

From Classroom to Computer Screen: Adjustments Educators Make to Facilitate the Optimal Online Learning Experience

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Abstract

Online education is of growing importance for today's colleges and universities. Many faculty who are teaching in today's online environment have not been specifically trained for this new format. There are certain principles and components necessary in order to make an online program successful. This paper will explore some of the differences in traditional classroom teaching vs. online teaching.

Keywords: online teaching, traditional classroom, face-to-face classroom, online degrees

1. Introduction

Until recently, students obtained a college education strictly through a face-to-face setting, either on campus or at an offsite location. Today's students now have the option to obtain a degree by engaging in online or hybrid programs. Institutions for higher learning have offered online classes for quite some time, but in recent years, their popularity has increased. The demand has grown so much that many schools now offer degree programs completely online, and students no longer have to step foot on a college campus in order to obtain their degree. This interest and growth in education via the Internet, accompanied by the rapid development of technology, suggests that more schools will follow the trend of providing online classes and degree programs. The current, well-developed, technological era assists in the success of online courses and meeting the needs of students. Enrolling in online classes or degree programs provides flexibility for students to adjust the pace of the class. Many individuals now have the ability to complete a college program when they would otherwise be unable to do so. For instance, single parents or individuals who work are able to complete their coursework online, in lieu of traditional, face-to-face classes.

The need for distance education or online learning has grown exponentially in recent years (Thomsett-Scott & May, 2009). With this growth, educators need to be prepared to face the challenges of online teaching (Treacy, 2007). Whitesel (1998) noted that while technology is important, the teachers actually impact student learning. Understanding how to effectively communicate content through web-based instruction can sometimes be difficult or challenging to faculty (Pedersen, 2000). According to Smith, Ferguson, and Caris, "Other faculty members have some experience teaching online, but haven't shared their experiences, nor have they read literature on distance education. Their knowledge remains fragmentary" (2001). Kearsley and Blomeyer also point out that educators are not always willing to attend professional development to learn to teach online (2004).

This research study explores how faculty members teach face-to-face classes compared to online classes. The following research questions will be addressed:

- What different teaching strategies do they use for online classes versus their face-to-face classes?
- How much and what importance do they put on interaction or discussion in online classes versus face-to-face classes?
- What do faculty perceive as major differences between teaching face-to-face classes versus online classes?
- What kinds of resources do faculty perceive to be beneficial to them when teaching an online course?

2. Literature Review

Online courses and degrees are taking the educational world by storm with over 6.1 million students enrolled in at least one online class in the United States alone (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The most recent findings of the Babson Survey Research Group show that “Sixty five percent of all (2500) reporting institutions stated that online learning was a critical part of their long-term strategy” (2011, p. 4). Also, it was found that the 10 percent growth rate for online enrollment, the second lowest since 2002, exceeds the overall higher education population growth by 9%. The increase of student enrollment in at least one online class has increased from 9.6% in 2002 to 31.3% in 2010. Allen and Seaman’s survey also discovered that the perception of faculty acceptance of online teaching and learning has changed little in the last eight years. This is quite surprising considering the dramatic increase of enrollment over this time and the increased chance that professors will teach at least one online course during their time as university faculty (2011, p. 5).

Two learning principles that are important to remember with online learning are the intrinsic motivation on behalf of the students and the facilitation by the teacher, both must exist in order to have a successful online learning experience (Hutton, Wiesenberg, & Stacey, 2005). Though numerous articles have been written regarding whether or not online learning is equivalent to face-to-face experiences, it appears as if professors are not sharing their experiences with each other in order to aid in a more efficient and effective online teaching experience. Until recently, most faculty were not hired with the expectation of teaching online courses (Caplan, 2004). This is why it is very important that the professor feels that they are receiving appropriate training and support throughout the process of teaching online courses. These courses have been proven to take more time for the professor to prepare for, both at the technological and academic level (Puzzafero & Shelton, 2009). They must plan the desired interactions of student-to-student and faculty-to-student, as well as offer a broad range of teaching techniques through the course in order to influence the different types of learning of various students (Ragan & Terheggen, 2003). A study conducted by Husmann and Miller questioned distance education administrators “...about their perceptions of variables and factors necessary for effective distance education programs. Administrators agreed most strongly that programs should encourage quality and a customer orientation, but mostly, should provide the tools necessary for faculty members to modify course materials” (2001). Because faculty still hold the key to the success of student’s learning, we must not underestimate the importance of the professors need to be technologically supported throughout the online teaching experience (Caplan, 2004). When aiding professors in their online teaching experience they must feel supported at the technological, administrative and peer level in order to continue to be a successful online educator in this continuously growing field of distance education.

3. Methodology

A survey using survey monkey was sent out to the University of Louisiana at Monroe College of Education and Human Development faculty members about teaching face to face classes and online classes. Thirty one faculty members replied to the survey. The survey covered the following items:

- Experience teaching in higher education both in face to face and online classes
- Delivery format and level of interaction of face to face and online classes
- Preparedness for teaching online classes
- Difference between face to face and online classes
- Resources available to them to prepare to teach online classes

4. Findings

Research Question 1: What different teaching strategies do they use for online classes versus their face-to-face classes?

In face-to-face classes, faculty members stated that their teaching style included presentation and lecture (86.7%), class discussion (80%) and Interactive (80%). While faculty members who teach online classes stated that their classes included classroom group/individual chats (87.1%), resources are uploaded for student's individualized use (93.5%) and students work at their own pace, meeting required deadlines through the semester (61.3%).

Research Question 2: How much and what importance do they put on interaction or discussion in online classes versus face-to-face classes?

In face-to-face classes 58.1% of the faculty answered their classes were very interactive, while 38.7% stated their classes were interactive. In online classes 64.5% of the faculty answered their classes were interactive and 29.0% answered very interactive.

Research Question 3: What do faculty perceive as major differences between teaching face-to-face classes versus online classes?

The major difference that faculty perceived as the difference between face to face and online classes was the interaction and reading of body language that is lost when classes are taught online. Role playing, lively discussion, getting to know their students, etc. were cited as examples of activities that were lost when classes were taught online.

Another difference that was cited was the prep time and grading of writing assignments. Only a couple of faculty members stated this as being a difference between online and face-to-face classes.

Research Question 4: What kinds of resources do faculty perceive to be beneficial to them when teaching an online course?

Faculty stated a variety of resources that would be beneficial to them to help teach online courses, all either came under the category of professional development or Moodle (the course management system used). Faculty wanted to be more familiar with current technology that was available and also time to learn how to use them appropriately to teach classes. Moodle was also a resource that faculty wanted help in learning; specifically how to better use it, what features assisted with creating an interactive class and how to have a more pleasing aesthetic class design.

5. Discussions

As indicated by the data in the findings section, traditional lecture and presentation style dominates face-to-face classroom teaching with lively discussion and in-class activities. Faculty members who teach online want to create a similar experience for students. However, while in the online environment you can create a lecture presentation, faculty find it difficult to create a lively discussion. The face-to-face interaction as stated by faculty as missing, translates into faculty wanting to see their students and read their body language which is difficult to create in an online environment.

The tendency for some faculty is to use content developed for a traditional, face-to-face class and import it without alterations for their online class. This is a mistake that tends to lead to little interaction or understanding of the course material. Course activities and assignments need to be specially adapted for an online format, making them meaningful and promoting the sharing of ideas.

More professional development is needed by faculty so they have a better understanding of what technology is available that can help them create the much desired interaction that they seek. Many times, faculty see their role in online teaching as the same in a face-to-face class. That is, in the traditional classroom, they are more of a leader. Whereas, in the online classroom, their role should be more facilitative in nature, allowing students to contribute ideas and expertise, encouraging interaction through methods such as discussion boards. Being present in the discussion, but not heavily directing it, can be a difficult transition for traditional classroom teachers.

6. Conclusion

While there is no single “right” way to teach an online class, there are some general principles that should be taken into consideration when developing course material in an online format. Good content encourages meaningful discussions and idea-exchange between students and faculty. A structure which provides clear expectations and assessment feedback is always welcome. And faculty must be open to a constant learning process, discovering new technology and new ways of integrating content to increase interactivity. Many universities offer resources and support to assist faculty in their online teaching pursuits. The responsibility rests with the faculty to take advantage of the information and knowledge available to them to become more effective online teachers.

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