Meeting the Challenges of Teaching Large Online Classes: Shifting to a Learner-Focus

Roger W. Berry
Associate Professor of Marketing
California State University, Dominguez Hills
Carson, CA 90747
USA
rberry@csudh.edu

Abstract

Successfully developing and teaching a large online class section requires a shift in focus from teaching to learning. The article discusses four key elements that the author has found to be important to include in the course design when developing a large online class section. These four elements are: (1) A Shift from a Teacher-Focus to a Learner-Focus, (2) Building Trust and Personalizing the Course, (3) Established Deadlines and Timeframes, and (4) Dealing with Online Testing. Results from a questionnaire administered to students enrolled in a large online class section indicated a high level of student satisfaction. In this article the author discusses why the effective use of each of these key elements results in high levels of student satisfaction and reduced instructor workload.

Keywords: Online instruction, Distance learning, Teaching methods, Online testing, Teacher-focus, Learner-focus

Introduction

Teaching an online class session that has over 150 students enrolled is substantially different from teaching a face-to-face class on campus or online class with 25-35 students. With large online sessions small mistakes in course design result in numerous e-mail questions and increased instructor workload, but they could be easily corrected and identified in a face-to-face class. Typically, in an on-campus class session a student will raise some question, which might identify the course design flaw, and the instructor can correct the situation and inform students at that time. Even if a student does not get clarification from the instructor, many will check with other students for information. However, in a large online class the same situation might result in 20-30 students sending e-mails which increases the faculty member's workload. One of the challenges in teaching an online class as compared to teaching a face-to-face class is having the opportunity to reinforce expectations and clarify misunderstandings instantly (Conaway, Easton, & Schmidt, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss four key course elements that are potential problem areas and briefly describe the author's solution. Keep in mind that while some of these ideas might be beneficial for smaller classes, the main purpose here is to focus on large class size issues. The four elements and potential problem areas discussed in this paper are as follows: (1) A Shift from a Teacher-Focus to a Learner-Focus, (2) Building Trust and Personalizing the Course, (3) Established Deadlines and Timeframes, and (4) Dealing with Online Testing.

Results of a questionnaire administered to students in a large online section of Principles of Marketing are presented throughout this paper. Students were informed that completing the questionnaire was optional. However, as an incentive to participate students were given 10 extra credit points. Of the 144 students surveyed, 115 usable questionnaires were received for a response rate of 72.6%.

The author first started teaching web based online courses that were 100% online, a little over 12 years ago and has taught over 40 online courses since then. These courses consisted of both undergraduate and graduate courses ranging in size from 10 to over 170 students. In addition, these courses have

covered 11 different topic areas and have included the use of cases, threaded discussions, chat rooms, audio sound bites, and both individual and group assignments.

Shift from a Teacher-Focus to a Learner-Focus

Shifting in an instructor's thinking from a teacher-focused approach to a learner-focused approach is beneficial when designing an online course (Gibson, Tesone, & Blackwell, 2001; Saulnier et al., 2008). When preparing for a lecture in a face-to-face class, typically an instructor might develop their lecture notes from a teacher-focus. The notes are developed based on information that the instructor requires to make an effective lecture presentation. These lecture notes also serve as a guide for the instructor. However, an online course becomes more effective when the instructor develops the course notes with a learner-focus rather than a teacher-focus. With a learner-focus the instructors focuses on what the student needs rather than what the instructor needs.

Although the author has been teaching graduate courses online for several years, spring 2007 was his first undergraduate online course. When the author first started developing his undergraduate online course he took his lecture notes from previous face-to-face class sessions, made a few modifications, and made them available to students. However, by mid-semester the number of student questions caused the author to realize that his notes needed more modification. At that time his notes took on a new focus, a focus on the student. The author refers to these revised notes as Study Buddy Notes (SBNs) and he, through the notes, took on the role of a mentor or guide to help students study the material. The notes are written as if you, the instructor, are sitting with the student and giving the student advice on how and what to study. Table 1 is a sample of the types of comments that might be contained in a set of SBNs.

Table 1: Samples of the type of comments that SBNs might contain.

Page 210	This material is a little complex and sometimes confuses students, so read the next SBN comment and example before you read this page in the chapter. [Etc.]
Pages 211-216	This is easy reading so I am not going to provide any additional information here. However, be sure that you read and study this section in the textbook.
Comment	The following information is not in the textbook. However, this is material that you as a business major should understand. [Etc.]
Page 217 Exhibit 3.4	It is easy to miss a couple of important points about this model so let me give you a little advice. When you look at this model be sure to note that …
Page 220	It would be embarrassing to be in a business meeting and indicate that you had never heard of the information on Page 220. This is information that all business majors would be expected to know.

A set of SBNs is developed for each chapter. A 40-50 page chapter will have a set of SBNs that might be 3-4 pages in length. With the use of SBNs in an online course the instructor's role changes. The role for an instructor in an online course changes from that of being an information provider to the role of a mentor or facilitator (Dykman & Davis, 2008).

When asked about the use and effectiveness of the SBNs, 79.5% (n = 80) indicated that the notes helped them study the material and 52.2% (n = 60) indicated that the notes gave them confidence. Unfortunately, 25.2% (n = 29) stated that they did not use the notes. When asked if they had any comments or suggestions regarding the course, they mentioned several positive unsolicited comments about the SBNs.

Building Trust and Personalizing the Course

A lack of personality and an overly formal online course can result in a cold and unpleasant experience for online students (Gibson, Tesone, and Blackwell, 2001). These researchers argue for the importance

of personalizing an online course. Results of a survey administered to students in the author's online course support the argument for personalization. A high percentage of students surveyed stated that, although they were not complaining, they missed the face-to-face interaction with an instructor. Borstoff and Lowe (2007) reported that the lack of face-to-face contact caused students to feel isolated and was the most common cited objection to online learning. It is with this thought in mind that an instructor should try to establish a trust relationship with students and personalize the course material as much as possible. The author has found that three tools help build trust and personalize an online course: (1) providing a current photo and biography of the instructor, (2) effective Study Buddy Notes, and (3) communication through sending informal e-mails.

If students have a problem in a face-to-face class setting they may be willing to wait until the next class meeting for a solution. This is probably one of the main advantages of a formal class meeting schedule. However, an online class schedule is very flexible. The student has a tremendous amount of control over the time involved in the learning situation (Brown, 2001; Borstoriff & Lowe, 2007). This flexibility may cause an online instructor to receive e-mail questions on a daily basis.

In an effort to personalize a large online class, the author applies a marketing approach called direct mass marketing to communicate with students. Direct mass marketing is an approach used by marketers to send a message that is perceived as being personalized to a large market segment. So, how and why is this approach effective in an online course? Certainly the best approach to personalizing an e-mail is to send it directly to an individual. But, how can you accomplish this in a large class section with 150 students? To accomplish this, the author uses an approach he refers to as direct mass e-mailing.

Here is one example of how you can accomplish a direct mass e-mailing in a large online course. After the second exam, the author reviews the grade book and makes a list of students that have improved their exam score from the first exam. Identifying this segment of students who have improved their score is a fairly quick process. The author then goes to the roster and prepares a group e-mail for those students. To achieve personalization the wording in both the e-mail subject line and message is important.

Wording in the subject line of a direct mass e-mailing might say something like "Good Job!" The message in the text could start off by saying, "While I was reviewing the exam results I noticed that you improved your score from the first exam. [Etc]" If your e-mail system indentifies all of the mail recipients than you might want to send to the list as a "blind copy." The author has received several positive e-mails in response to direct mass e-mailing that have included comments like, "I am so impressed that in such a large course you would take the time to recognize me for my performance" and "Thank you for taking the time to notice my efforts."

Direct mass e-mails can also be effective for less positive situations. For example, assume you segment the student roster by those that are not doing well on your exams. To this student segment your mass e-mailing might say, "I notice that you are not doing as well on the exams as you might like. Let me see if I can help. Some students have told me that they find [what ever you want to suggest] to be an effective way to study for my online exams."

Established Timeframes and Deadlines

Since they work on their own and must manage their time, students in online courses must have a clear understanding of what is expected of them and when assignments are due (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift 2004). The communication of deadlines and timeframes with detailed documentation early on in an online course is important for student success.

In the survey, students were asked to respond to two open-ended questions. A total of 103 out of 144 respondents answered the open-ended questions. First, they were asked to list two things that they found best about the online concept. Second, they were asked to list two things that they found most difficult about the online course concept. For the first question, 64.1% (n = 66) of the respondents wrote in comments related to flexibility as one of the things they found best about the online concept. However, apparently flexibility comes with a cost because 25.2% (n = 26) wrote that remembering deadlines and due dates was what they found most difficult.

Timeframes are also an important issue in large class sections. Initially the author set a given day of the week and a 24 hour time-period for exams to be taken. However, this generated e-mail requests from students asking for different dates to take an exam. Justification for the requests mentioned several reasons, such as "I work on week-ends," "I work during the week," and "I planned on being out of town on that date."

Students were surveyed to determine which days of the week and time slots were most preferred for exams. As expected, the most desirable days were Saturday and Sunday. Of the responses, 56.5% preferred Sunday, 19.1% preferred Saturday, and 10.4% had no preference. When asked which time slot was best, 40.9% reported, "Evenings (5pm until 9pm)" and 33.0% indicated "Late night (9pm until mid-night.)

When the timeframe for taking the exams was changed to allow the exams to be taken anytime between 7am Friday morning and mid-night Sunday night, the number of special requests dropped to almost zero. Not having to respond to numerous requests for special exam times and not having to schedule exams at different times can be a big time saver for faculty teaching large class sections.

Dealing with Online Testing

Course Management Systems (CMS) have been developed that allow instructors to manage large class sections more efficiently than was possible a few years ago (Bongey, Cizadio, and Kainbach, 2005). There are several systems available, such as Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle, and Desire2Learn. In addition to improving a student's access to information, these systems provide students with the opportunity to take exams online, get immediate feedback on their grades, and have grades automatically posted to a grade book. Even though all of these features are available in a CMS, their use is not without some concerns.

Instructors must remember that students taking exams completely online have access to information to help them with exam questions, such as textbook material, the Internet, notes, and friends. The author addresses this concern in the following manner. First, multiple-choice questions work well for this particular introductory marketing course, which helps allow for larger sections to be taught. The author maintains two test banks for each chapter. Reviews of previous exam questions and identifying the percentage of students that incorrectly answered a question has allowed the instructor to categorize questions into two groupings, one consisting of easy questions and the other with moderately difficult questions. Each grouping consists of 25-35 questions.

The typical exam for this course would cover five chapters with ten questions selected for each chapter for a total of 50 questions. For each student, the CMS randomly selects five questions from the easy group of questions and five from the moderately difficult group for each chapter covered by the exam. This randomization approach makes it difficult for students to compare and share exams. In addition, the exam questions are presented one at a time which makes it difficult to print a hardcopy of the exam for friends. To print a hardcopy, the student would have to use the "Print Screen" feature for each question. Printing each question individually is discouraged since the exams are timed and students are penalized for exceeding the time limit. In addition, the CMS is set so that it only allows one try at the exam and once started it cannot be stopped and started over. Immediately after the exam has been completed, the students are automatically informed of which questions they got incorrect. However, they are not given the correct answers. Although the CMS makes grading and posting of grades easy for a large section, giving an online exam is not without problems.

The author's experience with giving online exams to large undergraduate class sections has revealed that 10-15% of the students taking the exam experience some type of technical problem during the exam. In a small class section of 30 students this means that 3-4 had technical problems and the small number becomes fairly easy for the instructor to resolve. However, in a large section of 150 students this means that 15-20 students need to have the situation reviewed. Unfortunately, a teaching assistant cannot provide a lot of assistance with this problem because many situations will require the instructor's review and a final decision. Take for example the student who had a computer "crash" after having spent 40 minutes on the exam, completed 30 of the 50 questions, and had 10 incorrect. How much time do you give this student to complete the last 20 questions? Does the student take the exam completely over or does the student just take the last 20 questions? However, if they take only the last 20 questions, a special 20 question exam must be prepared.

There is a certain amount of trust that must take place in an online test taking situation. In a face-to-face class, if a student has a problem they can go to the instructor or the exam's proctor to immediately solve the problem. In this situation class size is typically not a problem. In an online class, no matter how large the class, the test situation becomes a one-on-one issue. Place yourself in the situation of the student. You are sitting at home taking your exam and you have just completed question 10 with 40 to go, when and all at once you are locked out. You login to the exam again and receive a message that says you have already taken the exam. What do you do now; you run the risk of failing the course? You know there is a deadline to complete the exam, so you e-mail your instructor. However, if your instructor is not waiting to receive your e-mail, what do you do?

At the time of this writing the author has given seven exams to large sections. For the first three exams the author received e-mail messages with such comments as, "Help I am panicked, I got locked out and don't know what to do," "Professor PLEASE believe me… I am in tears," and "I got locked out of the exam after I answered question five. I guess I am just [@&%]. I hope I can still pass the course."

One of the keys to helping reduce exam stress for students taking online exams is to have developed a trust relationship with the student. Students must believe that you will treat them fairly when they have technical problems. In the recent survey, students were asked an open-ended question, which was, "How can an instructor develop a trust relationship with a student in an online class?" Most students implied that it is difficult when you do not have the advantage of meeting face-to-face. Yet, most said it could be accomplished by communication and said that one way this could be accomplished was through fast responses to e-mail questions.

During the previous semester, when the author received three e-mails from a panicked student within a four hour time-period, he realized that something had to be done. Not only did he not want to read three e-mails on the same issue, he did not want the student placed under the extra exam stress. The solution was to provide information early on in the next semester's course that explained the exam situation and instructed students that they should not panic because the instructor would be able to resolve the problem. The instructions also said that they must inform the instructor and provide whatever details they had at the time the problem occurred. They were also instructed to wait about 15 minutes to see if there was an immediate response to their e-mail, if not they could expect to receive an answer and help within 24 hours. To help control the situation, the author maintains a log of students who had problems. The log shows that for most students the technical problems were not consistent and most only had a problem on one exam.

Conclusion

The importance of providing a top quality online course goes beyond just an instructor's course and reputation. If an instructor performs poorly in an on-campus face-to-face class, students might respond to other students by saying something like, "Don't take that instructor, his or her class is …" However, if that same instructor teaches a poorly designed online course, students say, "Don't take an online course because the online courses are not very good." A poorly taught online course damages an online brand reputation, which might take several years to repair. Perhaps, the one surety we have is that online courses will become increasingly more popular as we become better at developing them and students gain more experience and confidence in taking them.

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