

Numbers: Using Innovative Online Course Support Strategies to Raise College Course Enrollment

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Abstract

This article addresses the administrative issue of achieving satisfactory enrollment numbers in order to avoid canceling summer courses. A case study was developed to measure whether offering a single course with both online and face-to-face students would attract sufficient students to the course and whether this model would significantly alter the instructor's time commitments to the course. Student perspective was employed to help assess learning and the tool used to bridge both sections of students has been called "hybrid bridging format."

Keywords: Online, technology, assessment, teaching, criminal justice, investigation.

Introduction

Man. Nature. Technology...The human being and the machine joining for unity. The human being moving with its own strength, in cooperation with a machine. (Hütter, 2003)

The musical pioneers of electronic beats known internationally as "Kraftwerk," challenged the world decades ago, e.g. the albums "Man Machine" and "Computer World," to embrace what technology could do for music and how technology transcends the very fabric of society. (Flur, 2003) Today, this same musical group is famous for being able to address society's quandary in incorporating technological development in a beneficial way. (Buttimer, 2003) Technology is often used in addressing issues within higher education. This study focused on using technology to address the administrative issue of achieving satisfactory enrollment numbers in order to avoid canceling summer courses.

For colleges and universities, having sufficient students enrolled in a course is essential. Insufficient enrollment becomes an administrative issue which often forces administrators to mandate canceling a course within the first day or two of a semester. (McLaughlin, 2005) Traditionally, enrollment for summer semesters is especially problematic. The reality of declining enrollment is such an administrative issue (McNamee, 2006), that some institutions have considered mandating summer enrollment of students in order to guarantee summer funding for the institution. (Trulove, 1994) Some

institutions have explicitly attributed declining enrollment to a lack of focus on summer course offerings. (McNamee, 2006)

For students considering summer enrollment, the availability and scheduling of course offerings can mean a significant difference in income for their summer jobs. In addition to those students who rely on face-to-face summer courses in order to matriculate successfully, there are students who travel "home" for the summer to be with their families and friends. (McDermott, 2001)

A relatively new factor impacting both students and colleges and universities is the decision to select courses, especially electives, which are offered online rather than in traditional face-to-face format. (Bajjal, 2005) For some students, the opportunity to take a course online during the summer is important to successful matriculation or might quicken graduating their institution. (Pulliam, 2006)

Students with outside obligations, such as military or family, have other responsibilities which can only be met during the summer; making summer courses their only option. (Green, 2001).

Whether summer courses are scheduled for traditional face-to-face delivery or online format, the issue of sufficient enrollment for the course to make remains the same. Course cancellation is a burden for students already enrolled, especially when students have strategically selected both summer courses and job schedules. (McLaughlin, 2005) When courses are cancelled, especially within the first day or two of a semester, students must try to find another course, purchase new books and attempt to return the books from the cancelled course.

For many colleges and universities an important issue for selected summer courses is achieving enrollment numbers high-enough so that the institution can make the financial cost of offering the course worthwhile. Innovative use of online course offerings has provided a method of meeting enrollment numbers and helping ensure revenue. (Business Wire, 2005) This issue has influenced some institutions to entertain open forums with faculty in order to promote non-traditional approaches towards this end. Hess et al. (2005) make clear the importance of using the correct tools, e.g. WebCT alternatives, to address student need, faculty need, and institutional need:

Educators, administrators, and institutions need tools and methods to evaluate whether their courses and programs meet the requirements of accreditation, policy-making, and funding agencies in addition to meeting the needs of their students and faculty. (Hess et al., 2005)

For institutions anchored in traditional course offerings, student choices between online and face-to-face impact revenue and long-term planning.

In terms of producing the highest quality graduates based on an institution's mission, faculty and administration are aware that different students appreciate different options to help them learn effectively. For instance, some students might feel comfortable with functioning online, but not comfortable face-to-face; especially during intense summer sessions possibly requiring sitting in class five days per week. (Brown, 2005) This is why it is a struggle for institutions to decide which offering they will make available in a way that does not financially impact the institutions. The relationship between institutional financial needs and student growth needs, i.e. learning, is paramount to the effort used by all within an institution. This study recognized that there is no method completely free from error in which to assign student tasks and assess the learning associated with those tasks. (Erwin, 1991) To be sure, the methodology used herein, specifically attempted to provide numerous opportunities for each student to excel individually and as part of a group.

Focus

The issue of student enrollment and use of course resources to obtain needed numbers, posed several central research questions and two hypotheses. It was hypothesized that adding a hybrid section, a course taught totally online, would bring enough students into the course that it would meet minimum enrollment numbers to "make."¹ It was also hypothesized that the additional section would not add additional workload on the professor if technology were used to promote student interaction across both

sections. One central research question asked if the critical incident crime investigation course actually reached sufficient enrollment numbers once the online only section was added. A second question asked what technological tool(s) might help manage day-to-day administration of the course by the professor. A third question asked whether similar student learning could be achieved in simultaneous course sections having different structures, i.e. face-to-face versus online, while those sections work together.

Methods

A case study was used at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock - UALR in order to attempt a new model for addressing this issue. A professor with no issues maintaining enrollment numbers during the fall and spring semesters was having difficulty maintaining summer enrollment for two courses taught face-to-face only. These courses previously had been taught face-to-face only with web-enhancements using WebCT. This meant that course material, e.g. syllabi and assignments were available to students online using WebCT's secure and internal structure which even also supported email and discussion board hosting. Due to lower enrollment the next summer, this professor was told by the department chair that the institution would not be financially able to offer the two courses if enrollments did not double to at least ten students within five days. Faced with this dilemma, the chair and the professor sought a way to increase enrollments quickly, while still ensuring the ability to foster student learning effectively.

The decision was made by the department chair and the professor to offer an online section for one of the courses in addition to a section being offered face-to-face. There was one class section face-to-face and one class section offered online, thus allowing the professor to juggle two classes with less oversight while students in both sections saw the course as merely one section composed of online and face-to-face. This course was an upper level department course with an enrollment makeup of mostly juniors and seniors majoring in Criminal Justice. The course chosen was 'Critical Incident Crime Investigation,' a course set to introduce students to criminal justice anomalies, such as The Waco incident, the JFK assassination, and the 1997 North Hollywood bank robbery; which shocked authorities into revamping how to address such crime types. Since this course used unusual material, with the expectation that students would learn about how criminal justice professionals function in the real world, this course seemed appropriate for such research. Another important aspect of this model was to see if the professor could help the institution achieve viable enrollment without making the extra section load overwhelming to the professor.

Students currently taking online courses, were emailed in a marketing campaign offering an "opportunity to step into the shoes of a federal investigator in order to learn how such professionals research certain crimes to better address the future." The online course section was officially added by UALR's office of Records and Registration with the same verbiage from the email used as the course description. The purpose of this extra effort was to make the offering known to students who were not already online and might like to try something different in terms of format.

Within three days there were enough students enrolled in the face-to-face and online sections to eliminate the danger of canceling the course; growth included an increase from only four face-to-face students to an additional six online students, for a total of ten students. The students in both sections were sent welcome messages. At their first meeting, the face-to-face students were advised that many of the resources for their learning experience were going to be available online. Both sections were sent introductions by the professor within their respective course shells in WebCT. The flow of the course required students to be treated as federal investigators who would receive instructions from a covert contact known only as "Dr. X." The two course shells were provided the same student resources and access to the professor. Students were able to communicate directly with other students in their section, but were not able to communicate between the two sections. Toward this end, the students online and face-to-face were provided a bridging tool to communicate within WebCT. The tool was a unique access portal the professor could use to enter any section he taught and view the course without "designer access," i.e. from the students' view of the course. The decision was made to give students in both sections access to this portal, therefore allowing all students the ability to communicate and even share files, (e.g. MS Word or MS PowerPoint).

Due to the nature of the course, the class was given one email message enabling them to know that the course would employ the pretence that each student was part of an elite investigative unit comprised of two teams. It was explained to the students that the real world requires the ability for criminal justice professionals to work with others in remote locations in order to 'get the job done.' The students indicated they were elated at the opportunity to gain such a value added experience. The face-to-face students were referred to as the on-site team and the online students were referred to as the off-site team. The professor intended to teach the students the importance of teamwork and to shift responsibilities for work. As each week passed, the professor began to shift from assigning responsibilities to specific team members (rotating each week to provide each student an opportunity) to allowing team members to choose which people might be appropriate for certain tasks. The professor reduced providing information to both teams and disseminated to only one team instead. Consequently, each week students were sent a message telling of some new intelligence about a criminal justice incident a bank robbery involving new technology, requiring each team to split research and reporting tasks. The teams then posted their respective reports within the other team's discussion board (course shell). For example, during the coverage of the 1997 North Hollywood bank robbery, the on-site team took responsibility for obtaining data from Los Angeles police department headquarters, while the off-site team researched different locations to obtain data on body armor and weaponry. As the covert contact for these teams, the professor would stimulate discussion via email and would task a specific student to share the information with the others.

To analyze the data about the course, the authors used content analysis. This technique allowed the identification of indicators based on responses from the course instructor and from the students in both course shells. Those instances were then plotted using a data collection grid for analysis. A concurrent triangulation strategy was used to employ quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. (Creswell, 2003) This mixed method methodological approach allowed for greater understanding of this unique manner of technological course administration. Qualitatively, the professor's comments on student learning and students' comments on student learning informed the researchers on questions two and three. The comments were derived from notes written by the professor about the course and from email comments from students in the course. The patterned comments served as indicators to address the validity of those data. Quantitatively, both the percentage of any enrollment increase or decrease based on the use of a hybrid course with a bridging tool and the comparison of student independence associated with the professor's scaled level of guidance, informed the researchers on questions one and two. This operationalization on either increase or decrease in enrollment and the communication changes associated with professional interaction served to promote reliability. Focus was placed on communication changes with respect to the face-to-face and online students. No need for either an SPSS, or SAS application—statistical analysis software existed based on the combination of mixed methodologies toward this particular topic. (Creswell, 2003)

Findings

There are several observations to be made about the students' participation and about whether this hybrid bridging format (HBF) a good drawing-card to encourage students to enroll. Because the course was marketed as an online course, where all of the coursework was completed without sitting in a traditional classroom setting, it appealed to those students who would not have otherwise taken the course due to scheduling conflicts. One of the most significant findings based on comments from the professor on student course behavior, was that the students used their respective course shell structures, to draw primary support, prior to sharing their thoughts with the other team. Therefore, the face-to-face/on-site group took advantage of being able to meet on campus as needed to brainstorm; they indicated that they felt more comfortable doing so. The online/off-site group tended to communicate extensively online using a discussion board and even set up telephone conferences to make their discussion real-time.

Another observation was that even though the teams could communicate across the portal, they each quickly developed patterns as to who would assume the workload in case the team leader that week did not pull material together in a timely manner. In other words, core leadership emerged. Figure 1 indicates this by the significant increase in outgoing email during week number four when the two

strongest students contacted certain students with messages of encouragement for their course sections, and then contacted all the students in both sections. During this same week, the incoming substantive email from students to the professor dropped significantly. Traditionally, this would be a period in a semester when questions from students are higher in volume. Importantly, the teams demonstrated professionalism in every way with each other and across the portal. In fact, several messages were sent between students to encourage team members to keep their focus on deadlines. Toward this end, the lesser the interaction by the professor as the semester progressed, the greater the students' display of responsibility to get their work done. (see Figure 1) An example of this is in preparation for the final exam covering the text for the course and notes provided by their professor, Dr. X. The off-site team held a discussion board practice exam and the on-site team met on days in which they did not have class in order to help each other prepare. Once this preliminary studying was complete, several students in both sections asked each other to meet over the phone. Additionally, several of the students tasked themselves and their colleagues to prepare various sections of material and share with others in their sections and the other class section. This technique mirrored the professor's teaching strategy from earlier in the semester. As students encountered difficulty preparing for the exam, they contacted the professor and then quickly shared the information gained with their colleagues. In essence, class participation was phenomenal.

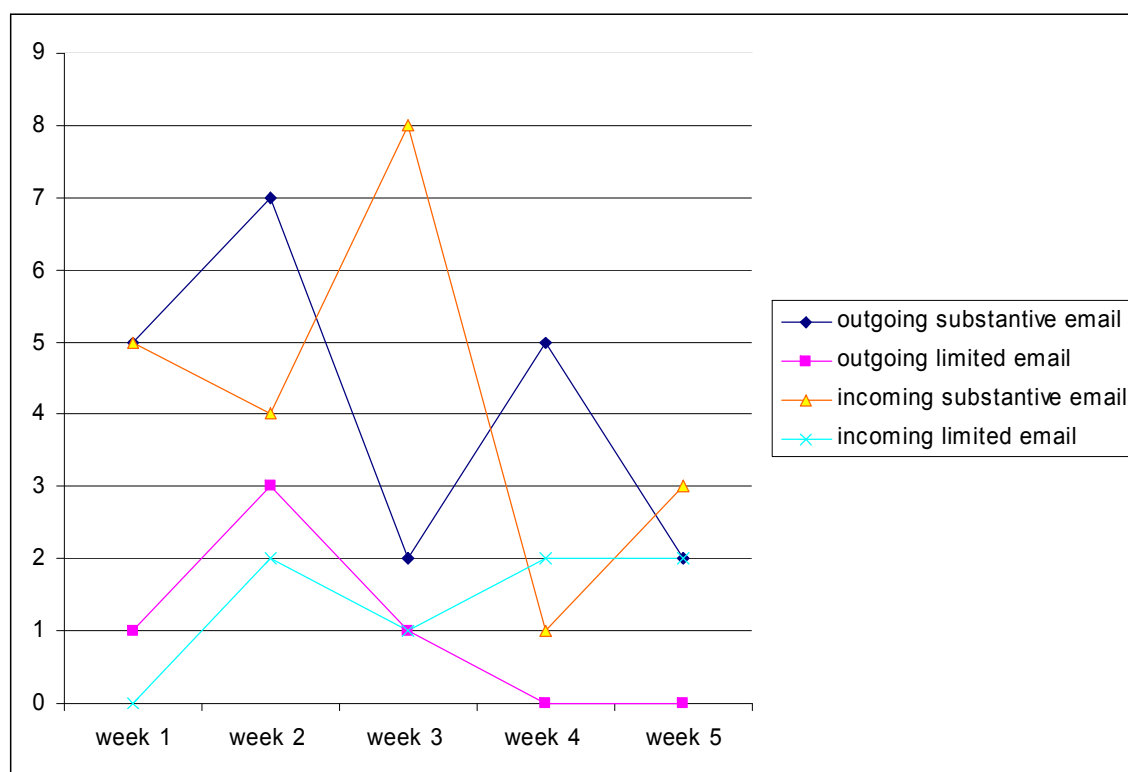


Figure 1: Comparison of professor's outgoing and incoming course email

With respect to the students' views on the viability of HBF to increase enrollment, the findings were clear (see Figure 1). One of the three face-to-face students independently approached the professor stating that she saw the announcement of the hybrid course provided by the online coordinator and enrolled because she was curious to see what the course would entail. Another face-to-face student independently commented that he saw HBF as a "...great way to increase student participation... it made the course fun." Two of the five online students independently contacted the professor stating they were glad that the online section was added in that they were not only able to obtain course credits during the summer, but also found HBF a useful way to handle difficult material, in that the students worked as an

overall team sharing strengths. Incoming email message 358 is an example of the overall feeling expressed by those who commented on HBF within the course: "Sir, I have really enjoyed this class. I will look forward to taking more classes with you. Your sense of humor is a great addition to my tiring work day." In terms of the impact on the professor handling two course sections existing in completely different environments simultaneously, the professor indicated that he found HBF useful to empower students. This student empowerment ultimately resulted in the professor committing less time and attention to each section.

Of the most powerful aspects of this course towards answering the central research questions, one of the two emergent leaders offered the following narrative comments about the course (names have been redacted):

Critical Incident Crime Investigation is a very complex course due to the numerous terms, and the importance of the student to learn proper research techniques. Not only was the course broad in nature, but I only had five weeks to learn the material and be able to present the material in a cumulative final. [The professor] set up the class where we were an investigative team. Each week we were given an assignment, and one classmate was given the role [of] "team leader." By combining our efforts towards one common goal, we accurately learned the course material each week, and established valuable team work skills. The last team assignment before the final was very intense in nature. Not only were we to combine efforts with each student in the onsite class, we were to work closely with the "on-line" class to produce one big study over a particular phenomenon. [Each week] The face-to-face was assigned one leader, while the on-line class was assigned one leader. The complexity of this assignment was not studying the material, but 20 students working for one common goal. [The professor] totally left the decisions up to the two leaders for each class. He was teaching us how to work with others in a "real" government situation, not face-to-face, but via email. All communication and document inference was done through the network. This technique not only strengthened my communication and leader skills ten fold, it also helped me to prepare for future assignments that might be assigned to me as an employee of an agency. Due to the changing technological environment around us, most communication between persons is through networks. I am now completely comfortable doing so, if needed. Since participating in Critical Incident Crime Investigation I have, on numerous occasions, used the leadership and communication skills I developed over [these] 5 weeks. These skills will be carried on through graduate school and in my future occupation. (University of Arkansas at Little Rock email, 2006)

This suggests that the students saw both sections as "one class" and not as two separate classes for which the professor would have to provide the same information twice, a significant amount of work. It also indicates that the student saw such an alternative format as providing useful practice towards his/her career and therefore made the risk of a different format worthwhile. Therefore, these data indicate that for this type of criminal justice course, HBF might reduce workload on the professor from the amount required for two sections or even less than the workload for one traditional section, while simultaneously helping the course reach sufficient enrollment numbers and promoting effective student learning.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that not only do students want alternatives to traditional face-to-face courses, they respond well to such alternatives. The research team acknowledges that more research needs to be completed to compare this teaching format, i.e. HBF, using other criminal justice courses and courses in other disciplines. This hybrid course technique might have application for research teams in the sciences, collaborative research in the social sciences, and joint composition projects in the arts and sciences. If such replication is successful, HBF could be of significance to college faculty and administrators generally. Faculty interested in compensation for summer effort may be more willing to experiment with the hybrid bridging format. Administrators interested in promoting or maintaining summer enrollment might welcome another tool toward such a goal.

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¹ In the realm of online teaching, the term “hybrid” generally refers to courses offering part of the material face-to-face and part of the material online. This study used the term hybrid as part of the phrase hybrid bridging format, in order to draw attention to the fact that two course sections, one online and one face-to-face were offered simultaneously.

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