

ONLINE LEARNING REPORT

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My initial reason for researching online learning was to become a better online teacher. While I had taught online for several years, I was still often frustrated at the gap between what I felt I could do in a classroom and what I was accomplishing online. I started reading books about online learning and scoured periodical databases for information on how successful online teachers approached their courses.

This report, based on some of my findings, was prepared for my department chair as a means to introduce what I thought were the key questions and issues our department needed to address as we looked towards developing more online courses. It is by no means an exhaustive review of the available research, but it does offer an introduction to the key challenges and opportunities we face as we seek to extend the reach of the Spirit of Ricks through online learning and teaching.

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BARRIERS TO WIDESPREAD ADOPTION OF ONLINE LEARNING

Making the Grade: Online Education in the United States, 2006, a report based on survey responses from over 2,200 colleges and universities, indicates two main obstacles to “widespread adoption of online learning.”

Student Discipline

The barrier most widely cited by academic leaders who responded to the survey, no matter the type or size of the institution they represented, was that “Students need more discipline to succeed in online courses” (qtd. in *Making the Grade*). The report continues: “Nearly two-thirds (63.6%) of all institutions agreed that this represents a significant barrier, with results ranging from a low 38.7 percent (Doctoral/Research institutions) to a high of 78.8 percent (Private for-profit institutions).”

K.D. Loomis’ study “Learning Styles and Asynchronous Learning: Comparing the LASSI Model to Class Performance” supports this concern. Based on his own experience teaching the same course online and in the classroom, Loomis concludes that one of the most significant factors determining his students’ success in an online class is their own preparation—their ability to study effectively outside the structure of a traditional classroom and the presence of an instructor who can readily intervene and assist in the learning process. He explains:

One of the benefits of the traditional classroom setting is that the more rigid structure (regular class meetings and frequent teacher reinforcement of important information) helps support some students with mediocre learning

and studying skills. In the traditional classroom much of the pressure in the learning environment is on the teacher and the system itself. Oftentimes instructors in the traditional classroom can detect when an individual does not understand or is unprepared for class, and can respond accordingly. Students in an asynchronous learning network do not have the benefit of such support. All of the course information is presented and available; but it is almost entirely up to the student to access and process it.

Faculty Time and Effort

According to *Making the Grade*, “An economic and logistic issue—that faculty need greater time and effort to teach online—is consistently the second-most cited significant potential barrier.” Interestingly enough, “institutions with the most experience with online instruction are the most concerned with this issue.”

DOES IT REQUIRE MORE TIME AND EFFORT TO TEACH ONLINE?

The answers to this question are mixed. Most studies indicate that it does take more time to teach online. For example, one survey of 428 faculty members concluded that online teaching did take more time than face-to-face teaching, focusing on the additional time it takes to communicate with students (Tallent-Runnels et al.). But some competing studies offer different conclusions, arguing that online teaching and traditional face-to-face teaching take about the same amount of time. Even the *Making the Grade* report indicated that over half of the respondents to last year’s survey felt that face-to-face teaching and online teaching required about the same amount of time and effort.

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However, those on both sides of the issue do agree that if online teaching doesn’t take more time, it is often more challenging. Barbara Pain McLain’s study “Estimating Faculty and Student Workload for Interaction in Online Graduate Music Courses” concludes that online teaching takes about the same amount of time as teaching in a traditional classroom. However, she explains that certain unique aspects of online teaching make it more demanding. She cites the following conditions:¹

Dynamics of Online Interaction

Online students attempted to contact their instructors, twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week, at least every fourteen hours. This was true regardless of class size or course duration. This is a radical shift from the traditional

1. McLain does not use these headings to organize her findings. Rather, they are the key conditions she identifies in the *Summary and Conclusions* section of her study. I include them here as a means to delineate each point.

office hours and face-to-face interaction normally experienced by university faculty. Students do not phone their professors at 3:00 AM to ask a question, or visit the professor's office on a weekend or holiday expecting assistance. Online students clearly have no limits on how often, or when, they attempt to interact with their instructors. This change of work "flow" for online faculty, who attempt to respond to students in a timely fashion, may be responsible for perceptions about additional workload as faculty find that there is no "down" time for online teaching.

Environmental/Communication Differences

Workload perceptions also may be affected by environmental differences in how assignments are submitted, evaluated and returned. Assignments submitted as WebCT mail attachments take additional time to open, download, store, evaluate, and return to students, than do assignments submitted in FTF classrooms...

This study assumed that students and faculty read their own discussion postings and did not consider proofreading time. It is possible that workload for creating email messages and discussions is much greater than indicated in this study due to proofreading time. It is also unclear how faculty perceptions may differ concerning the mental and physical actions needed for online teaching when compared to FTF classrooms. Typing may be perceived as more strenuous than speaking. Screen reading may be perceived as more physically demanding than listening. Working from home may be perceived as a psychological intrusion on privacy and traditional leisure hours for faculty...

Course Construction

Also not yet considered in this body of literature, is whether or not the construction process affects perceptions of workload once an online course begins. A faculty member who has recently spent hundreds of hours building an online course may have residual emotional issues about that process as they begin teaching. Online course development must be considered in any comparisons of preparation time, since the entire semester must be ready for delivery prior to the start of the term.

The differences in McLain's findings could also be attributed to the students' preparation. Graduate students are often better prepared to learn online because they are more disciplined, self-motivated, and have mastered basic studying habits that make them better suited to learn online. For example, only 38.7% of doctoral/research institutions cited student discipline as a barrier to the adoption of widespread online learning in the Sloane study, while the percentages were far higher (78.8%) for private/for-profit institutions.

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HOW IMPORTANT IS FACULTY/STUDENT INTERACTION TO EFFECTIVE ONLINE LEARNING?

This is one question on which every study I've read agrees: it is the key condition for effective learning online.

The study "Developing Learning Community in Online Asynchronous College Courses: The Role of Teaching Presence" indicates a clear link between an online teacher's active presence and student perceptions of learning and course satisfaction.

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This study reveals that a strong and active presence on the part of the instructor—one in which she or he actively guides the discourse—is related to students' sense of both connectedness and learning. This finding does not discount the importance of good instructional design and organization. Student who reported more effective instructional design and organization also reported higher levels of learning community; the contribution to the regression equation was simply not as great.

The study further defines the characteristics of "directed facilitation" that create an effective teaching presence:

These components include whether the students feel the instructor is drawing in participants, creating an accepting climate for learning, keeping students on track, and diagnosing misperceptions. Additionally when students feel their instructors are identifying areas of agreement and disagreement and helping to resolve these by looking for areas of consensus the students report higher levels of connectedness and learning. Further when students report that the instructor is reinforcing student contributions, injecting their own knowledge, and confirming student understanding, they are also more likely to report a better sense of learning community as measured by the Rovai instrument.

Another researcher concurs, concluding that "interactivity is identified as one of the most critical aspects related to online pedagogy" (Cercone 53). She quotes Hitch & Hirsh:

The most important factor for successful distance learning is a caring, concerned teacher who is confident, experienced, at ease with the equipment, uses media creatively, and maintains a high level of interacting with students. (quoted in Cercone 52)

IMPLICATIONS FOR FACULTY TRAINING

Because faculty/student interaction and directed facilitation are such important components of successful online learning experiences, it is important that online faculty receive not only technical training, but also an introduction to the pedagogical demands of online teaching.

In her study “Teaching Strategies in a Course Management System,” Kathleen M. Cercone warns against transferring lecture materials online or posting videoed lectures for student viewing, explaining that these methods, what one group of researchers called “backward pedagogy,” don’t allow for any learner participation (9). She suggests that “Transferring print-based or classroom lectures into print on the Web is not equivalent to teaching or learning. It is becoming critical that faculty members learn to take on a new role in the online classroom” (137).

Her conclusion is echoed by Sherri L. Restauri in “Faculty-Student Interaction Components in Online Education: What are the Effects of Student Satisfaction and Academic Outcomes?” who warns against what she sees as the “predominately instructivist environment” that currently dominates online instruction and urges “a training program for instructors and instructional designers alike, emphasizing a need to gear instructional design toward a more student-centered, active learning approach to teaching and learning” (160).

SOME SUGGESTIONS

Course Design

Unless we limit online learning to those students who naturally thrive in such an environment, we need to find effective ways to reach and engage students who are not intrinsically motivated. This pedagogical challenge can be addressed through technology but cannot be wholly solved by it. A philosophy of pedagogy that reflects the unique demands of online learning should govern course design. It isn’t enough to make content available online; we need to learn how to teach effectively online.

Faculty Training

Online faculty should receive adequate technical and pedagogical training. Teaching online does offer unique challenges and opportunities, and faculty members who teach online should not only be experts in their content areas, but should also receive additional training to help them facilitate online interaction, build consensus, and create an engaging learning community.

In addition, online faculty should receive adequate technical training. Self-initiated training is often not sufficient. Many online faculty do not know what kind of training will best benefit them. As Cercone points out, “Faculty members often do not consider educational philosophies and learning theories as they move their face-to-face classes online. The focus tends to be on course management rather than teaching activities” (57). A systematic training program will help faculty members not only master the online learning interface, but also recognize different ways

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that available technology can better help them facilitate student learning and help them create more responsive courses.

Courses should be designed by faculty members working in collaboration with instructional designers. Together they can wed proven pedagogical practice with sound course design to meet course objectives and outcomes.

Student Training

A training tutorial should be available to students to introduce them to the online management system. Students who are unfamiliar with the course interface might struggle to navigate the course. An interactive tutorial or set of modules would assist students taking online classes.

In addition to a technical tutorial, it may be helpful to introduce students to the unique requirements, challenges, and opportunities associated with online learning.

Course Size

Course size should be limited so as to allow consistent, substantive faculty/student interaction.

Since faculty/student interaction is perhaps the determining factor in students' satisfaction and perceptions of learning, course size should be limited so as to allow consistent, substantive faculty/student interaction. If the institution does adopt large online lecture-style courses, the design of such courses should also allow for the inclusion of qualified teaching assistants who can aid the instructor in facilitating and nurturing student/faculty interaction, akin to smaller lab sections for large lecture courses. Faculty who teach such sections should have teaching loads that reflect the additional time they will spend training and overseeing these teaching assistants. ∞

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