Classroom Management in the Online Environment

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of classroom management in the online learning environment of a community college history course. It is posed that despite the unique nature of the online learning environment, many of the same features that are essential to the success of a traditional classroom management plan also apply in the online classroom. However, the instructor must be aware of potential stumbling blocks such as complacency of rules, the needs of non-traditional students, and feelings of isolation that may be exaggerated in an online environment and plan preventive classroom management accordingly. This paper demonstrates that when appropriate preventive management strategies are applied, the online learning environment can be as rich and productive as the traditional classroom.

Keywords: Preventive management, online instruction, learning styles, community college, diversity, non-traditional students, learning communities.

Introduction

Effective classroom management is probably one of the most important responsibilities faced by educators in any number of learning environments. This may be particularly true of beginning teachers. "When teachers talk about the most difficult problems they experienced in their first years of teaching, they mention classroom management and discipline most often" (Arends, 2007, p. 172).

Classroom management may be defined as "the act of supervising relationships, behaviors, and instructional settings and lessons for communities of learners" (Iverson, 2003, p. 4). Iverson explains that classroom management is a preventive activity that results in decreased discipline problems (2003, p.4). Taking the preventive nature of classroom management a step further, Arends asserts that "preventive management is the perspective that many classroom problems can be solved through good planning, interesting and relevant lessons, and effective teaching" (2007, p. 173). This paper shall examine the special challenges faced in the implementation of classroom management in the community college online environment. Particular emphasis shall be given to the unique challenges faced by the online community college instructor with regards to student diversity and online instruction.

Community College Challenges

Like classrooms at any educational level, the community college classroom reflects a variety of learning styles. The community college instructor should try to offer learning activities that will appeal to the widest variety of learning styles possible. However, learning styles are only one aspect of classroom diversity with which the community college instructor must be prepared to address. Ethnic and cultural diversity are also likely factors the community college instructor must consider. Hand-in-hand with these elements of diversity is the English as a second language, or ESL factor. Additionally, the community college instructor must be prepared to meet the needs of a large variety of students who have collectively been grouped together as "non-traditional students."   Such students are often well over the age of twenty-five,

are often married and/or have dependent children, may work full or part-time or, conversely, may be unemployed and seeking to re-enter the work force via education. Additionally, many such students may be academically or technologically unprepared and likely face any combination of the previously listed factors as well as others not listed. For such students, returning to school already presents a formidable challenge, and this may only be compounded by the uniqueness of the online learning environment.

A lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors and other class members has been a frequently cited problem faced by such students. For example, "learners often encounter the stimulus materials when they are sitting alone at a computer, away from easy coaching or support from an instructor" (Wilson, Brent G., 2004, pp. 77-84). Instructors experienced in online education recognize this as a major barrier. According to the results of a recent survey of online educators:

> The biggest problem is when a non-traditional learner runs into a stumbling block, and has to find a way to overcome the obstacle. Frankly, non-traditional students by any definition tend to not have the history, family, or support system necessary to overcome challenges (Miller & Lu, 2002).

When one considers that, in addition to the problems created by the "isolation" of the online learner, nontraditional students in online courses are likely to have many of the other problems discussed, the online classroom looks all the less promising. However, despite such criticisms and concerns, one should not be too quick to write off the potentials of online education, even for the non-traditional student. There are many positive things that can be said of the online classroom that make it particularly appealing for non-traditional students. For example, Miller & Lu note:

> The 'anytime, anywhere' mentality of this course delivery makes sense to working adults who need flexibility completing degree programmes or taking courses that update their working skills. For others, namely those from lower economic classes, e-courses provide the flexibility to maintain part-time jobs, do not require travel time and resources to physically travel to campus and, in many cases, provide course-by-course progress toward degrees and credentials that might otherwise be barriers to completion (2003, pp. 163-179).

In accepting the preventive nature of classroom management, the online instructor must then develop a philosophy and management style that will result in student success without compromising standards. For the purposes of this paper, a philosophy of online course delivery is presented which poses that online courses can be the equal of traditional courses in providing a quality learning environment that addresses the needs of a diverse group of learners. Good preventive management and active teacher and student involvement are the cornerstones to the effective implementation of this philosophy. Demonstration of this philosophy and supportive online classroom management practices will be demonstrated by examining the structure of the course HIS 121, Western Civilization I, offered at Fayetteville Technical Community College in Fayetteville, NC.

According to Arends, "In classrooms, as in most other settings where groups of people interact, a large percentage of potential problems and disruptions can be prevented by planning rules and procedures beforehand" (2007, p. 179). To this many practicing teachers might add that these rules and procedures must be introduced to the students as early as possible. The online classroom does not represent an exception to either of these statements, but it does present a unique challenge in implementing this key feature of preventive management.

One Approach

In HIS 121, which uses the Blackboard delivery software, the rules and procedures are all clearly outlined under "Syllabus" and "How Course Works." These two areas can be accessed from tabs, or buttons, on the course homepage. However, one may wonder how the online student may be compelled to read these important areas and become familiar with course rules and procedures before problems result. A number of approaches may be taken simultaneously to insure this occurs. First and foremost, all students in the course should receive a welcome e-mail a day or two before the class begins, which will also provide basic instructions for getting started in the course. Such e-mails should typically instruct students to read the syllabus, the "How Course Works" section, how to find the "Assignments" section,

and how to determine the assignments due for any given week of the course. Interestingly, Miller and Lu list the welcome letter or e-mail as one of the critical strategies identified by online instructors in building student success (2003, pp. 163-179). However, the instructor cannot simply assume all students will receive or read the e-mail. For that reason, it is helpful to reiterate this welcome and information elsewhere. The Blackboard software features a course announcements page, which is a logical place to reiterate all of this information. The course announcements page can easily be set as the course entry point, making it the first page a students sees upon logging into their course. However, it has been in the experience of the author of this paper that simply telling students to read certain material is not sufficient to compel all students to actually perform this task. For that reason, a "scavenger hunt" has been designed, which will force them to read course supporting materials and answer questions found in various locations. Completing this worksheet will give students a general idea of how the course is set up, important rules, and where to look for further information when they are unsure about various issues. This is a mandatory assignment, and students are advised that no other work in the course will be graded until this has been completed. Directions on where to find and how to submit this worksheet are included in the welcome e-mail and the welcome announcement.

The importance of establishing course rules and policies in an online course cannot be overemphasized, but rules and policies on their own may be perceived by the student as rather dehumanizing and isolating if not accompanied by a "human side" to the instructor that issues them. Establishing human relations with students in an online environment might seem a daunting task, but is hardly impossible. Timely responses to student inquiries are one part of overcoming this problem, and developing a sense of community within the online class is another. These points seem to be borne out by the findings of a number of researchers. For example, Miller and Lu (2002) found that "there has to be a focus on community" and "real-time support systems (tech and class) are important." "Lack of close interaction between learners may have adverse consequences, possibly because learners experience feelings of isolation" (Davies & Graff, 2005, pp. 657-663). Again, accepting that classroom management is largely a preventive practice, the online instructor must strive to provide timely feedback to individual students and at the same time foster a sense of community in the online environment. In HIS 121, the online environment has been fostered in a number of ways. Perhaps most importantly, community forums have been created and utilized. Most lessons in the course include a mandatory discussion board which requires each student to answer a question on that week's topic. Moreover, the questions utilized have been selected because of their subjective nature and controversial features. For example, even after more than 2,000 years, Julius Caesar remains a controversial figure despite all the factual material that exists on him. In one discussion board, students are tasked to discuss factual information surrounding Caesar's rise to power, and then express opinions on him based in part on facts and in part on their own feelings. Students are then further required to read and tactfully comment on the posts of at least four other students. The instructor may make comments and perhaps correct erroneous information, but should try to let the students take possession of the discussion and go with it. The instructor's best role in such situations may be to act as a moderator, and remind students of their need to be tactful and respectful of the opinions of others, despite disagreements. These discussions often become very interesting, and it seems that the more controversial the topic, the more participation and discussion occurs. A sense of community emerges as students begin to get a feeling for the views of others and become comfortable discussing their own ideas. Again, it must be stressed that in order for this to work, the instructor must be prepared to take a back seat, but must be prepared to respond to a post in a timely manner when misinformation or rude comments are posted.

Other areas of classroom management that should be considered include managing the workload, providing a variety of assignments, and providing a variety of assessments. For the course under discussion, HIS 121, Western Civilization I, the workload includes three objective tests, a term paper, a group project, ten discussion boards, three map quizzes, three art evaluations, and five homework assignments that require the student to write one-half page reflective essays. In addition, students are given the opportunity to earn extra credit by watching various movies from a list provided by the instructor and writing a one page critique of the film that explores the historical accuracy of the film. While a discussion of the different learning styles to which these various assignments and methods of assessment will appeal is outside the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that from a preventive management standpoint, it behooves the online instructor to provide as many methods for the student to demonstrate mastery of the lesson as possible. The instructor who leans too heavily on one method of lesson delivery or assessment is likely to lose students who might otherwise be successful. Major

projects like the group project and the term paper are emphasized from the very beginning of the course. Students are given full access to all their group project tools in the second week and are required at that time to post to their group discussion board and to use their group e-mail for familiarization purposes. The group project is not due until the end of the seventh week of the course, but this early emphasis allows time for students to become familiar with the tools and resources available to them, and fosters discussion among their fellow group members, resulting in a far more meaningful group project in the seventh week. There are six groups, each of which produces a project focused on a different aspect of medieval history and culture. Three of the completed group projects become the topics of the week eight discussion board, and the remaining three are the topic of the week nine discussion board. This serves the role of bringing the groups back into the primary community of the course, and gives each group an opportunity to share the fruits of its labors with the greater whole. Throughout this process, the instructor works with each group via the group discussion boards in the capacity of a mentor. Feedback is offered whenever requested, but, as in the routine class discussion boards, effort is made to refrain from directing the groups' work unless it appears they have utilized misinformation. Immediate feedback is required in such instances to ensure that they do not then pass such misinformation on to the rest of the class during the discussion phase of the projects.

Conclusions

In summary, clear rules and policies coupled with the incentive to become familiar with them, prompt instructor feedback via a variety of means, a sense of community, and a variety of lesson and assessment types are essential to student success in the online classroom. The online instructor who recognizes the preventive nature of class management will foresee likely problems and structure the class in a manner that addresses problems before they occur. In considering such potential problems, the instructor must further recognize the diverse nature of the students that comprise any given class. However, it is posed that the online learning environment can be as rich and rewarding as the traditional environment if preventive class management is made an integral part of course preparation.

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