreign Service, where he actively taught and represented the American system of government in other countries, will be a blessing to students. His academic preparation ranges from BYU to Harvard. He has taught formally at BYU, University of Phoenix, and Idaho State University.

Another of our new colleagues, Dena Conley of Cedar Park, Texas, will be teaching students to become masterful speakers in Communications 102, Public Speaking. Sister Conley is a graduate of Ricks College and BYU and has taught and coached speech and debate for over a decade in Texas public high schools and community colleges. She was most recently a program specialist for the Texas Education Agency. In her conversation with us, she remarked, "The number-one fear of individuals is dying; number-two is speaking in public. I like to help them with number two." Students will be served well by her experience and compassion.

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Almost uniformly, those joining our ranks express a deep love for the role church-sponsored education has played in their lives and convey an eagerness to give back. One of our new online English faculty remarked, "I love to teach LDS students. In fact, I would teach for free...but I charge for grading." We appreciate such individuals who share our love for these students and desire to contribute to their life's prospects by helping shape their minds and hearts.

These individuals represent just a few of our many qualified, prepared instructors. Each has submitted an application that has been screened for credentials, interviewed, and ultimately approved by a council of associate vice presidents, associate deans, and department chairs. Each has completed a 40-hour training course in learning and teaching to certify them as a BYU-Idaho online adjunct faculty member. Each online faculty is assigned to a teaching group and is regularly evaluated for their involvement in the course and participation in their teaching group. They also receive a 360° evaluation at the end of each semester that includes self, teaching group leader, and student evaluations. These evaluations help to determine ongoing development objectives and faculty contracting decisions.

Our recruiting and hiring efforts have been consistently aided by the efforts of many at the University to find new ways to administer this very complex new system. In our latest recruiting round throughout seven states, we received 765 applications, conducted 90 interviews, and hired 39 new online instructors. We will be expanding our reach to many more

states in 2010 and are eager to engage more and more of the talent the Lord has so clearly prepared.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

It is projected that by 2012 more than 150 online BYU–Idaho courses will have been developed. Though the University has more than 2,000 total courses, the 150 online courses are being strategically chosen to provide 20 percent of the University’s total student credit hours.

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Most of the students enrolled in online courses will be taking classroom-based courses in Rexburg at the same time. With 20 percent of the total student credit hours online, it is likely that a student taking five courses in a semester will have four classroom courses and one online course. The addition of online courses allows an additional 2,400 students to be admitted to BYU–Idaho in a year.

While most students registered for online courses will be in Rexburg, there are some important exceptions. There is a small group of students that are online-only students. They are working to complete an Associates of University Studies (AUS) or Bachelor of University Studies (BUS) degree. These students attended Ricks College or BYU–Idaho in the past, but left school before completing their degrees. These students are able to complete the degree requirements from their homes. Online AUS and BUS students, though small in number, live in states all across the country as well as in other countries.

Additionally, BYU–Idaho is able to extend its reach as off-track students register for online courses. This provides additional opportunities for students to study while completing internships or other off-track activities.

FACULTY CURRICULUM TEAMS

For the past ten years, BYU–Idaho faculty have been experimenting with online courses. Some of these efforts have been quite successful, while others have had mixed results. Most of these courses were designed before the Learning Model was defined. Many were designed around an asynchronous, self-paced learning experience that minimized faculty involvement. Most of these courses were designed to be taught by the same person who wrote the course. With the need to scale online courses, the University needed to create a more formal institution-wide capability to bolster this effort. This focused, team-based approach has led to significant quality improvements for the new online courses.

Beginning in fall 2008, under the direction of the newly created Curriculum Development organization, all new online courses were moved to a team-based course development process. Each development

team consists of the following individuals: a campus faculty member with a one-course release, one to two other faculty committee members, a curriculum development manager and instructional designer, a student assistant project manager, and student media developers. Every new course is aligned with the BYU–Idaho Learning Model. Accordingly, each course is designed around a cohort, semester-based model that allows students to progress together and learn from each other. Each course is evaluated along a defined set of quality standards and goes through a peer and student review process. Moreover, department chairs review the learning outcomes and assessments for every course.

COURSE QUALITY STANDARDS AND REVIEW PROCESS

Students will be expected to reach the same level of demonstrated performance as in campus courses.

Some faculty worry that online courses are simply an easier version of the classroom experience. Through the revised course development process, all courses will now be aligned with their corresponding on-campus course learning outcomes and assessments. Thus, students will be expected to reach the same level of demonstrated performance as in campus courses. Additionally, given the cohort, semester-based approach, students will need to meet weekly preparation and assignment deadlines, engage in graded participative activities, and work within a semester schedule. Nearly 70 percent of online student enrollments will be on-track students taking one of their courses online. It is critical that each course has the same rigor, performance, and assessment as its campus analogue.

The following are characteristics of the new-style of online courses:

- Online courses are built around the Learning Model principles and process.
- Teach one another is a hallmark characteristic of the online courses, with significant personal contact in a course between students and their peers and with their instructor.
- Online courses are cohort-based. The class members interact with each other throughout the semester in structured learning activities. (Online courses are offered on a semester or block time schedule.)
- Online courses are organized around closely interacting groups of 10–15 students, with no more than 90 students in a section.
- Online and classroom courses are integrated.

INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

There are some things that happen in the classroom that simply cannot be replicated online. The power of looking into students' eyes, hearing their tone of voice, or reading their body language can lead to teaching experiences that become magical. There are, however, things

that cannot be done in the classroom, for which the online medium is uniquely attuned. For example, an entire class can participate in an online discussion or blog, whereas time constraints in-class may otherwise limit a student's opportunity for engagement. Real-time assessment, monitoring students' progress, individualized feedback, adaptive learning activities, and other interactive learning tools can provide instructors new ways to engage and manage student learning. The key is to avoid making point-per-point comparisons and to focus on the unique opportunities that the online medium can create. Not only does online increase schedule and geographic flexibility for the student, but several large sample studies demonstrate that when online courses are well-designed, both student satisfaction and measured learning can perform at levels comparable to even the most successful campus courses. While some of the specific teaching strategies may differ to accommodate the different environments, the core curriculum will be the same. And, as resources (such as readings, audio/visual objects, assignments, rubrics, etc.) are developed for the online environment, they will be available for use by those teaching in the face-to-face classroom.

In early 2009, an online task force was organized to consider solutions to various issues about online learning. The task force was made up of three deans, three associate deans, three department chairs, a faculty member, and representatives of the online learning organization. One of the fundamental issues was integrated curriculum.

Should online courses replicate corresponding campus courses down to the most miniscule detail? Or should they have an identity of their own, determined entirely by the instructors' personal preferences, vision, and teaching styles? Or would the ideal mix be something in between those two extremes?

The remote online instructors should be able to personalize and make these online courses "come alive" in ways that accentuate their unique and individual talents. However, there should be real parameters around the curriculum itself to ensure quality and to tie online classes to campus offerings.

These are five key dimensions that the online learning task force felt were critical in creating an online curriculum that is integrated with campus:

- **Outcomes:** Learning outcomes are common among every section online and the main campus course. Part of the online course development process includes not only the creation of the learning outcomes to match campus, but also the approval from campus Department Chairs or Associate Deans.
- **Learning Model Architecture:** Each online course is built around an explicit Learning Model architecture with a corresponding

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learning cycle or rhythm. The campus course development team determines this architecture, which is built into the course design and remains a fixture of the course.

- **Content:** A blend of fixed and elective content seems to be the best solution for an integrated curriculum, as determined by the campus faculty team leader and course development team. In other words, whether content is fixed, elective, or some blend of the two should be determined in the course design. Of course if other suggestions come from the teaching of the course, those should be captured and suggested just as they are on campus. The general consensus from the task force was the creation of a “bounded choice” model, whose stewardship would continue to reside with the team leader on campus.
- **Teaching Plans:** The way an online instructor engages the content is an area with the highest level of personal and professional adaptation. A course would typically be built with a “master” teaching plan, but faculty members should be able to adapt their own teaching plan in ways that work for them and learn organically from what others are doing.
- **Assessments:** The task force felt these should be fixed for each course and determined again by the campus team leader and the course development team. Some design flexibility should be built in to accommodate content choices employed by the online instructor. However, that decision still rests with the campus development team as to where and how that happens.

What became clear from the discussions was that a lot depended on where you stood. When campus faculty considered their own teaching, they felt strongly that curriculum should be quite open. When they considered online courses, they were much more concerned about consistency and integration with campus. We believe we are moving toward an approach that balances each of these perspectives to provide a high quality online learning experience that is tied to campus.

THE EXTENSION ONLINE

Online learning is providing a way to extend the BYU–Idaho experience to many more students.

Whether in the physical classroom or in the virtual classroom (or in some combination of the two), online learning is providing a way to extend the BYU–Idaho experience to many more students. Because of an integrated curriculum aligned with the Learning Model, the students are engaged in the online elements of their coursework in a way that requires them to take action and reach out to teach and serve each other. In their online courses, BYU–Idaho students are led by instructors from across the country who love to nurture disciple-leaders and are anxious to

give back to BYU–Idaho. Online learning is extending the BYU–Idaho experience. ☺

NOTE

Kim B. Clark, “Inaugural Response,” *Devotionals and Speeches*, 11 Oct 2005, <http://web.byui.edu/devotionalsandspeeches/Default.aspx>.