

Designing and Planning Instruction for the
Online Environment:

A Personal History

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John Dewey said that learning to face change productively was a major purpose of education. You are here today to hear some of my ideas about planning and teaching online, and about change. I will relate part of my story on how I began to teach college courses online.

I often refer to teaching online as a great opportunity unfulfilled. It seems to me that as soon as I get comfortable about teaching online then something changes and I need to learn something new that changes my point of view, and my way of operating. It does seem that I am always facing change and it is a challenge to constantly face change and do it gracefully.

I know that on online teaching and learning are here to stay. Like the Genie in the lamp; once the bottle has been uncorked the Genie will not go back into the bottle. I am sure; we often wish that we had not opened the bottle in the first place.

I have been teaching using technology since the summer of 1997. In 1997 I took a Compact Disk (CD) program that helped me learn to use e-mail for the first time. After taking this short programmed learning CD I began to use e-mail in my summer school classes. At the same time I began using a very neat little course management program called Nicenet. Nicenet was simplistic courseware that was a precursor to today's WebCT and Blackboard. I used Nicenet on a limited basis. It allowed me to upload my syllabus, schedule and important documents for students to access. By today's standard Nicenet was not very fast or efficient; and most of my students needed extensive instructions to access Nicenet on their dial up modems. I keep remembering, in 1997 technology was very primitive. I had an office computer that was 66 MHz and a home computer that was 200 MHz. The 200 MHz machine was very fast for the time. Most of my students did not have the computing capability that I had. This was the first time I realized that I needed to keep the student's computing capability in mind when designing and planning instruction.

The fall of 1997 was quite an exciting time. I was asked, by the department chair, to teach a Distance Learning (DL) class over Instructional Television (ITV). I had two graduate level courses that I could convert to distance learning classes. At the time ITV was called compressed video. Still know as compressed video outside Kentucky. It was interesting; there was a half second lag in the video and voice communications from the various remote sites in the course. This was awkward, but the students and I got use to it in

time. While training for the ITV classes I thought it made sense to couple the use of Nicenet, and e-mail with the classes.

With Nicenet the students did not need to purchase a "course packet" from the book store and I could use hyperlinks, and class notes students could print on their computers. Now I was using Nicenet as the main courseware for my classes. Before this I used Nicenet as an extension of my classes. Nicenet did not always work as well as I wanted, but I was determined to use it. I know that I had to train my students on how to access Nicenet and how to use the hyperlinks that I put up for them to read. Fortunately, I was able to see my students in ITV and give them instructions on how to access their course materials. Additionally, I was able to add new materials to Nicenet for students to access as the courses progressed. As the courses progressed I was able to save materials and use in future classes

The spring semester of 1998 brought additional challenges. I prepared my ITV classes using Nicenet before I left for Christmas break. Upon return to campus, a week before classes started, I was informed that Morehead State was implementing a campus wide course management system called CourseInfo. For those of you who do not know about CourseInfo, it is the predecessor of Blackboard. I was one of four faculty to use CourseInfo. Also, Morehead State was one of four institutions nation wide to use this course ware. CourseInfo was in a beta stage at the time.

We had some very quickly planned training on CourseInfo and I moved all my Nicenet materials to CourseInfo. The CourseInfo server ware worked much

better than Nicenet. I was thankful for that. The spring semester went fairly smoothly. I taught ITV in two classes and had a total of 55 students in the two classes. It seemed the students were getting more comfortable with ITV and the distance learning in general.

I taught two graduate courses on ITV during the summer of 1998. In the fall I was asked to teach a class fully online and to continue to teach one graduate class on ITV. The University offered a stipend of \$1500 to each faculty member who planned, designed and taught courses online. This was for one time only; however, it was enough to get me started teaching online. To be fully prepared for teaching online I took more training on CourseInfo. This helped me to begin planning and implementing my fully online course. The ITV and CourseInfo combination that I had been working with really helped me prepare for teaching online, although they did not fully prepare me for what lay ahead. I can tell you, I thought I was fully prepared for teaching this online course. Unfortunately, I was not! The volume of e-mail coming to my University e-mail box was staggering. I had 30 to 40 e-mails a day for most of the first term. What I learned was that I had not given my students enough instructions on what my expectations were for assignments. The syllabus was not developed as elaborately as it should have been, and the calendar was not detailed enough for the students. The cryptic instructions I gave them raised enough questions in their minds to make them want to ask more questions, and to ask for reassurance that what they were doing was what I wanted. The first online course was flying while building the airplane.

As the term progressed I designed several informational web pages to give students more information so they would feel more comfortable with the course. I designed a web page with a template for the summary and critiques I wanted them to turn in every week. I gave them examples of assignments - A papers, B papers, and so on. Additionally, I designed a web page to help students understand how to save a file in Rich Text Format (RTF). This was necessary for students who were not using MS Word software. These web pages reduced the number of e-mails from my students. In subsequent semesters, I linked these web pages to my course syllabus. I requested that students print most material and work offline a lot. They were to print these web pages. This was really helpful.

In the fall of 1999 my chair and I discussed converting another class to online. This, course was a graduate methods course. This was a special course that required a unique set of requirements that were a challenge to deliver online. I taught this course from the fall of 1999 until the spring semester of 2000. My department chair moved to another university, and a new chair was appointed. The faculty was just getting familiar with concept of online teaching. However, the faculty was not convinced that methods courses could, or should, be taught online. There was a lot of skepticism about what I was doing.

At the end of the 2000 spring semester, I was approached by the new chair stating that there was concern about teaching methods courses online. The chair stated that there was not enough research to prove that teaching online was an effective way to teach methods courses. With this in mind, I

applied for a small research grant to help me with a pilot research project involving the online methods course. I was able to teach the methods course online and face-to-face during the summer term. When the summer term was complete I was able to use pretest and post-test data to compare the achievement of students in each of the courses. I found that there was no significant difference between the achievements of the students in each course.

With the pilot data in hand I pursued, and was awarded a University research grant, which provided money to develop learning materials to help with the online, and face-to-face, instruction. In the fall of 2000, spring 2001 and summer 2001 I taught the same identical course. Three were online and three were face-to-face courses. Additionally, I developed instructional materials for both courses which augmented and enhanced student's learning experiences.

After the three terms of teaching identical courses, with different modes of delivery, I concluded that there were not significant differences in achievement between the delivery modes. Students were not harmed by choosing to take the methods course online.

The saga continues, however. After the research was completed the department decided to discontinue teaching the graduate methods course online. The reason for this was a combination of skepticism on the part of many faculty and departmental governance. It appeared that teaching online was a new phenomenon that had not taken root. Also, there was not a University, or department policy, for approving the teaching of online courses.

The research that I did was not without some residual effects. I developed a lot of new materials for delivery online and face-to-face. The research grant afforded me to purchase a state-of-the-art video camera. I was able to record video clips of teachers teaching children. The clips were put on CDs to demonstrate good teaching practice. Also, I sent these video clips to all my online students and embedded the clips into the assignments of the course. The face-to-face class used the video clips as well. The student's video taped their own teaching and sent me copies, which I critiqued and returned to them.

I was able to improve my management of my courses as a result of the research. I coded each of my assignments with meaningful labels. For instance, each week I had a module which I labeled with an M. Additionally, each module had one or more assignments that I labeled with an A. An assignment module would have a M1A1, or M4A3 designation, depending on the content.

I have taught the methods course several times since it became strictly a face-to-face class. I still use Blackboard as an enhancement to the course. Additionally, I use the learning materials that I developed with the grant. I have had several student evaluations since the online course, and the student's rating of my instructions have gone up significantly. I feel the online experience has made my teaching more precise. I have become more deliberate, and have not relied so much on my personality, and personal delivery as the focus of the class.

John Dewey said that learning to face change productively was a major purpose of education. If this is a fact I can say that I have experienced a lot of change over the past seven years. The change has not been easy. It

sometimes appeared that I was by my-self in the implementation of online courses within our department, college and university. It was not easy to have developed an online course, researched the effectiveness of the learning that took place, and to have the course taken away. But, I did learn and I did change. As far as the gracefulness aspect of learning, and change, talked about in the opening paragraphs, I will leave it up to others to make that judgment.

This is a program on “Practical Applications for On-line Planning and Learning.” Below I have outlined some of the things I have learned when developing courses online. Please understand that these ideas are not exclusive. There are many ways to develop online course. These are ideas that I have found useful; that I have learned from my research, and from my personal experience.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED FROM MY REVIEW OF LITERATURE, RESEARCH AND FROM TEACHING ONLINE

The “The No Significant Difference Phenomenon” is alive and well. In the research that I conducted there was no significant difference between the online and face-to-face classes with regard to achievement. A review of the literature on online vs. face-to-face learning will substantiate the claim that most research studies involving technology will reach the same conclusion. What I found in my research is that it does make a difference in the technologies you use to deliver instruction, but this is not out weighted by the

instructional design of the class. The better the course is designed to meet the needs of the student the better the outcome.

Research in using technology must focus on the important questions related to learning at a distance (online). Important questions I feel need to be addressed:

1. What is the impact on learning styles?
2. What is the optimum means to engage students in a learning community?
3. What are the effects of the changing nature of social presence in on-line learning?
4. What is important in interactions at a distance (“distancing effect.”)?

As online instructors we must not ignore these questions, and to simply focus on the technologies. If we do not focus on improving our questioning about our practice we will lead people, inside and outside the academy, to continually question the validity of the practice of online education.

THE WAY I DESIGN MY CLASSES – SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

The architecture of each of my online courses includes the textbook, syllabus, calendar and modules. I have examples of exemplary work for the students to use when completing their assignments. I try to give explicit instructions to all assignments and activities that student’s are expected to

complete during the semester. Additionally, I use the Announcement section of Bb, e-mail, discussion board, group work, and virtual chat. Below, I have some suggestions you might find helpful in designing and planning online courses.

- At the end of each semester have online students leave a discussion thread on how to survive my course. When the new semester begins have the new students read the recommendation from former students. This works very well.
- Communicate with online classes everyday, or every other day. This is may be a note or paragraph placed on the Announcements section of Blackboard. Send friendly e-mails asking how students are doing with the class. If I am going out of town for the weekend, I want my students to know that I will not be working on their assignments or answering e-mail. One semester a family member died and I announced this. I told the students that I would be away for three days. I did not get one e-mail until I announced that I had returned to my computer. This helps students understand that you are a real person. Doing this helps students identify with you. This helps to development community within the course.
- Use a textbook to help organize the content of the course. Design the syllabi based on the guidelines of the university, the accrediting agencies for the discipline, the department, and for your own teaching style.
- Give detailed instructions to students on how they should study for the online course or courses. I suggest they use a three ring binder and print

pertinent documents. They need to organize documents into some type of order. Allow students to organize their own work according to their own study patterns, and study tools. Inform students it is not reasonable to read everything online. Students like the feel of pencils, pens, books and paper. The tactical and kinesthetic aspects of learning, as well as the visual, are enjoyable to many learners, and important in helping students feel comfortable studying online.

- I give 12 to 15 modules that must be completed, graded, and returned during the semester. A module may contain several assignments. Labeling assignments is helpful to the organization of the course. I use a label (e.g. M1A1 or M3A3). The M1 is the module number, and the A is the assignment number. When students save their work they must use the assignment number in the label for the assignment. I do not allow any other description of the module. This helps in organizing and immediately identifying the students work when checking their digital folder. If you do not insist that students use your labeling protocol, they may give an assignment a name you might not recognize. This is particularly helpful at the end of class when you want to see if everyone has turned in all module assignments.
- I give detail explanations to my students on how I want the assignments returned to me in the file transfer (This is the Drop Box in Blackboard). WebCT may call the process something different. You can get assignments from attachments to e-mail, as well. Blackboard has a new

- “building block” which allows you to send graded assignments in a file and record the grade in the digital grade book. This is a great feature.
- Have separate e-mail boxes for each class. I have a Yahoo mail box for each class. This must be used by the students for this class. I do not want the students to use my University e-mail box for course correspondence. I use my University mail box for general University correspondence and advisees.
 - Have an exhaustingly detailed syllabus and course calendar. My calendar gives details about modules. It gives due dates and can be view from the beginning of class. If there is modification I will tell them.
 - List all assignments that are due in the class as part of the course calendar, and list all activities that they will do, but will not turn in. All of this should be available at the beginning of class. I link to all reading materials so students can access the information from home or were they may be at the time.
 - Constantly refresh the course content through fresh reading materials and course activities. This can be done during the semester the course is taught. However, it is better to save all new materials and add them before a new semester or term begins.
 - Use group work to help students get a sense of community. The group work should be integrated into the module assignments. The group work should be explained in the syllabus and in the modules. Also, the due dates for group work should be listed in the course calendar. There

should be a detailed grading rubric for group assignments and participation.

- Have rubrics (scoring guides) for all assignments and activities. Publish these rubrics and make sure students understand how they are being graded before the assignment is graded. This cuts down on the e-mail.
- When designing online courses have everything planned before the course begins. Make modifications as you go along during the semester, or term. Incorporate the modification into the next course plan.
- Do not be afraid to make modifications as you go along in the online course. If you do make modifications be sure students are informed and no exactly what was done, and what they are to do. “No surprise is the best surprise!”
- I think the personal fulfillment in online teaching is trying to improve students understanding of the content that is being taught. Enough said!
Best wishes on your journey in teaching online!