Teaching Behavioral-Based Skills Online

Gerri Hura
Assistant Professor
Education Foundations/Adult Education
Buffalo State College
Buffalo, NY 14222 USA
huragm@buffalostate.edu

Abstract

With the rapid increase of online courses and programs, effective methods for teaching behavioral-based skills online become a growing necessity. Besides implementing best practices for online teaching, using methods such as videos, audio clips, simulations and carefully constructed assignments and assessments provide the tools and aids for effectively teaching the behavioral-based skills such as coaching skills, listening skills, teaming, and presentation skills.

Keywords: Online methods, Distance learning methods, Behavioral skills, Performance skills, Online teaching best practices, Teaching methods, Management development skills, Online tools and techniques

Introduction

It is a known fact that more colleges and universities are offering online courses to their undergraduate and graduate students. The Sloan Consortium (Allen & Seaman, 2007) reported that 3.5 million students in the fall of 2006 were taking online courses which was almost a 10% increase from 2005. The Consortium (2007) also reported that this increase in students taking online courses was a higher growth rate (9.7%) than the overall growth rate of students in higher education. Why? Because more students want the flexibility and convenience the online environment provides.

Foundational and lecture based courses seem to have the greatest success in this media, but what about behavioral-based skills, or soft skill courses (team development, management development), or those courses and techniques that require skill practice and feedback (presentation skills, instructional methods, counseling skills)? Are these types of courses and skills effectively and easily transferable to the online format?

The traditional method for teaching behavioral-based skills is to show or demonstrate the skill, practice the skill, and finally to provide feedback on how the learner used the skill (Noe, 2005). Expanded, this includes instructor-led lecture or discussion (Hall, 1997), review of the key skills through the use of a video, a live demonstration and discussion, followed by instructor facilitated individual or small group skill practice or role play methods (Smith & Ragan, 2005). Finally, immediate feedback is provided to the learner through self critique as well as through group and instructor input (Smith & Ragan, 2005). Dooley and Dietz in 1941 believed that people learned by doing with an instructor closely involved in the learning (Jacobs, 2003). Their methods were used during WWII production. The Dooley and Dietz approach was based on the four-step process of Charles Allen (preparation, instruction, application, inspection (McCord, 1987)) which was used to train civilians in shipbuilding during the war (Jacobs, 2003). Behavioral methods utilize a model which allows the learner to practice the skill or behavior in a realistic (or simulated) environment (Blanchard & Thacker, 2004).

This article will review various methods and techniques that any instructor can use to adapt their behavioral-based course content into a rich and rewarding online learning experience for students. In addition, this article provides several examples of online instructional methods for behavioral-based skills or courses.

Learning Behavioral Skills

Historically the online environment has been a successful medium for transferring cognitive knowledge (versus skill-based or behavioral/attitudinal learning and changes). The complexity of teaching behavioral-based skills lies in the fact that for the learner to successfully utilize the new skills there must be an attitudinal change (Smith & Ragan, 2005). Not only must the learner know how to use the skills (cognitive knowledge), but they need to internalize the need to use the skill and understand why they are using the skill (attitudinal change), the value of the skill, and ultimately choosing to use that skill (Smith & Ragan, 2005). Thus to teach behavioral based skills online, care and attention needs to be placed not only on disseminating the content (knowledge) but also including methods to help the learner internalize the value of the behavior and understand and accept why the behavior change is important (Tanner & Tanner, 2007). Finally, the key to the successful transfer of learning for behavioral skills includes commitment of the learner (Tanner & Tanner, 2007), and feedback and reinforcement to the learner (Smith & Ragan, 2005); something which requires intentional curriculum design in an online environment.

Challenges of Teaching Behavioral-Based Skills Online

In an online environment, learning is completely learner-centered. The learner decides when, what, and how they are learning. While the instructor can provide the environment for a collaborative and interactive learning experience, the learner is ultimately in control. Often online courses are asynchronous, where the learner is completely independent. For behavioral-based skills where practice and immediate feedback is critical, this challenge is compounded by hoping that the learner is actually practicing the skills and then showing the results or communicating the results to the instructor so that the instructor can provide timely and appropriate feedback.

Another challenge in the online environment is that appropriate and useful material takes longer to develop. In instructor-led classes or programs, the instructor typically uses notes or an outline and conducts the class using this material. The instructor may show a video or conduct a live demonstration of the skill and then the learner has an opportunity to discuss the process and then practice the skill with feedback from observers and the instructor. Finally there is an all class discussion on the behavior and skills: what went well, what did not work with the process, ideally followed by additional time to practice the skill one more time.

In the online learning environment, this information is transmitted online through various methods including readings, written out lectures and instructions, video support, targeted assignments, instructor or student-led discussions and live chat opportunities. All of these methods take time and energy from the instructor to develop and interact.

Online course or program development is time intensive (Hall, 1997; Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003; Wang & Gearhart, 2006). The course or program designer needs to utilize multiple perspectives, methods and tools to impact the student and their learning styles. In addition, online students often need clarification of the course objectives, expectations, assignments and activities usually involving multiple e-mails or discussion postings (Conceicao, 2006) with the instructor. Since the learning is often asynchronous and the practice of the skill is done on the learner's own time, the feedback process is usually not immediate. The feedback process becomes more reflective versus actual (Wang & Gearhart, 2006).

Another challenge in the online medium deals with using videos online and copyright issues. In a traditional, instructor-led class, using a video clip is easy to do, but in the online environment, permission needs to be obtained from the producers or authors of the video as well as the video clip needs to be presented in a viewing platform that will not allow copying. Also the viewing format should be web-based so that students with dial-up connectivity can easily access and view the clip.

To be successful, the instructor needs to stay current with online technology (Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003). While they do not need to be programmers or Web designers, effective online instructors need to have a fundamental knowledge of the various tools and techniques and resources available to them online or within their institution's course management system.

The critical success factor in this traditional method has the instructor coaching the learner using feedback and monitoring as the learner is processing and assimilating the new skills into practice. Can

this process be accomplished successfully in an online environment as well? The first issue to consider is fundamental to learning itself: has the student learned and incorporated the new skills and attitudes and are the skills repeatable by the learner in various environments? The second issue is more basic to the process. Is the teaching process and format something that the average, computer literate faculty member can easily achieve with little or no assistance (and minimal time) and housed within a format that most learners with various technology skills, equipment, and connectively can access?

Various learning platforms are available in the corporate environment but the average undergraduate or graduate student does not necessarily have the proper software and hardware and connectivity that make the more sophisticated online learning methods a reality. Also, most faculty do not have the interest or time to transform their course content into formats using the software that creates a truly interactive online learning experience for the learner.

The final challenge that faces both faculty and the learners is that teaching and learning online requires a whole new way of thinking. Both the students and the faculty need to be ready, willing, and able to accept the online medium as a viable learning and teaching vehicle.

Best Practices for Teaching Behavior Based Skills Online

Not What But How

Most subjects can be taught online, the question is how should it be done and are these methods creating an effective learning environment. Transposing classroom teaching methods and posting PowerPoint slides and lecture notes online peppered with instructor-led discussions is the traditional or perhaps first generation of online teaching (Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003). But as the volume of online learners steadily grows and the need for effective, responsive pedagogy grows, these methods need to be augmented with innovative course design and teaching practices (Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003). Knowlton (2000) suggest that for faculty "the emphasis should be placed on managing the learning experience, not on managing the technology" (p. 11). This shift requires the faculty to become facilitators of student learning and not just the disseminators of the learning. The shift is to involve students in their learning by requiring them to become active participants. This can be accomplished through collaborative activities, reflective assignments, individual and group problem solving, and challenging and innovative assessment projects and assignments.

Using a variety of aids and handouts to augment the text (if you are using a text) (Hall, 1997; Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003), audio and video supplements (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006; Wang & Gearhart, 2006), and guest speakers (Durrington, Berryhill, & Swafford, 2006) all add to the richness of a course for the online learner. In addition, the course experiences, assessments, and activities must be authentic. Case studies must reflect real life problems and applications (Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003), and the instructors must relate real life support stories or encourage students to share their own experiences supporting the topics. The approach should include problem-based learning (Durrington et al., 2006) which forces the learner to take theoretical knowledge and apply it using critical thinking and reflective skills. And finally the tools and aids need to be of a high quality that are personally and professionally meaningful (Durrington et al., 2006). This makes the entire learning experience authentic.

A key aspect of teaching behavioral-based skills online is for the course designer to step back from the content and think about how that content can be "translated" to an online environment. A live demonstration of the skill is not possible, but a video clip or a well-scripted case could be used as a meaningful substitute. The video clip could be no more sophisticated than two individuals reading a script on camera that demonstrate the key behavioral-based skills. The online students are then requested to view the video and in the discussion forum, they critique and discuss the steps of the process or behavior.

Behavioral-based skills are typically taught using collaboration or small group work in traditional classroom environments. In the online medium, student collaboration or small group work is doable; however the activities, the group composition, and the pacing or timing needs to be carefully orchestrated by the instructor. Since many classes are asynchronous, the pacing or time limits for small group work or student collaboration needs to be sufficient to allow students adequate time to discuss and process the content. Something that can be accomplish in a one, three hour face-to-face class session, may need one or two weeks in the online environment. Using groups that are too large (more than four

or five students) or having too diverse of a student population (very experienced students partnered with inexperienced students) in a small group project also requires more time as well as opportunities for role delineation to ensure that everyone participates and is actively involved in the learning process.

Developing a "supportive, open, and respectful" (Durrington et al., 2006, p. 191) learning environment which includes using a variety of communication methods helps to link the content effectively to the learner as well as provide an environment that encourages the learner to explore new behavior-based skills and attitudes. Using role models which portray the desired skills (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006; Smith & Ragan, 2005) or having a discussion forum which challenges the behavior-based skills is another example of a technique to "demonstrate" the new skill. Through the careful intervention of the facilitator or instructor, a complete, yet correct and positive image of the appropriate behavior–based skills are established in the learner's mind. Instructors become coaches or "mentors, facilitators and role models through giving feedback, asking questions, and guiding inquiry" (Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003, p. 5).

Additional Online Success Factors

Teaching behavior-based skills online also requires the instructor to use core, instructional best practices and success factors for all online courses. Core communication techniques are useful including having a detailed syllabus with course expectations, learning objectives and assignments clearly articulated. Stating each lesson's learning objective continues this communication process for the student and helps to clearly articulate ongoing goals. Discussion forums are often the backbone of the online environment, but these forums require set interaction and quality guidelines, ongoing feedback to students on their responses and participation, carefully constructed questions by the facilitator (questions that require the students to use critical and reflective thinking skills), quality topics, as well as student moderated discussions (Durrington et al., 2006).

Using both synchronous and asynchronous modes from live chats, phone calls, formal and informal discussion forums, e-mails (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006) helps to enrich the online experience. Personalization is another aspect that helps to create a community of learning. Calling students by name, providing informal chat opportunities (via an Internet Café or a voice-to-voice phone call), having students post their pictures and a friendly tone of voice create a learning environment where students are willing to speak up. In the live classroom, the personality of the instructor and the learners are quickly ascertained by verbal and non-verbal clues, but in the online environment, the personality and classroom atmosphere needs to be more intentional and planned. While teaching online can be a "trial and error process and not for the faint of heart" (Sudzina & Sudzina, 2003, p. 5) it also can be a rich and rewarding experience for both the learner and the instructor. These success factors are inherent to any quality classroom experience, not just for the online environment.

Three Case Studies – Application

Methods for Teaching Adults

Teaching and learning behavioral-based skills online can be done with a little thought and effort on the part of the instructor and the students. In a *Methods of Adult Learning* class, online students are given two teaching assignments, one a lecture and one which must be a "significant learning experience" (Fink, 2003) which entails teaching a lesson which has learning objectives covering foundational information, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. For these teaching assignments, students are responsible for developing the lessons, finding appropriate adult audiences, securing appropriate teaching environments and having a camrecorder and/or videographer. The learners conduct the teaching assignment and submit the DVD or VHS tape via regular mail to the instructor as well as write a reflection on the experience. The instructor works with the institution's instructional resource team who compress the video segments, house the videos on the institution's Intranet and provides a Web link for each video segment (this method allows for students with dial-up Internet, the ability to download the videos with reasonably fast download times). The course site has a folder for the "video feedback class" and students in the class are directed to go to this folder. Housed at this site are separate folders for each student in the class. Within each student folder is the video link of the individual teaching segment and a discussion forum where classmates provide positive and corrective feedback after they have viewed the video segments.

Using this process, each student must practice teaching two types of teaching methods to a target audience, as well as they review a variety of other approaches (from their classmates' videos) of someone using the same methods. In addition, each student receives specific, positive feedback as well as suggestions for improvement. This process is also used in a traditional face-to-face class where students "teach" a portion of a lesson to their classmates in the live environment. Students in the online environment have an advantage since they must teach a longer segment (usually an entire lesson) whereas in a traditional face-to-face methods class there is usually not adequate time for an entire lesson, but rather just a portion of a lesson (usually 10 to 20 minute segments). Also the online feedback tends to be more specific and substantial than the face-to-face class feedback which tends to be more superficial. Finally, in the online environment, students are potentially teaching to the content's intended audience, rather than their classmates. Having students film and submit their videos for the online methods class requires some advance planning, scheduling, and orchestration by both the students and the instructor, but the benefits is that online students do have an opportunity to practice their teaching skills and receive substantive feedback.

Working on a High Impact Project Team

Forming a team and successfully working on that team for a specific project involves a variety of behavior-based skills including communication skills, leading a team, negotiation, dealing with conflict, listening skills, etc. In a course dealing with developing training and development projects, online students, working on virtual teams are asked to produce various deliverables for a simulated client. Based on the client's directives, student teams produce a training proposal and outline for one of three projects: customer service training, supervisory training or executive development training. After the client "accepts" the proposal, students then develop a detailed agenda for their training program, and finally the teams produce the instructor and participant guides for the project. Prior to the teams working on the specific projects, they develop team operating agreements which include individual and team roles and responsibilities as well as individual commitments to the team and the project.

The students select the projects as well as they are given three weeks to develop their team and individual operating agreements. The teams use the course management system as well as alternative tools including phone calls, email, and Internet tools to work through the intricacies of the team, the team dynamics and working on a virtual project. In addition, the students have an opportunity to interact with the various client sponsors through e-mails and discussion forums. Each sponsor (The CEO, VP of HR, VP of Customer Service and VP of the Retail Stores) has a discreet log-on and e-mail so that when students are communicating with these individuals, it appears, at least on the screen, that this was the client sponsor that is interacting and responding to the student/team questions and not the instructor.

Students not only learn firsthand the various challenges of working on and managing a project team, but they also experience the challenges of working on a *virtual* project team. They learn to deal with the various issues of dealing with a client (lack of information, availability, demands out of scope of the project, lack of specificity, etc.). In addition to course content, this course requires the instructor to develop the simulated client environment and client personalities as well as working with the campus technology process to set up discreet e-mail identifies for each sponsor within the client environment.

Teaching Management Skills

The last example is an online course that teaches specific skills in managing people. These skills include listening skills, coaching skills, problem solving, interviewing skills, delegating and managing change.

This course is taught online during a four week summer session, which also forces some changes in format due to the accelerated time. The methods used in this course include online video cases (provided with the text), audio activities, video demonstrations of specific processes, skill practice assignments with reflective discussions and journals, self assessments, and fact finding interviews. Students are able to learn about, view, and discuss examples of and practice various management skills, followed by reflection in the online environment. While the students do not receive direct feedback from the instructor, they receive immediate feedback from the skill practice sessions (real life practicing) from the employees or individuals they use for these practice sessions. Although not ideal, the students are able to actually practice the skills and discuss what worked and what did not work with their skill

practices in their reflections and online discussions. Student comments after using a skill practice for "coaching skills" include:

This was a great experience. I chose to work with my 12-year-old son and coach him on how to improve his test taking and improve scores. At first, I wasn't sure how it would go, kids tend to be pretty defensive/sensitive at this age. He liked how we started off by identifying the things he was really good at. That certainly built up his confidence and made him realize that he is good at things AND that I notice that he is good at things! I had him identify strengths first and then I identified a couple more. Then, when I asked him to identify areas of weaknesses, he was really good about it and made the connection that EVERYONE has things they can improve upon. He was very open and honest about the things he can work on. He actually admitted that he rushes through sometimes! WOW. An admission!! He also realized that I was not mad at home for having areas to improve upon. It worked so well, that he decided that he wanted to apply the coaching experience to his upcoming lacrosse travel tryouts as well. That also worked well and he had a great game last night (student posting during discussion in EDF 715, June 6, 2007).

I did the coaching session with a friend of mine who is in her second year as a graduate student. We focused on her school work since it is her "job" currently in her life. We started out talking about the things she is doing well. I think this is really important to "pump up" the person. We talked about the ways that she could still improve upon the things she is doing well. We next talked about the stuff she needs or could improve on. I offered suggestions to study habits, reaching out to tutors or study groups and trying to concentrate on preparing better for tests and papers due. We left with an action plan of items that we will follow up on during our next coaching session in six months (student posting during discussion in EDF 715, June 6, 2007).

This course requires some initial set-up for the case videos, the video demonstrations of some specific skills, the audio tapes and the assignments; however none of these tasks require special skills from the instructor, just some thought and time to create the aids. Students in this class are amazed that they could learn AND practice the skills through this online format.

Conclusion

Teaching behavior-based skills online does not require any special talents, but what it does require is stepping back and spending time "translating" in-class activities and assignments for the online medium. Experimenting with various techniques and processes and getting feedback from students on what is effective and what needs to be changed is also very helpful in course design and development. Ongoing and extensive communication with the students is a foundational component of success in this environment and a little thinking outside of the box is the formula for potential success.

References

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2007). *Online nation: Five years of growth in online learning*. Boston, MA: The Sloan Consortium, Olin and Babson College.

Blanchard, N. P., & Thacker, J. W. (2004). *Effective training: Systems, strategies, and practices* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Conceicao, S. C. O. (2006). Faculty lived experiences in the online environment. *Adult Education Quarterly, 57*(1), 26-45.

Durrington, V. A., Berryhill, A., & Swafford, J. (2006). Strategies for enhancing student interactivity in an online environment. *College Teaching, 54*(No.1), 190-193.

Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hall, B. (1997). *Web-based training cookbook: Everything you need to know for online training*. New York: Wiley Computer Publishing.

Jacobs, R. L. (2003). *Structured on-the-job training: Unleashing employee expertise in the workplace* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Knowlton, D. S. (2000). A theoretical framework for the online classroom: A defense and delineation of a student-centered pedagogy. In R. E. Weiss, D. S. Knowlton & B. W. Speck (Eds.), *Principles of effective teaching in the online classroom* (pp. 5-14). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lewis, C. C., & Abdul-Hamid, H. (2006). Implementing effective online teaching practices: Voices of exemplary faculty, *Innovative Higher Education* (Vol. 31).

McCord, A. (1987). Job training. In R. Craig (Ed.), *Training and development handbook: A guide to human resource development.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Noe, R.A. (2005). *Employee training and development* (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill/Irwin.

Smith, P. L., & Ragan, T. J. (2005). *Instructional design* (3rd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Sudzina, M. R., & Sudzina, C. M. (2003). *Insights into successfully teaching with cases on-line: The view from both sides of the 'Net.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the World Association for Case Method Research and Case Method Application.

Tanner, D., & Tanner, L. (2007). *Curriculum development: Theory into practice* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Wang, H., & Gearhart, D. L. (2006). *Designing and developing web-based instruction.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.