

Introducing Distance Learning to Novice E-Learners via Course Web Enhancements

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Abstract

At the most simplistic level, blended learning involves collaboration between the delivery of resources online and what most refer to as “traditional” classroom instruction. This article discusses the benefits of introducing a web-enhanced learning format to novice and sometimes reluctant e-learners. Resistance to distance education is often due to a lack of direct experience and unsubstantiated fear, even for otherwise techno savvy students. The author summarizes a personal experience teaching an Educational Theory and Policy course at Penn State University-Altoona in which inexperienced e-learners were given multiple opportunities to “practice” e-learning utilizing a blended format, thereby creating a comfort zone and knowledge base for future distance learning opportunities.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Reluctant E-Learner, Distance Education, Technology Integration, Online Instruction

Introduction

What causes today's techno savvy student to resist distance education courses? Even though nearly all college students readily carry cell phones on which they can listen to music, take pictures, surf the web, text their best friend and email their mom, students often have a hesitancy to take Internet only courses. Perhaps one method for increasing the comfort level with online coursework is for students to be gradually introduced to the benefits of e-learning through a series of intentional activities.

Blended instruction combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online instruction so that portions of the learning activities are conducted using an online format (Bonk and Graham, 2005). Driscoll views blended learning as a strategy to gradually move learners from more traditional classroom settings to e-learning using incremental steps, thus making the change easier (as cited in Kerres and DeWitt, 2003). A recent study indicated that in the next decade more emphasis is expected to be placed on blended learning formats than on courses offered in a fully online format (Kim and Bonk, 2006). Indeed, in 2002 Graham Spanier, President of Pennsylvania State University, called blended learning opportunities “the single greatest unrecognized trend in higher education today” (Young).

According to Singh (2003) anecdotal evidence indicates that blended learning not only offers more choices, but may in fact be more effective. Garnham and Kaleta (2002) found overwhelming support for what they termed “hybrid” courses. Although different in title, they defined a hybrid course as one in which a significant portion of the learning activities had been moved online while the time traditionally spent in the classroom was reduced but not eliminated. They noted that not only did the students appreciate the flexibility in completing coursework, but faculty participants almost universally believed that the students learned more in the hybrid format than they did in the traditional class sections. It has also been found that when multi-modal delivery methods, such as e-learning opportunities are added to a traditional class format, student satisfaction with the class improves (DeLacey and Leonard, 2002; Kaur and Ahmed, 2006). By “mixing it up” and including both face-to-face classroom experiences with self-paced learning opportunities, an instructor can take advantage of multiple teaching strategies and students have the advantage of discovering a learning style which best suits his/her preferences.

Kerres and DeWitt (2003) note that the major challenge for blended learning is how to find the right “mix” of formats and delivery. Their interpretation of blended learning includes both didactical methods and different delivery formats, dependent upon course content. The 3C-model of didactical components

provides a framework for an individual instructor to define a learning environment and assign either equal or unequal weight or value to each component. The 3C-model can be applied to any learning environment and includes 1) a content component which makes learning material(s) available to the student, 2) a communication component, which creates opportunities for students and faculty to interact and 3) a constructive component whereby students are encouraged to engage in active learning situations, problem-based learning and/ or related learning tasks. Many instructors new to distance education may be most comfortable utilizing web enhancements for content delivery (assignments, course materials) and communication (discussion threads, email) before embracing the constructive component. In this particular course, more emphasis was placed on content (posting materials and assignments online) and communication (via threaded film discussions and calendar updates). Toward the end of the semester when the study of distance education options with elementary and high school students was explored, the class was expected to fully participate in the constructive component via an online lesson which required application of theory and concepts. Because instructional goals differ depending on course objectives, the emphasis placed on content, communication and constructive components may vary based on the distance education experience of the facilitator and students.

Web Enhancement

Utilizing a web-enhanced format with novice e-learners may be successful in providing an introduction to the benefits of distance learning for both students and distance education wary instructors. Education in American Society is a course within the Educational Theory and Policy Department and is required for students enrolled in teacher education program within the College of Education at Pennsylvania State University. Students in this particular section (N=32) were between the ages of 19 and 21, primarily Caucasian, from a rural background and of sophomore level standing. Only two students indicated any prior experience with distance education when the class commenced; one indicating a positive experience and one negative. Moreover, it was clear from verbal comments that some students felt "cyber schools" provided a less-than quality form of education. These comments, freely offered during class discussion, were based mostly on their observations of high school friends who had taken courses via the Internet.

Sensing that there was a lack of familiarity with online courses, the author chose to gradually implement blended e-learning options into the traditional delivery course. This was done in a variety of ways from the most basic posting of lecture notes online, to a more traditional e-learning method at the end of the semester whereby the "study" of e-learning and distance education was done via an online-only activity.

Pennsylvania State University-Altoona uses the ANGEL course management system, with built in tools for online course delivery, thus providing a mechanism to easily support a web-enhanced format. In this class, students were initially given paper copies of the syllabus and assignments, but over the duration of the semester paper copies were eliminated and assignments were only accessible online. The instructor updated the online calendar regularly, noting all activities, assignments due, exam and presentation schedules, etc. and encouraged all students to check for course information and updates on at least a weekly basis. Beginning week three, all lecture notes were posted in PowerPoint format immediately following the class period. Supplemental readings including journal articles (or websites directing students to the article) were available only by accessing the class online.

During the fourth week, students were given their first online assignment when they were asked to participate in a group discussion online after viewing a film in class. Because the class was scheduled on a traditional time period (50 minutes), holding the film discussion online allowed students to respond to the instructor's prompt while the film messages were still fresh in their minds, as opposed to waiting until the next class period to react to the film. It also allowed students time to reflect on issues, both spoken and visual, that were portrayed in the film prior to responding. The instructor created an online discussion forum and initiated the film reaction by asking students to respond to one of three leading prompts, in a manner that not only answered the question, but also allowed them to share their personal beliefs or feelings regarding the topic. The first film, Jonathan Kozol's *Children in America's Schools*, resulted in student comments ranging from shock and surprise to more complex analysis of the underlying problems in America's funding of public education. The instructor made follow-up comments to approximately 1/3 of the students.

During week six, a similar assignment was completed. This time students were required to comment about the notable film, *A Class Divided*, a film that is often used in introductory education classes and frequently garners strong responses. Again, the instructor created online prompts for students and also provided supplemental information and links for students to learn more about the researcher, Jane Elliott, as well as the global impact of *A Class Divided*. Tracking student responses, the instructor determined that not only did the film have the desired impact, but many students took advantage of the extended learning options available. Indeed, one of the benefits of holding online discussions following film presentations is that students are encouraged to not only be more independent learners but also be more reflective in their comments. The instructor carefully reviewed all student comments and noted any students that seemed to be in need of clarification or who asked for additional information. A brief (5 minute) time was set aside at the following class period to address lingering questions regarding the film.

Throughout the course and following each exam, the instructor made available three optional extra credit opportunities for students to improve their last test grade. The details of how to earn such credit was only available online. While one of the opportunities required personal attendance at an on-campus event, the others consisted of e-learning activities such as visiting the PBS website *Only a Teacher* <http://www.pbs.org/onlyateacher/> to review the text, video clips and interviews, before electronically submitting a reaction paper.

Another aspect in which the instructor encouraged online resources was via the creation of interactive study guides for upcoming exams. Periodically, crossword “puzzles,” such as that shown in Fig. 1, were posted which encompassed key aspects of course content. For example, the initial crossword outlined important contributions to the history of American education. These study guides were only available online.

The screenshot shows a web-based interface for a crossword puzzle. At the top, the course title "EDTHP 115, Section 001: ED IN AM SOCIETY" is displayed. Below it are navigation tabs: "Syllabus", "Calendar", "Lessons" (which is selected), "Resources", "Communicate", "Report", and "Manage". A breadcrumb trail reads "Home > Course > Lessons > Chapter 4-7 Crossword". On the left side, there is a vertical toolbar with icons for home, help, power, and user profile. The main content area is titled "Chapter 4-7 Crossword" and includes a "Test 2 Review" section with links for "Settings", "Reports", "Utilities", and "Delete". The crossword puzzle itself is presented in a light blue box. The clue is: "A school designed to operate outside the parameters of the state educational bureacracies and local school boards is called a _____ school." Below the clue is an "Answer:" label followed by a row of seven empty input boxes. To the right of the input boxes is a "Hint" button. At the bottom right of the puzzle area is a "Submit" button. The interface is clean and functional, typical of a learning management system.

Figure 1. Example of a crossword puzzle study guide.

Additionally, toward the end of the semester, a *Jeopardy* style format was created for students to review major legal cases involving school issues. Using face-to-face class time, issues related to school law were introduced by dividing the class in half and using the game-style learning method. At student request, the material was later posted online for students to “play” at their convenience.

One of the latter chapters in the text dealt with textbooks and e-learning issues. In lieu of holding a traditional lecture and class discussion, the instructor used this as an opportunity for all students to have an authentic hands-on distance learning experience. Three articles regarding e-learning which detailed the growth, benefits and potential drawbacks of e-learning were selected for students to read. After reviewing each article, students were instructed to respond to the instructor prompts in a discussion group online. These prompts were intentionally designed to elicit a more reflective analysis by the student and all students were asked to make a minimum of two substantive comments to classmates. Since few students had actual online course experience, examples of reflective comments were shared when the activity was introduced. Students were strongly encouraged to move beyond general agreement responses such as "I agree" and "You make a good point" and were given opportunities to differentiate between rote and reflective comments prior to the e-learning activity. The instructor used personal examples to show how responses to peers should expand the knowledge base, enhance the discussion, or question and challenge their fellow classmates in an appropriate manner. This prelude to the online activity was essential in creating appropriate course discussion expectations. Roper (2007) notes that instructors who create clear guidelines regarding threaded course discussions as well as asking specific questions can encourage richer online dialogue.

All but one student participated in the e-learning activity. Upon return to the traditional classroom, students were asked to write about their e-learning experiences in discussion journals. Several student comments spoke to issues of convenience, including, "I enjoyed participating in the online discussion because number one I didn't have to go to class and number two it allowed me to complete my assignment when I had time" and "I loved being able to 'go' to class on my schedule, at night when I learn best." These comments mirror findings by Greener (2008) in a small-scale British study done to assess student conceptions of initial blending learning experiences. In this qualitative study, 69 initial respondent themes were grouped into nine, the largest of which dealt with references to personal learning choice and preference. She notes that "the blended learning mode gave students the freedom to make time and quality decisions about learning (p. 246, 2008).

Other student comments focused on parity issues: "I got a chance to hear everyone's opinion, that is not how it is in class" and "I thought the e-learning activity was interesting. I've never done anything like it before. I liked the fact that I could do it whenever and wherever I wanted....I liked that everyone participated and gave feedback. In class not everyone states their opinions so it was nice hearing from everybody." Not all students were ready to embrace full Internet learning: "I did not really like the e-learning activity. I missed the interaction with real people, and conversation." Finally, several students noted that while they enjoyed the online activity, they did not foresee themselves in an online teaching role: "I'm glad I did it but I never want to teach an online class." However, most students indicated in their journals that they would be more willing to take an online course now, having had the experience.

Benefits for Students and Instructors

There are clear benefits for blending a traditional course delivery format with e-learning activities. For those students who are hesitant to sign-up for an Internet class, it provides students with real experience prior to making a semester long commitment to online learning. Additionally, the lag time between films and subsequent discussions can be minimized by utilizing the online discussion format, thereby allowing for more authentic reactions to multi-media presentations. Moreover, every student in class was expected to contribute to the class discussion and likewise afforded the time and opportunity to share their opinion, something that is virtually impossible in a class of over thirty students. Because some students are reluctant to participate in a traditional classroom discussion, especially in larger classes, the online discussion opportunity offers a less-intimating forum for student participation (Gould, 2003). In an online format Young noted some students who rarely take part in classroom discussions are more likely to participate because they have time to reflect before they respond and aren't "put on the spot" (2002). Moreover, Greener (2008) found that themed online discussions were shown to "engage potential lurkers" and those who did not regularly contribute in face-to-face discussions (p. 252).

Schwarz (2007) studied the challenges of hybrid course development and suggests that integrating out-of-class activities, such as those associated with flexible e-learning, with in-class face-to-face activities offers a more effective use of traditional class time. Furthermore, he notes that by doing so, in-class discussions can often be continued online and discussions begun online can be carried over into the classroom setting. Utilizing multi-faceted discussion methods allows opportunities for more student

engagement and participation. Student feedback on blended courses often indicates that student's perceive an increase in interaction with peers and instructors when multiple discussion methods are utilized (Lin, 2008; Gould, 2003). It should also be noted that novice e-learners greatly benefit from both the instructor's active moderation of online discussions and his or her encouragement of student contributions, especially in the initial stages (Greener, 2008).

A recent study of business students at a private university in the southeastern United States exemplifies the importance of student-faculty contact. Young and Duhaney (2008) found most hybrid course survey respondents (N=111) were satisfied with the level of faculty contact and appreciated the prompt feedback that hybrid course methodology afforded. Moreover, those survey respondents who were under the age of 30 felt more strongly about student-faculty contact and opportunities for active learning than did the students over the age of 30. This suggests that today's younger student values both frequent faculty contact and prompt feedback from the instructor, something easily attainable when incorporating web enhancements.

Providing freshman and sophomore level students a web enhanced format encourages student independence and further clarifies that students possess a responsibility to be personally invested in the learning experience. It demonstrates that the learning process is not merely "showing up" for class and sitting passively through a professor's lecture. Instead, students are expected to be actively *engaged*. This lesson in active learning is sometimes difficult for young college students. As noted both by Bowen (2006) and comments from students in this class, students benefit from the opportunity to learn at different hours, thereby leveling the playing field for different types of learners and situations. An instructor utilizing web enhancements with novice e-learners should seek to provide the support and encouragement some students may need to navigate the process, while at the same time ensuring that the technology does not drive the teaching agenda (Greener, 2008).

Perhaps the most important contribution of blended learning formats is the increase of *in-class* instructional time. By minimizing the need to use valuable face-to-face class time to cover "housekeeping" items such as class announcements, handouts and upcoming due dates, the instructor is instead able to devote more time to making genuine connections with students. By encouraging students to move away from a lecture-listen format, the instructor can use valuable class time for discourse, debate, presentation and application activities. Students benefit from regular face-to-face interactions with an instructor and fellow classmates, in addition to having the added benefit of more student-centered active learning.

Even faculty leery of online instructional methodologies see the value of creating more time for classroom discussion as well as additional classroom time to encourage students to apply textbook theory to authentic situations. When students are actively engaged in the educational process, they will assume more ownership for expanding their knowledge base, which may include learning in a variety of different environments. Indeed, learning should not be construed as a one-time event but rather a continuous process (Singh, 2003).

Conclusion

As instructors we have a responsibility to inspire students to learn more, beyond the four walls of the traditional classroom. As Bowen (2006) maintains, "technology will surely be a key component of all future higher education, but we need to rethink how we use technology inside as well as outside of the classroom." For both students and instructors, the fear of new and changing technology is not a valid reason for avoidance. Whenever technology is involved in education, face-to-face, fully online or blended education, there will always be challenges and problems for learners and teachers alike (Greener, 2008). Utilizing web enhancements, which may or may not lead to blended course development, meets multiple needs—easing the entry to blended or hybrid course development for technology-wary faculty and demonstrating to students that faculty is cognizant of the role that technology will play in our students future careers. By gently opening the door to distance learning, instructors both reduce the fear for novice e-learners and reap the benefits of creating more time in class to build important personal relationships with students.

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Manuscript received 24 Feb 2009; revision received 9 Jun 2009.



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