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Designing Competency-Linked Courses for Critical Thinking & Workforce Readiness

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Abstract

This paper outlines the competency-linked project of a total redesign of a fully online master’s program that linked every deliverable and assessment in each course with a competency model. Extensive mapping was completed and then applied to every course in the master’s program over a two-year period. Graduate students’ perceptions of connecting new course knowledge to existing knowledge on the course topic, prior to current skills, and the perceived ability to apply course knowledge to the workplace were examined, analyzed, and reported. Lastly, recommendations on finding competencies, mapping, and spreading the word are detailed.

Keywords: competency-based education; competency-linked education; course development; learner-centered; learning outcomes; student success; workforce ready; critical thinking

Background

The purpose of the Master of Education in Training and Development in the College of Education at North Carolina State University is to prepare adult learners for careers such as instructional designers, trainers, and program managers or evaluators throughout various industries. Courses throughout the program prepare students to engage in curriculum development, manage people and programs, and apply learning to a wide variety of situations. The program redesign between 2017 and 2019 required course assignment modification to incorporate specific industry competencies throughout topics covered in each course as well as course restructuring to serve students for both regular 15-week semesters and summer 5-week semesters. The purpose of the program redesign was to improve student learning, develop students’ critical thinking skills, increase labor market outcomes, and establish community partnerships. Competency-based learning has been proven to be beneficial for students on all education levels (Gross, Tuchman, & Patrick, 2018).

Designing Courses for the Learner

Regardless of whether a course is designed for online, face-to-face, hybrid, blended or flipped learning, every course should be designed with the learner in mind. Learner-centered instruction places the student at the center of instruction so students are active learners rather than passive participants (Altay, 2014). The five overarching themes for each course’s modules allowed us to section out students’ course materials, readings, and assignments so everything tied together with the main theme. As we did this, we linked industry competencies and course learning objectives to everything within each course. Instead of students merely going through rote steps and memorization in program courses, the changes required them to engage more with the materials and apply what they learned throughout the course to various assignments.

These assignments were even stronger since not only were the course objectives mapped to the assignments and readings, but the assignments also had an extra layer of rigor since they incorporated various competencies related to the concepts covered in class. Some assignments covered multiple competencies while others only incorporated one. Regardless, students were able to see which competencies they had met and achieved at the end of each assignment, module, and course. To ensure students applied critical thinking skills and integrated skills they would likely apply in the workforce, most assignments were created to be mock projects of what students would likely encounter in the workplace in various training, learning, and educational settings.
Professional Development and Qualitative Feedback

Designing to Support Course Rigor, Ensure Alignment, and Aid in Student Outcomes

Once each course was associated with a high-level competency area, then the course objectives, assignments, and readings were analyzed. Doing so created an illustrative approach to see which competencies went with which course throughout the program, what competencies aligned with which assignments throughout a course, which objectives needed to be rewritten or revised, and where gaps existed throughout the various program courses. To ensure every course throughout the program met the previously established course objectives and aligned with the competencies being linked throughout, every course was redesigned in some shape or form to support rigor, ensure alignment and aid in increasing student outcomes. The end goal was to ensure students knew they not only mastered the course objectives but were also proficient in various industry competencies by the end of the course. The redesign ensured each course had a higher level of rigor with students applying knowledge gained instead of merely regurgitating it through multiple choice question quiz or exam questions and seeing how each course connected with the real world. Critical thinking is defined as a way of thinking that requires the thinker to analyze, assess, and reconstruct knowledge through problem-solving and effective communication (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2019). Assignments were revised to provide students more application-based opportunities rather than rote memorization or passive learning of concepts. The program redesign aimed to purposefully require students to apply critical thinking skills and those learning outcomes are not only increased but also tied to real-world application.

Aligning Industry Competencies to Program Courses

Industry competencies related to learning technologies, change management, managing learning programs, and instructional design were aligned to program courses associated with those specific competencies. Every assignment in each course is mapped and aligned with at least one-course objective and typically one industry competency. Some assignments are mapped and aligned with several. To ensure we aligned and mapped course objectives and competencies with the correct course, we aligned and matched each course in the program to an industry competency (i.e., learning technologies, change management, instructional design, etc.).

Figure 1. Course names and competencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>ATD Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Designing Instructional Systems</td>
<td>Instructional Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Advanced Instructional Design</td>
<td>Instructional Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Organization Operation of T&amp;D Programs</td>
<td>Managing Learning Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Needs Assessment and Task Analysis</td>
<td>Performance Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Evaluating Training and Transfer</td>
<td>Evaluating Learning Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Integrating Technology in T&amp;D</td>
<td>Learning Technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Methods and Techniques of T&amp;D</td>
<td>Training Delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Research in AHE</td>
<td>Knowledge Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Organizational Change in HRD</td>
<td>Change Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Adult Learner</td>
<td>Training Delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Special Topics: Leadership</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Capstone</td>
<td>Integrated Talent Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36 credit hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Questions

In order to see the connections among students’ preparedness and skill levels after completing the various courses, the following research questions guided the study.

Research Question #1: How do graduate students perceive participation in an online competency-based course impacts their own work preparedness?

Research Question #2: How do graduate students perceive participation in an online competency-based course impacts their skill level and Connection to prior knowledge?

Research Question #3: Is there a statistically significant relationship between the connection of prior to knowledge for graduate students in an online competency-based course?

Data Collection

Researchers for this study created an end-of-course survey to collect students’ perceptions related to, prior skill level vs. current (end-of-course) skill level, level of connection of new knowledge to prior knowledge, and the relationship of the level of connection of new knowledge to prior knowledge with perceived ability to apply knowledge in the workplace. The data that was collected and analyzed indicated that students in a competency-based course that is linked to specific competencies gained significant knowledge on skills needed to pursue training positions. Incorporating competencies provides students the ability to transition from graduation to the job knowing they have achieved industry-specific competencies that are needed in the workplace.

Data Sources

Four online graduate level courses were selected from a master’s program that is fully online which had recently had a complete redesign to be competency-based. Data was collected from courses that were taught in the Fall 2019 semester. Student survey data was obtained from the following courses:

- EAC 556: Organization Change in HRD (ATD Competency Area: Change Management)
- EAC 580: Designing Instructional Systems in Training & Development (ATD Competency Area: Instructional Design)
- EAC 581: Advanced Instructional Design (ATD Competency Area: Instructional Design)
- EAC 582: Organization & Operation of Training & Development Programs (ATD Competency Area: Managing Learning Programs)

Participants

The participants were graduate students currently enrolled in courses that were designed for a fully online master’s degree program in Training and Development with a focus on Instructional Design during the Fall 2019 semester. Data was specifically collected from online students from four of the 12 required graduate-level courses (n=87).

Findings for Research Question 1: Prior to Current Skill Level of Course Topic.

How students perceived participation in a graduate online competency-based course impacted their skill level was examined through survey questions that asked students about their prior skill level of a course topic and also asked them their current (end-of-course) skill level. Data from the survey around work preparedness, Prepared to apply knowledge to future work (FCP) and Prepared for future job in field (FJP), were analyzed. Findings indicate there is a statistically significant difference in prior skill level and current skill level of online graduate students after completing a CBE designed course.
Table 1.
Prior skill level vs. current (end-of-course) skill level of students who completed a competency aligned online course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>1.54</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard error</td>
<td>0.121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>1.3021 to 1.7784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t-statistic</td>
<td>12.766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DF</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance level</td>
<td>P&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings for Research Question 2: Connection of Current to Prior Knowledge

In order to answer research question two, participants were asked to score on a likert scale of 1-5 , ‘Course activities helped me make connections of new to prior knowledge’. Data from the survey around skill attainment and connection, Prior skill level vs. current (end-of-course) skill level (DIFF) and Course activities helped me make connections of new to prior knowledge (OVN) were analyzed. The scores from this survey question help examine the impact of their connection of currently obtained new knowledge to prior knowledge. Findings indicate that students perceived a strong connection of the new knowledge in the course with prior knowledge on the topic.

Table 2.
Students who completed a competency aligned online course perceptions of connection of new knowledge to prior knowledge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likert Scale Label</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>% of Frequencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>31.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>60.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings for Research Question 3: Connection Between Course Knowledge and Workforce Application

Data on students’ perceptions of connecting new knowledge to old knowledge related to their perceptions of being able to apply their new knowledge in the workplace was analyzed. Findings indicate that as connections prior to new knowledge increased so did the ability to use new knowledge in the workplace ($r=.73$).

Future Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Competency selection. Not all fields have an existing list of competencies to draw from or align with for education purposes. It is helpful to create a list of competencies from experience, findings from the literature and have the list of competencies examined by other stakeholders such as workplace leaders, hiring agents, accreditation and credentialing agencies, and other experts who have a solid understanding of the skills needed for success in their field.

Recommendation #2: Mapping. Just as course designers map overarching course learning objectives to smaller module learning objectives, when mapping competency-linked courses you map the course deliverables, content, and readings to the competencies. This helps organize the content and deliverables to ensure all competencies are addressed in the curriculum and measured through assignments, quizzes, discussion forums, and projects.

Recommendation #3: Make it known. It is imperative that students are informed that the course is competency-based (or linked) and which specific competencies are aligned throughout the course. Providing a map of the alignment between course and module learning objectives with competencies is helpful so that students see the connection between their learning and the competencies. Students, therefore, possess a narrative to identify their new skills. They can then share those strengths by stating their proficiency in specific competencies in written form on resumes and/or in verbal form during job interviews.
References


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Understanding the Impact of Cultural Competency Courses in Remote Learning

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Abstract

Cultural competency for online doctoral and MEd students is essential to ensure they learn the necessary attitudes, the skills and knowledge needed as leaders & educators, and to create authentic relationships for effective communication and learning with those of different belief systems (Mareno & Hart, 2014). In this study, we sought to understand the benefits of developing cultural sensitivity through remote learning environments. Students from online classes provided feedback about the positive impact increased cultural sensitivity had in their lives. Feedback was assessed using current and graduated remote learning PhD and MEd students at University of the People, Columbus State Community College, Walden University, and the Muslim Students Association. The results showed an increase in cultural understanding, cultural interest, and equity.

Need for Awareness

With the expansion of global interaction through online learning (Palvia, Aeron, Gupta, Mahapatra, Parida, Rosner & Sindhi, 2018) the importance of intercultural awareness cannot be understated. Online learning reaches students locally and globally, monocultural and multicultural, as well as urban and rural creating a unique opportunity to develop intercultural sensitivity (Bennett, 2009) on a global scale. While great strides have been made in increasing the quality of remote learning programs which include social and global competencies (Arbour, Kaspar, &Teall, 2014) there are still challenges in higher education to show accountability in students’ knowledge and skills of cultural competencies (Smith-Isabell & Rubaii, 2020). This research will add to current articles promoting quality education through the increase of cultural competency skills in online learning programs.

Cultural Awareness and Qualitative Feedback

Current and graduated remote PhD and MEd students find differences in beliefs and value systems can create challenges in teaching and learning. Issues such as an inability to recognize perspectives, disinterest in global issues, ineffective communication, and an inability to take action or become a positive change agent are challenges experienced within our educational systems (Asiasociety, 2020). Current and graduated students found after completing cultural competency classes that they experienced an increase in their cultural knowledge, skills, and perspectives that assisted in difficulties they experienced. As their knowledge of the complexities in cultural differences developed, they expressed that their responses to these cultural differences became more compatible with effective intercultural communication. They felt more confident to address cultural issues and felt better equipped to be a progressive change agent for their schools.

An opportunity for current and graduated PhD and MEd students to leave feedback about the impact online cultural competency classes had on their teaching and learning was made available. Students were able to express their opinions and thoughts in an open discussion forum and through private emails. Responses expressed the benefits they found for themselves as well as for their students with examples of these benefits. See Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduated Students</td>
<td>“I learned many new things from the content (in Living and Learning Globally EDUC 5811) as well as reading peer discussions and writings. For example, I am doing a week-long research project on winter holidays for international middle schoolers. The idea came to me from someone talking and celebrating/acknowledging the major holidays of their international students. In my class they had to choose a holiday they didn’t practice and then interview a classmate who did practice it as part of their research. Last unit we focused on what is a TCK and “Am I a TCK?” They really enjoyed learning reading and writing lessons via this topic.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“This was one of my favorite courses at UoPeople. I was able to understand one of the main aims of an IB education and changed how I viewed education as an American. I aim to be more culturing responsive and relevant, and encourage my peers and students to incorporate knowledge and experiences to learn about various cultures. When I find myself or others make ignorant statements, I encourage them to do research or I provide them with resources.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“In this virtual environment, one of the best ways I introduced different cultures was mainly through music and videos. It was fun and engaging, and plenty of learning was done, myself included. I hope to incorporate other aspects in schools once things become normal.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I learned that it is very important to learn to say someone's name from another culture. They should not have to change their name to suit me. If they can learn an entire language, I can certainly learn one word: their name. Also, I learned a whole new way of thinking because of their eastern (philosophy, religion). It helped me view the world in a whole new way and understand that others have a different perspective.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                   | “I am teaching completely online right now and I actually love online teaching. What I have learned is that you have to find innovative ways to engage your class to help them learn and part of that is knowing who they are as individuals, how they communicate, and how they interact in the online classroom environment. Because I identify as an American Muslim woman who is white. I have experienced some of the difficulties of being a member of a non-normative white religion. Where I am sometimes seen as not 'Arab' enough to be a true Muslim by other Muslims and seen as someone who may have 'something wrong with them mentally' by white peers. I know that my identity does not fit many cultural norms. Therefore, recognizing differing cultures in the classroom is extremely important, as well as helping students to understand those differences and to find commonality. I do
not believe in safe spaces, but I do believe that we can create safer spaces. Therefore, one of the things I do as a new cohort comes into the into my program is to create a safer spaces document with that cohort during orientation. I then post this in each online class and as the second slide of each PPT presentation for each course. We dedicate as much time as is needed at during orientation until this list is completed. It might be important for me to mention that I am the program coordinator for a Master's program in Higher Education Administration. The program was created with a Social Justice foundation. We are constantly talking about hot topics in higher education. Therefore, we are constantly addressing issues of racism, genderism, issues associated with sexual orientation, ableism, ethnocentrism and the like within the structures of higher and leadership. Cultural difference in the classroom and how we share about those make a huge difference to the curriculum. Learning about each other and our differences will make better leaders who are able to recognize the importance of cultural difference. I guess what I am trying to say is that in my program and in the online environment we not only recognize cultural differences, we fully engage in them. I am not sure this is what you are looking for, but this would be our experiences.”

“One thing that I really want to change is to add an activity that I mentioned in one of my discussion posts during the class. I teach in a university in China with a lot of foreign students as well as Chinese students of course. However, the students rarely interact, and I have always thought that is a huge lost opportunity because the foreigners could learn a lot of their Chinese schoolmates, and the Chinese students, especially my students who are preparing to study abroad could learn a lot from the foreign students.

So, I would like to organize an English/Chinese corner that encourages interaction between both groups and allows everyone to share their culture with people from different cultures.

This idea is one of the biggest things I have been inspired to do because of that class, and that class also helped me organize my thoughts a little bit. Of course, there are some challenges to work through, especially since most foreign students are not on campus now because of the virus.”

Table 2.
Student Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current Students</td>
<td>“Taught me to appreciate my classmates. And created a warmer sense of belonging in the class.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“What I found most interesting were shared experiences.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“I once asked a class to talk about their own cultures and traditions. I was surprised about how many people don’t know their roots.”

“I consider that the fact that we engaged in a group project with people from differing cultures really helped in making the remote class seem as though it was in-person. Also, reflecting on my own assumptions, values, and beliefs was a valuable and informative experience that led me to understand how my philosophy of education has, and still, evolving to address intercultural and global understanding in my teaching and learning.”

“I wish I had this sort of class and approach since I was at school, at university or even in my curriculum.

Frankly, I said that statement before because as a kid, I never thought how many opportunities we skipped because courses like this were not important. I always consider nature and environment important. Who told me to think like that? I heard that green areas are important from my family. Is it something innate in people? Therefore, I believe that teaching kids subjects like this might create innovative ideas and awareness in their lives. This can be research about how kids learn and innate things come to life in their lives, but as a dad, I can see that in my kids because they feel comfortable in a home environment which leads to my second thoughts.

I totally agree that places of learning must be culturally friendly to diverse students as culturally and linguistically diverse places learn to be comfortable and creative and therefor, knowing about them, family, and culture will help build their potential.

Through this remote learning class, I learned that sustainability can be part of any subject. Sports, Maths, Social Studies, etc. I always thought that sustainable subject needs a dedicated time. This semester, through Project Y, I changed one of my assessments and created a project. In addition, I brought one of our hobbies to do recycling and composting in a more educative way as I connected to subjects related to the concepts of recycling and their benefits.

As an ICT, I see that social media plays a crucial role for reaching people so promotion and digital projects such as infographics, videos can be online in order to promote ideas of sustainable living.

Some students may say that learning about other cultures requires living abroad, but I believe that social media channels and international travels have enhanced cross-cultural relationships and communications and it makes it easier to experience other cultures without moving abroad.
For instance, Peru is a country that has allowed more migration of Venezuelans because of their political turmoil and over a million Venezuelans have crossed Peruvian frontiers, and this situation has created many comments and debates, but most people have embraced the new migration and the Peruvian government has facilitated their lives with simple ways to get a job and housing.

Learning about culture improves our lives, it helps us to see situations like Peru in a better view, understanding migration, democracy and so forth helps teachers to understand other kids’ backgrounds and their horrible journeys they experienced for a better future.

I believe that we need more courses like this and even at a deeper level so professionals, teachers, parents, students can learn and understand this complex world we live in. I am glad that I came across and learned about this in only 8 weeks, I can’t imagine how much more I can learn in one year. Thanks for teachers who are ambassadors for courses like this because I see that they believe in a global community living in harmony.

Thank you, Dr. Binger and your passion for subjects like this.”

The open discussion forum created a space for students to express their thoughts and opinions about the benefits of learning cultural awareness in their graduate education classes and it further provided a space to understand other students’ experiences and perceptions of cultural competencies. Providing the option for students to express themselves through personal email benefited those who prefer a more private communication and way of expression. All students expressed a joy in being able to explain the positive benefits of their cultural competency experiences and how it has transformed their teaching.

**Conclusion**

Teachers face a diverse student body including race, ethnicity, religion, language, economic, LGBTQ+ in the 21st century classroom (Walden University, 2020). Cultural competency education develops teachers’ equitability practices and deepens their understanding of multiple perspectives (Averill, Anderson, & Drake, 2015; Ebersole, Kanahele-Mossman, & Kawakami, 2016). For these reasons, time was spent exploring the impact of cultural competency courses in a remote environment with graduate level students across a multitude of ethnicities, global locations, religions, and economic regions. Our findings show online classes that addressed cultural awareness developed students’ cultural understanding allowing them to be more effective in their intercultural communication, develop their confidence to address cultural issues, and better equipped them to be progressive and positive change agents for their schools. Furthermore, it shows that as their knowledge of the complexities in cultural differences developed, they expressed that their responses to these cultural differences became more compatible with effective intercultural communication. They felt more confident to address cultural issues and felt better equipped to be a progressive change agent for their schools.

**References**


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Abstract
The challenges to recruiting students for online learning programs include global competition, declining enrollments, political uncertainty, and limited financial resources. Institutions of higher education must find new and innovative ways to market online programs. Here we examine the current condition of higher education, the impact this has to online learning programs, and how institutions and program coordinators can effectively keep up with the competition while marketing their online programs.

Introduction
The challenges to recruiting students for online learning programs are not unique, but they do require innovation. While nearly 80 percent of online students agreed that the financial cost was worth it, 18-to-24 year-olds were not in favor of attending online; they prefer an in-person educational experience (Zalaznick, 2020). According to Zalaznick (2020), online students seek programs that provide affordability, a strong school reputation, and quick paths to completion. Online learning may not be a long-term solution for all students, but it does provide opportunities for working adults and those who are land-locked and do not have a program of interest within a driving distance from their current homes and can provide the ability to create a flexible study schedule and have lower costs. Here we examine the current condition of higher education, the impact this has to online learning programs, and how institutions and program coordinators can keep up with the competition while marketing their online programs.

What is the Current Landscape?
Higher education is facing a variety of challenges that are pushing change. The most common challenges moving forward are those of global competition, declining enrollments, political uncertainty impacting policy changes, and limited financial resources. According to Wiley Education Services (2021), the United States is struggling with declining world rankings. “The US claims a record eight places in the top 10, ...but US universities outside the top 200 show signs of decline” (Times Higher Education, 2021, para. 6). In addition, there has been a severe drop in new international student enrollments in the United States. With a decrease by 43 percent, U. S. institutions will have to look for innovative ways to increase future international enrollments (Redden, 2020). Domestic student numbers are also on the decline. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2020), there has been an overall 13 percent decline in U. S. freshman enrollments, specifically an 18.9 percent decrease at the community college, a 10.5 percent decrease at four-year public institutions, and an 8.5 percent decrease at private nonprofit four-year institutions. In addition, higher education has been directly affected by the national political climate (Higher Ed Dive, 2020). Changes in policy at the federal level directly impact current and future students. “These changes influence student loans, cost of education, employment after graduation and government incentives” (Nene, 2020, para. 3). Without increased federal aid and with the growing tuition cost, some college students may not be able to continue in their educational endeavors.
How Can Higher Education Move Forward?

One of the most important lessons learned from COVID-19 was the need for a stronger online infrastructure across institutions and the need for more professional development and training in online programming (Kelly & Columbus, 2020). Moving forward, institutions will need to strengthen these resources and the budget lines that support them. In addition, they will have to confront the financial challenges they currently face and develop more sustainable business models. If these steps are not taken, deeper cuts for sustainability will occur including early retirements, salary reductions, furloughs, hiring freezes, the closing of academic programs and departments, reduction in workforce, and possible further college closures and/or consolidations.

What is Needed to Create a Marketing Plan?

There are multiple approaches to marketing an online program. Having access to student support resources, having a visible program website, creating social media accounts, reaching out to professional organizations and conferences, and hosting virtual information sessions can all be impactful in recruiting prospective students. However, in order to build a strong online presence, first administrators and online program coordinators will need to assess the tools and resources available on their campuses. The best place to start is with the institution’s university relations and/or marketing office. They can also advise on what options are available, the cost, who pays, and how to gain access. They will be able to convey specific branding guidelines on graphics, institutional logos, and images that may need to be followed, as well as specific approval processes.

Student Support Resources

When thinking about what prospective students are looking for in an online program it is important to know what resources are available to support them while they are in the program. This may include eLearning centers, 24-hour IT services to online students, downloadable apps and programs with student access, program course platforms with tutorials for navigation, online library resources, and various other online student supports. These are not only helpful resources for current students, but they are also useful to include in marketing your program to prospective students.

Program Website

Some online resources are already cost efficient, but often under-utilized. For example, colleges and individual programs already have designated spaces on their university websites. These are not only great places to post information about the program, but also to share pertinent information about upcoming events, social media accounts, application processes, and program handbooks. Remember to keep these spaces clutter free and easily clickable. A prospective student who has to click through multiple layers to find pertinent information will not stay interested long.

Social Media

Social media is a great marketing tool. Many institutions have created guidelines for social media use (Powers & Schloss, 2017). Be sure to request this information and any available training required. Social media is a great place to highlight your program and expand your reach – locally, nationally, and globally. For example, Facebook pages are a great resource for posting program information, related conferences, job announcements in the field of study, and virtual campus events. These pages can help you to build community around your program and advertise the great work you are doing and your connections to the larger field. Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and various others can also be used to build a marketing platform. Be sure to keep your CV up-to-date and posted on your personal sites. Students are not only looking at the program, but they are also looking at who the faculty are, what their research entails, and how they are connected in the field.

When thinking about what to post in your virtual spaces, ask your current students or alumni to participate. Your current students can create videos talking about why they joined the program, their future goals, and how the program is moving them forward. If you have a portfolio-based program, ask your students to showcase their work. Alumni can talk about how the program prepared them for employment or what they currently do in their positions. The videos do not always have to be serious and well crafted. Have your students and alumni create a quick video...
with their cell phone and allow your marketing department to work their magic for a final product combining the videos into a short clip to be featured on your website, social media, and the like.

Also be sure that you are featuring the program faculty’s research and accomplishments. Students want to know who they will be working with and what kind of research they do. Finally, get into the habit of regularly assessing your program and sharing the highlights of your assessment outcomes as well.

**Virtual Information Sessions**

Hosting on-going virtual information sessions can also be an effective way to advertise your program. Information sessions need to be interactive allowing prospective students the ability to ask questions throughout and to really get to know you and the program. Be sure to be conscientious about differing time zones and participant cultures and identities. Wednesday night may not be the best time to hold an information session if your prospective population holds religious meetings on that night. The dates and times can be posted on your program website and on your social media sites.

**Targeted Advertising**

Many institutions are now utilizing geo-fencing as an advertising tool. Geo-fencing is a marketing strategy that uses a virtual location-based fence to send ads and messages about programming to targeted prospective students in designated areas (Kemmis, 2020). This is a great tool for programs to target in on specific populations in designated areas.

**Conferences and Organizations**

Local, regional, and even some national conferences and organizations provide free/cost-effective program advertising. Be sure to post your program information in these spaces with clear contact information. Join listservs related to these organizations and practice sharing the great things that you are doing within your program including when applications are open and when virtual information sessions are scheduled.

**References**


National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2020, November 12). *Stay informed with the latest enrollment information: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center’s monthly update on higher education enrollments*. https://nscresearchcenter.org/stay-informed/


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Shifting the Paradigm: On-Campus to Online for a PhD Residency

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and how the PhD in Global Leadership program at Indiana Tech was able to run a signature event (Immersion Weekend) during the pandemic. We provide a case study description of how this event was transformed to an online virtual format in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We then discuss how learning technologies were leveraged to create an experience that would be both academically rigorous and meaningful to students despite the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

Indiana Institute of Technology (Indiana Tech) is a traditional brick and mortar university that provides associates, bachelors, masters, and a doctoral degree. In addition to traditional offerings the university has a large College of Professional Studies program to provide online instruction to non-traditional adult students. The doctoral program is considered the ‘flagship program’ for the university, attracting top students nationally and internationally. In addition, a cadre of approximately 30 faculty from across the globe bring expertise to the program as respected leaders and scholars in the field. This unique program houses approximately 150 PhD students.

Findings from the 2018 Online College Student: Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences report indicates there are three features that push students to online coursework: reduced total cost, time to completion, and program quality/reputation (Magada & Aslanian, 2018). Moreover, a study by Seagram et al. (1998) indicates developing relationships with dissertation supervisor, frequent meetings with dissertation supervisor, and collaborating with dissertation supervisor on papers and articles are significant factors associated with student completion in doctoral programs. Terrell et al. (2012) suggest that online and limited residency doctoral programs can reduce attrition rates by increasing face-to-face interactions with both other students and faculty members. Distance learning programs are often criticized for the lack of interaction in the course’s students take. McBrien et al. (2009) indicate that synchronous sessions help to reduce the distance and increase interaction among students and faculty members.

PhD in Global Leadership Overview

The PhD in Global Leadership program is a 10-year old program that is administered online with in-person residency requirements. Students and adjunct faculty in this program are spread out over the United States and abroad. Full-time faculty and administrators are co-located at the Fort Wayne campus. The PhD in Global Leadership program has a small full-time faculty and staff contingency; therefore, the residency experience is an all hands on deck undertaking to execute the program and support students and faculty who are traveling into town for the event. Because of the small size of the department it is also important to involve partners from across the university in the planning process. Table 1 provides a look at the planning process for the traditional Immersion Weekend.
Table 1. *Traditional Immersion Weekend Planning Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning Milestone</th>
<th>Time Out from Event Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Event Date Finalized</td>
<td>12-18 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Major Space Reservations</td>
<td>12-18 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel Block Reserved</td>
<td>12-18 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda Template Created</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tentative Budget Creation</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekend Theme Development, Rationale, and Finalization</td>
<td>5-6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest and/or Featured Speaker(s) Invited</td>
<td>5-6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Call for Proposals to Faculty</td>
<td>5-6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Save-the-Date Immersion Announcement to Students</td>
<td>4-5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposals Due from Faculty</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Save-the-Date to Students for Writing Workshop</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Email Regarding Defenses at Immersion to Chairs</td>
<td>4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest Speaker(s) Finalized</td>
<td>3-4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Proposals Initial Feedback Communicated</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest Speaker Travel Logistical/Arrangements Initiated</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest Speaker Ongoing Communication Regarding Programming</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Faculty of the Year Survey to Students</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Invitation to RSVP for Writing Workshop</td>
<td>3 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakout and Collective Sessions Planned</td>
<td>2.5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Attendance List Planned</td>
<td>2.5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Faculty Initial Invitation Email</td>
<td>2.5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Travel Arrangement Instructions to Faculty</td>
<td>2.5 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Acceptance Letters, Invitations</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Call for Student Proposals (Roundtable Discussion Topics)</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Writing Workshop Attendance List Finalized</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Attendance List Finalized</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tentative Weekend Agenda Developed</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller Campus Rooms Reserved</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and Keynote Flight Arrangements Completed</td>
<td>6-8 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel Reservations Made for Faculty and Guest Speaker</td>
<td>6-8 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send Invitation to Students to RSVP for Immersion</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Agenda Confirmed</td>
<td>4-6 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Immersion Attendance List Finalized</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/Faculty/Guest List &amp; Content Due to Mktg</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agenda Due to Mktg</td>
<td>3 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Traditional Residency**

As one of the requirements for the program, doctoral students must complete 15 residency academic units (RAU). Doctoral students are eligible to earn up to five RAUs during each residency by participating in the entire event.
Residency is offered in the spring and fall of each academic year known as Immersion Weekend. Each Immersion Weekend runs Thursday evening through Saturday evening. The Immersion Weekends are free to students; however, they must pay for their own travel, lodging, and other expenses associated with attending the event. In addition, faculty are flown in for each Immersion and are available to students in formal and informal settings throughout the weekend.

The on-campus Immersion Weekends are a distinguishing part of the PhD program. Students commonly share sentiments such as: “The event gave me the opportunity to feel a true affinity with the program as well as the opportunity to meet classmates and instructors” and “I had a wonderful time at the immersion weekend. It reaffirmed my commitment to the program and I look forward to starting my second year!” The traditional Immersion Weekend is important to connect students to the actual campus where they are getting their degree and resources available to them, network with peers in the program who may be ahead of them or even at the same stage in the program, and network with faculty to help identify potential committee chair and members. Traditionally, Immersion Weekends are themed with an opening welcome dinner, keynote speakers, moderated faculty sessions, breakout sessions, dissertation oral defenses, and alumni speaker sessions. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic Indiana Tech was required close the campus, therefore causing the cancelation of the traditional spring residency.

During the traditional on-campus Immersion Weekends full-time faculty and staff are available to both students and visiting faculty to provide support. Some of the roles of the full-time faculty and staff include registration, opening the event with announcements, and serving as event timekeepers to ensure we remain on schedule.

Another important feature of the on-campus Immersion Weekends is the Graduate Recognition Ceremony. The Graduate Recognition Ceremony is a tradition in our PhD program to honor those graduates every Fall and Spring Immersion Weekend who have successfully defended their Dissertation and have met all the requirements for graduation. Even though Indiana Tech officially honors each graduate at the May commencement ceremony, this is an opportunity for graduates and their respective faculty chairs to make comments on their doctoral journey in an intimate setting. This ceremony is not intended to replace commencement but is the program’s own private celebration of our graduates.

Virtual Residency

As the news of the growing risk of traveling and restrictions were increasing, the decision was made that Immersion would need to be offered in a virtual format. This allowed students the opportunity to earn the normal five RAUs as in an on-campus experience. Then, the challenge began to identify the important goals and outcomes of the traditional Immersion programming, how they can be met and through what available forms of Instructional Design. In a five-week period the entire event was transformed to be a virtual event that included both synchronous and asynchronous sessions. The following issues were considered: realizing that students were managing multiple priorities, realities the residency requirements could not be onerous to the student, student participation in synchronous sessions would be required, and the residency requirements still had to be academically rigorous.

The director provided vision for the event, and along with the assistant director collaborated on creating strategies and forming a team. A small planning team consisting of the director, assistant director, three on-site faculty and an administrative assistant were pulled together to plan, develop, and collaborate within the Blackboard system.

The team then developed the following plan to develop an engaging Blackboard course site:

a. Meet with Associate VP of IT for his perspective on Blackboard, Blackboard Collaborate, and Microsoft Teams as tools to administer Immersion
b. Meet with Director of eLearning Pedagogy for perspective on Blackboard and Blackboard Collaborate Ultra as tools to administer Immersion
c. Communicate to faculty and students that Blackboard would be used as the Immersion delivery platform
d. Invite students to register via Psychdata
e. Introduce Immersion course site design during department meeting
f. Meet with marketing to design pieces, imagery, and video to incorporate into the course
g. Contact collaborators to create elements for the site (e.g. the library)
h. Conduct research on traditionally effective online course design
i. Conduct research on formatting of online conference delivery
j. Meet with full-time faculty to brainstorm elements/modules that should be included in the site and how they should be arranged
k. Compile Blackboard Collaborate Ultra training elements and instructions for Immersion presenters
l. Train and empower Immersion presenters to record their sessions, write descriptions, upload handouts, and complete biographies
m. Meet with additional program faculty members to gain perspective on Blackboard course design and assign developmental components
n. Compile and arrange all elements and incorporate all edits
o. Review of course by Director of eLearning Pedagogy for any final edits and suggestions
p. Complete final design
q. Enroll all student registrants into course
r. Make course live

Similar to the all hands on deck approach used for the in person Immersions, during the planning phase and up to the execution of the event the full-time faculty and staff were assigned tasks such as: reviewing faculty recorded presentation, proofing documents, writing documents, providing daily announcements in Blackboard, and being available to troubleshoot issues throughout the residency week and weekend. Documents that were written to support student and faculty success included: Tips to Get the Most out of Your Spring Immersion Online, Be Ready for Immersion – Check Your Technology, and Guidelines for Student Discussion During Synchronous Sessions.

In addition, the assistant director served as a behind the scenes session host for each of the synchronous sessions. In this role she was responsible for uploading the faculty presentation slides, providing music as people entered the session room, and assigning the students into groups when it came time for group work. Full-time faculty served as session hosts to welcome everyone to the session, introduce the faculty session facilitators, provide directions to the students on how the breakout groups should be structured prior to the breakout session, and reconvene the group from the breakout session for the groups to report back. Faculty facilitators provided a brief introduction to the topic, visited various breakout groups to listen in on discussion, facilitate the group report back session, and provide closing thoughts at the conclusion of the synchronous session.

Residency was extended from three days to one week so that doctoral students could get through the asynchronously recorded faculty presentations prior to the synchronous sessions. RAUs were earned as follows: up to four RAUs for watching the asynchronous recorded sessions with each recorded session being 0.5 RAUs and one RAU maximum for attending the synchronous sessions must participate in at least two synchronous sessions (attending a dissertation oral defense could be used for one of the discussion sessions). Students were not allowed to earn a partial RAU, and they were required to earn a minimum of one RAU to be considered as a participant.

Faculty were paired up to lead synchronous discussions on a broad topic providing a commonality between their two respective asynchronous sessions. Since students could attend any of the synchronous sessions they wanted, the synchronous session could not be dependent upon the student having seen the asynchronous session by the faculty facilitators. Finally, the synchronous sessions had to rely mostly on student discussion in breakout groups.

Table 2. Faculty Presentation Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asynchronous Topics</th>
<th>Synchronous Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Internationalization: FX or Real Impact?</td>
<td>Globalizing Your Personal and Professional Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• New Research in Global Leadership Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guide to Program Completion Update</td>
<td>Guide to Program Completion Panel Session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Values-Based Leadership and Action Research</td>
<td>Reflection: The Practice of Leaders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To bring awareness to the start of Immersion Week, the director hosted an *Immersion Live Kick-Off Party* at 12:00 a.m. (Eastern Time) on the Saturday that the course became available to students in Blackboard. This was well attended by both students and faculty across the globe. To allow students to connect with faculty and other students in a more casual way we hosted optional *Casual Café* sessions at various times throughout the week. Student-hosted sessions were not attended by faculty so that they could have the opportunity to ask questions of one another, share experiences, and build relationships. Faculty-hosted conversations were informal to allow students the opportunity to ask questions, make comments, etc.

**Technology**

Technology was leveraged by using the Blackboard learning management system that students and faculty were already used to in their courses. Faculty recorded asynchronous sessions through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra to upload into the classroom. The synchronous sessions also used Blackboard Collaborate Ultra to break students into breakout groups to deliberate key discussion questions. In Blackboard the tracking statistics function was enabled to be able to capture attendance in both the asynchronous and synchronous sessions. Students were also asked to track the sessions they attended as a backup or if they entered the live sessions as a guest. Microsoft Teams was used to conduct the dissertation oral defense sessions. The Blackboard classroom centralized all content and provided links to external content (i.e. dissertation oral defenses).

**Student Feedback & Results**

Student feedback was gathered both formally and informally on the virtual Immersion. In the *Casual Café* sessions students reported they attended more of the sessions than required because it was spaced out and there were no overlapping sessions unlike at the traditional Immersion Weekend. Students also reported that the asynchronous sessions allowed them to be able to space out the time over the week before the synchronous Immersion Weekend began on Thursday afternoon.

**Quantitative Feedback**

This was the largest Immersion Weekend in the program’s history with 91 students registering for the virtual event, with 76 students (83.5%) earning at least one RAU and 48 (63.2% of those attending) students earning the maximum five RAUs. At the conclusion of the event a survey was sent to students to evaluate areas such as: event communication, theme and agenda, use of technology, networking opportunities with students, networking opportunities with faculty, and individual sessions. The survey used a five-point Likert-type scale: 1) satisfied, 2) somewhat satisfied, 3) neutral, 4) somewhat unsatisfied, and 5) unsatisfied. An additional selection for not applicable was provided to ensure accurate data, therefore, these responses were excluded in the data summary. In addition, a section for open-ended comments was provided. Approximately, 36.8% of the students participating in the virtual Immersion Weekend completed the student survey (28 participants). Overall results indicate students were satisfied with the event (see Table 3).

In comparison the results from the spring 2019 Immersion Weekend had 72 students who registered for the in-person event, with 50 students (69.4%) earning at least one RAU and 14 (28% of those attending) students earning the maximum of five RAUs. Approximately 62% of the students participating in the in-person event completed the student survey (31 participants). Overall results indicate students were satisfied with the event (see Table 5).
Although there were minor improvements in survey results from Spring 2019 to Spring 2020 in key areas such as: communication, theme and agenda, availability/use of technology, and breakout sessions, it is difficult to know whether these improvements were because of the change in format or additional focus in these areas as the online event was being planned. It is also interesting to note that there was only one item in the spring 2020 online Immersion Weekend where students indicated they were somewhat dissatisfied—event communication prior to the event.

**Table 3. Spring 2020 Online Immersion Student Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Event Communication Prior to Event</th>
<th>Theme and Agenda</th>
<th>Availability/Use of Technology</th>
<th>Networking Opportunities with Students</th>
<th>Networking Opportunities with Faculty</th>
<th>Asynchronous Sessions Combined</th>
<th>Synchronous Sessions Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – Satisfied</td>
<td>92.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>73.1%</td>
<td>90.2%</td>
<td>89.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – Somewhat Satisfied</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Neutral</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Somewhat Unsatisfied</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 – Unsatisfied</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4. Spring 2019 In-person Immersion Student Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Event Communication Prior to Event</th>
<th>Theme and Agenda</th>
<th>Availability/Use of Technology</th>
<th>Networking Opportunities with Students</th>
<th>Networking Opportunities with Faculty</th>
<th>Asynchronous Sessions Combined</th>
<th>Breakout Sessions Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 – Satisfied</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td>80.6%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>84.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – Somewhat Satisfied</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>16.1%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – Neutral</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – Somewhat Unsatisfied</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 – Unsatisfied</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Qualitative Feedback**

Generally, students reported that they participated in more sessions than required. The following areas were praised most often:

- One-stop shop nature of the online Immersion—general structure and design of event
- Opportunities for personal connections and online networking
- Flexibility of the blending of asynchronous and synchronous sessions with asynchronous sessions being available during the entire week leading up to Immersion Weekend
• Accessibility for students unable to attend in person – therefore more opportunities for students to “meet” and interact
• Virtual Graduate Recognition Ceremony

Students were also solicited to provide suggestions for future Immersion Weekends. The following student suggestions were provided:
• Opportunities for more virtual programming throughout the year
• More opportunities for live virtual interaction with students and faculty
• Live discussion sessions and corresponding breakout discussions need better coordination, planning, and design
• Determine a way for students to know their attendance is being tracked as they go along
• Better instructions on how to use and navigate Blackboard Collaborate Ultra
• Continued live dissertation oral defense sessions
• The ability to download the presentations for review and reference later

Faculty Feedback Results

Faculty feedback was also gathered both formally and informally on the virtual immersion. At the conclusion of each synchronous session in Blackboard Collaborate Ultra faculty presenters, moderators, and the director could debrief the synchronous session. At the conclusion of the weekend the virtual immersion faculty had a brief after hours meeting via Zoom to provide initial thoughts and comments in an informal forum. Faculty indicated that they were able to watch other faculty presentations and take part in many of the synchronous sessions, not just their own. Faculty also brainstormed doing future virtual programming either through immersion or other mechanisms.

In their formal feedback faculty made the following suggestions:
• Redesign of format live collaboration/discussion sessions, better coordination of breakout groups
• Keep faculty teams, but align them by specialty and allow them to choose the topic during synchronous sessions
• Do more virtual immersions, hybrid immersions, or mini virtual immersions each year
• More thorough faculty training on technology
• Allow asynchronous session recording on platform other than Blackboard Collaborate Ultra as it does not allow for editing, professionalism, etc.
• Offer a discussion board for each recorded session so students/faculty can discuss the topic
• Include more student-led activities
• Have students complete a short survey/questionnaire after watching a recorded session to prove attendance
• When soliciting topic submissions from faculty, include “anchor” sessions to ensure key topics are covered

Contingency Planning

Currently, we have started the planning process for the fall Immersion Weekend with the intention to transition back to campus for an in-person event. However, many states are still under quarantine and social distancing guidelines, therefore we are using contingency planning to move to an online event if needed. Regardless of the format, we are using the survey results and suggestions from both students and faculty to inform the planning process.

Conclusion

From this experience, we have developed some keys learnings going from on-campus to an online program. The following takeaways are important for faculty making the paradigm shift to the virtual environment:
• We had to understand the learner and current circumstances in relation to the pandemic, their work requirements, and the fluidity of the situation.
• We had to offer flexibility in delivery and reasonability in expectations. We found that it would be unreasonable to have students sit in front of their screen 8-hours per day as if they were in an in-person experience.
• We needed to create an experience for maximum engagement for both student-to-student and student-to-faculty.

• We needed to know our objectives/outcomes to ensure that we were still hitting them:
  - To emphasize critical points in the course progression to assure adequate progress is being made on development of research skills and critical analysis capabilities necessary to produce the dissertation.
  - To provide opportunities for students to interact with faculty concerning development of the Qualifying Paper and Dissertation.
  - To provide collegial opportunities for students; wonderful opportunities for socialization with faculty and fellow students; students are given opportunities to network in formal and informal settings
  - To offer a Graduate Recognition Ceremony
    - Inspiration for current students – they can do it too!
    - Shows meaning behind the program
    - Personalizes/personifies the program
    - Pomp and circumstance – reasons to feel pride in their program
  - How we do emulate those goals/outcomes in a virtual setting?
  - Identify those things that are transferrable from one context to another.

• Illustration is highly important in a virtual environment.

• If this was only about transferring knowledge, we could have just done synchronous sessions. However, we realized the importance of student engagement and had to have a mechanism as a conduit for engagement.

Creating and facilitating programming that met our objectives with professional quality standards was one of the most difficult challenges we faced in our program’s history. However, it has been one of the most satisfying and has stretched our boundaries and capabilities in very positive ways. We plan to use the knowledge we have gained to now partner virtual experiences with our traditional programming to enhance student engagement and growth.

Challenges are always opportunities, and personally we believe the Covid-19 pandemic has provided knowledge that will deepen our reach to students.

References


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Effectiveness of a Virtual Option for a Limited-Residency Online Doctoral Program

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Melanie E. Shaw  
Northcentral University  

Abstract  

With the growth of online doctoral programs, administrators are interested in determining the best programmatic structures to support student success. The structures of online doctoral programs vary widely. Some institutions require in-person or virtual residency experiences, while others can be completed entirely online without a synchronous residency requirement. The purpose of this quantitative, ex post facto study was to determine how attending a virtual in-residence affected the progression and completion of students’ doctoral research. The study included an exploration of differences in progression between students who attended virtual, or in-person residencies, or a combination of the two to determine which programming resulted in the highest rates of student completion. This study found that on average students participating in a mix of in-person and virtual residency experiences finished their doctoral degree more quickly than students who attended exclusively in-person or exclusively virtual residency experiences. Future research should be conducted to see if these findings are generalizable to other institutions and also to determine if progression rates differ for students in programs that do not require synchronous, residential learning.

Effectiveness of a Virtual Option for a Limited-Residency Online Doctoral Program  

An important part of many online doctoral programs is the in-person residency experience. In Spring 2020, concerns about the spread of COVID-19 forced many higher education institutions into an immediate transition to online delivery, including limited-residency doctoral programs. Thus, it is timely to consider the experience of one institution that has been offering a virtual option to online doctoral students who could not attend in-person residences since 2016.

In a previous study comparing on-campus and hybrid delivery in a doctoral program, researchers found no significant difference in student outcomes based on students’ GPA and comprehensive exam performance (Mu et al., 2014). Other researchers have identified student and faculty perspectives of on-campus experiences in limited-residency graduate programs (Hardin-Pierce et al., 2020; Yourous, 2020). However, there is little published research about the effectiveness of such in-residences, or whether virtual delivery of the face-to-face residency requirement results in different student outcomes.

The purpose of this quantitative ex post facto study was to determine how attending divergent formats of synchronous in-residences affected the progression and completion of online students’ doctoral research. As such, the guiding research question was:

RQ1. What differences, if any, exist in doctoral research progression and milestone completion of students who attended in-person, virtual and a combination of in-person and virtual residency experiences?
Literature Review

Blended and hybrid are both terms used to define learning in one or more delivery modes (McGee & Reis, 2012). Doctoral students require direct instruction to develop academic and professional competencies (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016). Online doctoral programs commonly supplement online course delivery with in-person orientations, residences, and other workshops to support competencies needed for learning to conduct independent research. Blended learning is pedagogically suitable for such courses, which may be less structured and tailored to teach aspects of research in graduate degree programs (Bower et al., 2015).

Bates (2019) defined a blended learning mode as any mix of technology with face-to-face instruction. Faculty and students interact in mixed delivery formats to accomplish pedagogically supported learning outcomes through teaching, learning, and assessment activities (McGee & Reis, 2012). Lakhal et al. (2017) identified four advantages and three challenges of implementing blended delivery in a graduate program. Advantages included: (a) flexibility and access, (b) quality of learning experience, (c) enhanced learning outcomes, and (d) institutional benefits; while challenges included: (a) course design, (b) student relationships, and (c) technology issues.

Implementing blended course delivery has been shown to reduce feelings of isolation of online students by allowing students to get to know each other more fully than when all instruction is conducted asynchronously (Cunningham, 2014). Students enrolled in blended, synchronous courses reported higher levels of social presence due to real-time, spontaneous, and dynamic communications (Bower et al., 2015; Cunningham, 2014). Increased program completion rates have been seen in research with Australian and Swedish college students, who have synchronous interactions with faculty and other students, as compared to those who only have asynchronous communication (Bower et al., 2014; Norberg, 2012). Blended learning can include both asynchronous and synchronous formats, including contexts where remote students participate in face-to-face classes by way of rich-media technologies such as video conferencing, web conferencing, and virtual worlds (Bower et al., 2015).

To ensure institutional viability, online doctoral-granting programs must monitor completion and time to completion data to promote student success (Shaw et al, 2016; Shaw et al, 2015). Online doctoral candidates present unique challenges, including life constraints, that hinder program completion (Yasmin, 2013). Researchers have explored reasons why students in doctoral programs do not complete their degrees. Reasons for attrition include issues with time management, personal constraints, and academic challenges (Zepke & Leach, 2010; Shaw et al, 2016). As such, institutions struggle to provide the most appropriate academic environments and interventions to help online doctoral students make continual progress and complete their doctoral research.

Doctoral programs should include administrative support for students failing to make adequate progress (Leijen et al., 2016). Online doctoral students often feel isolated and abandoned and so these supports should be tailored to promote collaboration and engagement (Erichsen et al., 2014). Doctoral students need direct instruction to develop academic and professional competencies (Godskesen & Kobayashi, 2016). In person or virtual intensive residencies or workshops may provide students with individualized instruction to support competencies needed for doctoral degree progression.

Methodology

At the institution where this study was conducted, online doctoral students complete regular coursework in an asynchronous online format and attend independent research preparation sessions in synchronous 3-day In-Residence Workshops held at the school’s campus. In 2016, the school introduced 2-day virtual, synchronous In-Residence Workshops for students who could not attend the in-person sessions. These sessions were hosted on the Zoom platform to allow for synchronous engagement with faculty and students.

Data were gathered for this ex post facto, quantitative study over three years.

The archival data included the following variables:

1. All Ground: Defined as only attending in-person residency experiences.
2. All Virtual: Defined as attending only virtual residency experiences.
3. Mixed: Defined as attending at least on in-person and one virtual residency experience.
4. Average Weeks (Wks) to LOI (Letter of Intent)/PJT (Project Justification Template): Defined as average number of weeks to obtain approval for the first doctoral research milestone after coursework.
5. Average Weeks (Wks) to Proposal: Defined as the average number of weeks to obtain approval for the doctoral research proposal after coursework.
6. Average Weeks (Wks) to Final: Defined as the average number of weeks to obtain approval for the doctoral research manuscript after coursework.

To determine whether a statistical effect between the three groups (in-person, virtual, mixed) occurred between the three dependent variables (weeks to the three doctoral milestones), a two-way ANOVA with replication was conducted in Excel.

Results

RQ1. What differences, if any, exist in doctoral research progression and milestone completion of students who attended in-person, virtual, and a combination of in-person and virtual residency experiences?

Table 1. Results

ANOVA: Two-Factor without Replication

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ANOVA

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These results suggest that on average students participating in a mix of in-person or virtual residency experiences finished their doctoral degree more quickly than students who attended exclusively in-person or exclusively virtual residency experiences.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results from this study support a comprehensive approach to programming aspects of limited in-residency online doctoral curricula. The findings reveal that residential components of the program may facilitate student progression toward completing their doctoral research. Specifically, increased faculty engagement with students through participation in virtual or blended intensive workshops may predict progression and promote student completion.
An assumption was made that student characteristics in all three populations studied – virtual, in-person, and mixed attendees – were similar. However, it is possible that the students who chose to attend virtual in-residences, and subsequently demonstrated quicker time to completion of their overall project, may be more autodidactic. The fact that they would prefer a virtual online environment to an in-person experience for their doctoral in-residency could be the result of being more comfortable in a more self-directed format. This idea supports Kasworm and Bowles’s (2010) conclusions on the importance for doctoral students to master self-directed learning skills, as well as the importance of self-directed orientation in adult students (Khiat, 2017) and online learning (Cigdem & Ozturk, 2016).

Online doctoral program administrators may want to build upon this knowledge by expanding the use of virtual and online options for limited in-residency components of their programs. Overall, other online doctoral degree granting institutions should build on these results and what is demonstrated as best practices in online doctoral education to further facilitate student success. The next step for future research includes replicating this study in other limited in-residency online doctoral programs to ensure the findings are generalizable.

References


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Non-Traditional Online Transfer Students' Expectations and Experiences with Student Services

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Abstract

Non-traditional undergraduate students have unique experiences and needs for student services when they transfer into online programs. This narrative qualitative study highlighted voices of non-traditional students who transferred into the only undergraduate online degree-completion program at a research I institution. Three research questions guided this study exploring online students’ expectations and experiences of student services and students’ overall perception of their collegiate experience based on their interactions with student services. Data was collected through in-depth semi structured interviews and the analysis and interpretation of findings were organized using Polkinghorne’s (1995) narrative of analysis and analysis of narratives. This research revealed four themes of the participants’ expectations and experiences (1) access (2) engagement, and (3) inclusion. Pride (4), revealed how students’ interactions with student services influenced their overall perception of the institution and their educational experience. Using Burgoon’s (1995) expectancy violations theory, two sub-themes: (a) disconnections and (b) connections emerged as negative and positive experiences from the second theme of engagement.

Introduction

Student support services are designed to help students transition to college and are vital to learner success (Schuh et al., 2016) and students’ overall satisfaction with their collegiate experience (LaPadula, 2003; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Institutions have traditionally handled student services for distance education as an add-on to on-campus services, which worked well when online programs and courses had smaller enrollment numbers. However, as institutions serve larger numbers of non-traditional students, traditional student services solutions are no longer feasible (Schlissberg et al., 1989; Smith, 2016) and many student services should be completely redesigned to include serving distance learners (Dirr, 1999).

Problem Statement

Non-traditional undergraduate students have to navigate their entire collegiate experience virtually when they transfer into online programs at institutions that primarily cater to traditional-aged campus-based students (Dumais et al., 2013; Zirkle, 2004). Tasks such as accessing the online classroom, campus resources, and student services are not easy to navigate online. Research demonstrates these students are more likely to drop out and less likely to persist (Astin 1984, Bean & Metzner, Britto & Rush, 2013; Tinto, 1987) and additional studies have shown there is a lack of support at the college level for nontraditional students. Online adult learners, as a subset of the non-traditional student population, may be lacking even more support (Fairchild 2003; Hittepole, 2016; Lorenzo, 2015). Adult students may hold different expectations about their needs for education services (Boudreaux & Schoenack, 2016; Chen, 2017; LaPadula, 2003). Traditional campus students are surrounded by resources and programs to help them adjust to college, in contrast, some online adult learners feel isolated at these institutions (Dirr, 1999; Major & Summer, 2018; Visser & Visser, 2000). Student Services offices are typically closed during the hours that online adult learners—who often work full-time—are available to use them (Gast, 2013; Hadfield, 2003). MacDonald (2018) stated, “adult learners typically cannot alter their lives to fit some schools’ fixed schedules, so they prefer to find institutions where the programs, services, extracurricular, and employees can adjust to their lives” (p. 161). Considering all of the recommendations for these growing populations, there is a tremendous lack of research on the expectations and experiences of undergraduate online adult transfer students.
Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand non-traditional undergraduate students’ expectations and experiences with student services when they transfer into the only undergraduate online program at a research I university that typically caters its student services to the traditional-aged campus-based student. The experiences of these students may impact attrition, persistence, and overall satisfaction with their educational experience and of the institution.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are non-traditional students’ expectations of student services before they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large research I land-grant university?

2. What are non-traditional students’ experiences with student services after they transfer into the only online undergraduate program at a large research I land-grant university?

3. How do non-traditional students feel their interactions with student services impacted their overall experience at the large research I land-grant university?

Theoretical Framework

Expectancy violations theory (EVT) provided the framework for this study. EVT (Burgoon, 1978) is an interpersonal communication theory that attempts to explain people’s reactions to anticipated and unanticipated behavior. Figure 1 provides a visual illustration of the theoretical framework.

Figure 1. Adapted Depiction of EVT Theoretical Framework

The EVT framework was used to determine if non-traditional undergraduate online transfer student's expectations of student services at a traditional research I institution were positive or negative, while also investigating if a positive violation of an expectation produced a more desirable experience.

Methodology

This study used a narrative qualitative research design to determine if online non-traditional students’ needs were being met. This qualitative approach implies an emphasis on exploration, discovery, description, and explanation of a complex situation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The use of narrative inquiry helped to explore how undergraduate nontraditional online transfer students narrated their expectations and experiences of student services.
Data Sources

The participants were non-traditional online students from the Leadership in the Public Sector (LPS) program, the only undergraduate online degree-completion program at North Carolina State University, that primarily provides services to the traditional-aged campus student.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected using in-depth, semi-structured open-ended interviews via Zoom. The interviews were manually transcribed and analyzed using Polkinghorne’s (1995) two types of paradigmatic narrative research for data analysis. Research questions 1 and 3 used narrative analysis where data was collected and synthesized into stories. Research question 2 used analysis of narratives where stories were collected and analyzed with a paradigmatic process.

Findings

There were three overarching themes across all three research questions: (1) access, (2) engagement, and (3) inclusion, and a fourth theme, pride also emerged from research question 3. The participants’ revealed they had “access” to more services than expected that were shared via email communication or through online tutorials and websites created for them. They experienced “engaging” encounters with like-minded classmates, course content that was relevant to their career, and instructors within their program area who provided effective teaching strategies and course designs. However, they also experienced some “disconnections” in courses that had outdated lectures or instructors who they felt did not understand adult learner characteristics. They shared many unexpected positive experiences and “connections” with advising, financial aid, the career center, and quality online courses from instructors who put forth a lot of effort in providing quality online education. Moreover, they were presented with many opportunities or invitations to be a part of the campus community physically by attending events or joining clubs and organizations, virtually through online services or workshops, and within their class discussions with younger classmates, which ultimately contributed to their sense of “inclusion” at the university.

The overwhelming access, engagement, and inclusion the participants experienced contributed to their overall sense of belonging and pride in being an alum of the university, even as an online student. The services provided made them feel like they were a part of a larger community they are proud of and willing to boast to others. As a result, a fourth theme of pride emerged to reveal the overall feeling the students had based on the impact student services had on their collegiate experience and the institution.

The second theme of engagement also uncovered the two sub themes of disconnections and connections that surfaced from the unexpected negative and positive experiences the participants had with student services, which related to the theoretical framework used in this study, EVT (1995). With the participants’ overwhelming sense of belonging from their met expectations with student services, it was clear that the vast connections outweighed their disconnections and impacted their overall positive experience and pride.

Implications for Practice

Access. Higher education institutions should offer more online programs targeting non-traditional students who are looking for reputable in-state schools to meet needed credentials by employers. Programs should provide online access to services via user-friendly websites and video tutorials to allow non-traditional students the opportunity to access needed services on their own time.

Engagement. Universities should offer relevant programs and curricula with content non-traditional students can put into practice immediately in their workplace.

Disconnections. Universities offering online courses and programs should provide training for quality online design and instruction for all instructors. Institutions should consider offering prior learning credit to non-traditional students who have years of relevant work experience in the intended degree field.

Connections. Institutions offering online courses and programs should inform the entire campus community of non-traditional online transfer students’ unique learning characteristics and needs. Institutions should also hire
knowledgeable student services professionals who can create strong relationships and innovative services for the students in the degree programs.

**Inclusion.** Universities should include non-traditional online students on university email updates, advertising campaigns, and invite them to participate in campus events and activities both virtually and in person. Activities and spaces should be created for them to feel included and a part of the larger campus community.

**Pride.** Opportunities should be provided for non-traditional online students to remain connected to the degree program and their fellow peers, as well as present opportunities to give back to the university and campus community.

**Significance**

There is an increase of non-traditional students in higher education and many schools are establishing online courses and programs to meet students’ needs. Traditional brick and mortar schools that typically cater to campus students are included in this influx (Gast, 2013; Smith, 2016). Findings support that non-traditional online students are different, and institutions offering online education should consider the differences of adult students when designing online learning environments (Chen, 2015, Panacci, 2015; Kasworm, 2003).

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Creating Community: Providing Support for Online Learners

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Abstract

In order to build community for students in the online learning environment, we must first determine their needs for support. This means recognizing and giving value to the context of the virtual college campus. In this paper, we use Garrison’s Community of Inquiry framework to identify how to create a sense of community. We will discuss our strategies for building community in two new online programs.

Introduction

Online education continues to increase in the United States over the past several years (Seaman et al., 2018). However, online programs are still experiencing challenges with attrition rates (Robichaud, 2016; Russo-Gleicher, 2013; Rovai, 2003; Shaw et al., 2016; Sorenson & Donovan, 2017). There are several factors that contribute to students’ attrition from online courses. Willging and Johnson (2009) categorized the factors as: personal-, job-, program-, or technology-related. Similarly, Bonilla Murillo (2020) identified four categories: internal, external, faculty, and student-related factors (p. 25). Through an extensive literature review, Lee and Choi (2011) identified three categories that contributed to high attrition rates: students, courses/programs, and environmental factors. In some cases, these factors are beyond the control of the institution and the student. However, other factors are directly related to the course, program, or institutional resources and could be mitigated by the faculty and administration.

Several research studies look further into the institutional factors that affect the retention of online students. Sorensen and Donovan (2017) provided insight into why students decide to withdraw from online programs, mentioning lack of institutional support and limited technological infrastructure as deciding factors. Moreover, Russo-Gleicher (2013) noted that technical problems and lack of structure contribute to attrition from online courses. Travers (2016) also noted a lack of institutional structure, as well as a lack of teaching support from the administration. If one of the greatest factors in student retention is institutional support and structure (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Travers, 2016) and connections to the institution, then institutions need to be proactive in how they approach these services. Many online students may be physically separated from campus, so they may not be using the student support services available to them (Russo-Gleicher, 2013) or even be aware that they exist if they are not integrated into the online student experience (Heyman, 2010). This may also lead to a lack of feeling of being a part of the institution and can contribute to feelings of isolation and alienation (Rovai, 2003; Rovai & Whiting, 2005).

Creating a sense of community for online students so they do not feel so disconnected from others (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009) is key. Therefore, it is critical to identify how to create this sense of community.

Framework

Garrison’s Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a model for effective online education that focuses on the collaborative learning environment in which dialogue, interaction, and collaboration is at the forefront (Garrison et al., 2000). The CoI framework suggests that a learner community is fostered when social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence are high. These three elements are described below.
Social presence is “the ability of participants in a community to project themselves socially and emotionally” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 94). Teaching presence is the ability of the teacher to create a sense of connection with students. Cognitive presence is the ability to make connections between the course content and real-world applications.

Creating a Sense of Community

One important factor positively associated with CoI is sense of community (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). The engagement between students, content, and instructors is key for creating a sense of community (Scoppio & Luyt, 2017). Community fosters collaboration and improved learning outcomes and students feel like they belong when they have shared goals (Murdock & Williams, 2011).

Researchers have depicted how a sense of community can be created through a variety of ways, including through connecting students with support services (Russo-Gleicher, 2013; Stewart et al., 2013), diverse technological tools (Barry, 2017; Delmas, 2017), virtual orientations (Robichaud, 2016; Rose, 2018), peer knowledge sharing (Waycott et al., 2013), and collaborative learning, sharing personal experiences, and active discussions in courses (Barry, 2017; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012; Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016). By creating these environments and learning how to foster them, students can feel like they are supported and are connected to each other (Moore, 2014).

Connecting Students with Support Services

As noted previously, student support services may be under-utilized (Russo-Gleicher, 2013) due to students not knowing that they have access or that these resources even exist (Heyman, 2010). Students need to receive support from all aspects of the institution, including financial aid, academic advising, counseling, and tutoring (Heyman, 2010). Stewart et al. (2013) identified several areas for student support in the following areas: admissions and registration, advising, orientation (to the university and to online learning), academic support services, scholarships and awards, library resources, computing and technology resources, articulation and transfer from other institutions, career placement, and communication (p. 290). The researchers further identified who was responsible for providing these services at the course level, the department/college level and the university level. Using these resources can have a positive effect on retention rates (Swett, 2016).

Virtual Orientations

The first few weeks of a course are the most critical for establishing social presence (Lahaie, 2007). Similarly, at the beginning of a program is also a critical time to orient students to the expectations of the university, college/department, and program. Robichaud (2016) described the importance of not only including the logistics of how to access various student services across campus, but also to offer the orientation at the appropriate time for working adults. The impact of these virtual orientations can be great. Stoebe and Grebing (2020) conducted a small study with students and faculty and found that there was an increase in student retention and that withdrawals decreased. Students also agreed that they were more prepared to begin classes. Rose (2018) found that utilization of student support services increased after the implementation of a virtual orientation.

Faculty Support

Additional training for faculty is critical in several areas because faculty are essential to the success of online students (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004). In some cases, they may be the only point of contact that a student has had. If faculty want to integrate new technology, they may need additional computer training (Barry, 2017). They may also need to become more familiar with the resources available on-campus in order to provide that information to students. Faculty need to be supportive of their students, which means reaching out through phone calls and emails to check-in (Kranzow, 2013). They need to be warm, welcoming, and inclusive of all students in order to create a positive and engaging learning experience (Barry, 2017). On-going academic advising may need to take place throughout the semester (Lee & Choi, 2011) in order to keep students on track, recognize where students are struggling, and to help build community for student engagement online.

Course Design
The course design also plays a key role. Incorporating assessments such as portfolios and reflection journals (Kranzow, 2013) or providing opportunities for personal introductions, collaborative group projects, and opportunities to discuss personal experiences and exchange resources (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012) also contribute to a sense of community online. In addition, Waycott et al. (2013) identified peer knowledge sharing through discussion boards where students are posting and providing feedback to each other.

Cohort Model

Cohort models can be quite beneficial for students starting an online program (Lee & Choi, 2011). One of the first steps to creating a successful cohort model is to define the parameters of the cohort, such as identifying how many students can be enrolled in the program per class at any given time. This number needs to be manageable for the faculty and the sustainability of the program. Then work toward steps to create a safer space within the classroom. Holley and Steiner (2005) defined a safer classroom space as a “classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors” (p. 50). Cohort models aid in building student identity and can be effective retention tools (Plavchan, 2020). When students enroll in the same classes and encounter a shared learning experience, academic outcomes are improved.

What We Did

As program directors for two fully online graduate-level programs, we implemented a number of the activities mentioned above. One program was in its infancy, while the other program had been established for three-and-a-half years. We are also the only full-time faculty for each of these programs, so we are responsible for recruitment, admissions, advising, and marketing.

One important note is to really identify the needs of the students and know who they are. This will determine what will work and what might not work. In one case, one of the authors conducted an alumni survey to be able to identify where the gaps were with the program. In both programs, we have full-time working adults, so having an orientation during the day may not be well attended.

In addition, we have each worked to create program resources and activities specific to our individual programs that can be used to retain students and build a sense of community. These include, but are not limited to:

- Hosting an online orientation
- Creating a program handbook with links and phone numbers to various campus resources
- Giving students the opportunity to create a “virtual campus space” for themselves
- Using assessment pieces to showcase students work (portfolio)
- Connecting students with alumni/community partners
- Creating professional development opportunities with guest speakers from the field
- Partnering with eLearning to create consistent course design across the program within the LMS

Conclusion

In order to reduce attrition rates and create a strong online program, it is vital to have a well-developed retention plan and to create a sense of community. This can best be accomplished by providing connections to student support services, hosting a well-planned virtual orientation, having robust faculty support systems, having solid course designs, and using a cohort recruitment model.

References


Bonilla Murillo, E. (2020). *The experience of online sense of community of students and how it affects their decision to withdraw from online education* [Doctoral dissertation, City University of Seattle]. City University of Seattle. https://repository.cityu.edu/handle/20.500.11803/982


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Instructor Communication, or Academic Coaching, to Facilitate Student Engagement

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Abstract

This presentation will describe the results of a posttest-only control group study (N = 173) examining the effect of instructor communication, or academic coaching, on social, cognitive, and teaching presence within a large online course, as measured by the Community of Inquiry Survey (Arbaugh et al., 2008).

Introduction

More than ever, institutions of higher learning are offering fully online courses to meet educational demands, amplifying the need for effective teaching strategies to ensure student success. Quality instructional design and course delivery require increased effort from the online instructor; likewise, the online learner has come to understand that online education requires commitment to succeed (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Furthermore, online instructors must consider how best to engage students. Instructor-student interaction is the most time-consuming aspect of online teaching and probably the most important. Quality instructional design, course delivery, and instructor-student interaction are correlated to the three elements (cognitive, social, and teaching presence) defined within the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework, a model widely used for the investigation of quality online learning and teaching (Avery et al., 2020; Garrison, 2011). When effectively aligned, these three elements have the potential to enhance student success.

Significance

Because student success and student achievement are interconnected, early identification of poor performing students is key. Appropriate and timely instructor-learner communication, or academic coaching, might improve student engagement, resulting in improved student success and achievement. The consensus of existing research indicates increased instructor-learner interaction leads to student success. Yet, student success results from more than a single instructor-learner interaction; it is the result of a culture promoted within the classroom (Frazer et al., 2017; Romano, 2018). Of specific interest to this study was the impact of online instructor-learner communication on the differences in cognitive, social, and teaching presence as reported by participants in a control group compared to those in an experimental group.

Methodology

This quantitative research used a posttest-only control group design to explore the following research hypothesis: students who receive additional instructor-learner communication, or academic coaching, after scoring 85% or less on any assessment will report increased cognitive, social, and teaching presence. Cognitive, social, and teaching presence (CP, SP, and TP) were measured for both experimental and control group participants using the CoI Survey Instrument (draft v14) (Arbaugh et al., 2008).

Participants were randomly divided into control and experimental groups. An instructor-learner communication, or academic coaching, strategy was implemented with the experimental group participants. Each time a student within the experimental group scored less than 85% on any assessment, a personal email communication was sent to the student in addition to the grading rubric feedback provided to all students. The CoI survey was administered via
Qualtrics during the last week of the course to both groups. Collected data were de-identified prior to analysis. This same process was used to gather data for two cohorts, during Fall 2019 (Cohort 1, n = 65) and Fall 2020 (Cohort 2, n = 108).

Results

Internal-consistency reliability, as measured by Cronbach’s α was greater than 0.70 for the overall CoI survey (Cronbach’s α = 0.96), the CP subscale (Cronbach’s α = 0.95), the SP subscale (Cronbach’s α = 0.82), and the TP subscale (Cronbach’s α = 0.96). The Kaiser Meyer-Olkin Measure (KMO = 0.95) and the Bartlett’s test of sphericity (H0: No common factors; p-value < 0.0001) indicated that the sample was adequate for a factor analysis. The factor analysis including all 34 survey items resulted in four factors accounting for over 70% of the cumulative variance of the model. The sample size satisfied the minimal sample size requirements of five times the number of variables to obtain reliable results (Streiner, 1994). A 5-point Likert scale was used for all responses. All statistical analyses were conducted using SAS 9.4 (SAS Institute, Inc). All statistical tests were two-sided and were performed at significance level of 0.05.

Based on bivariate proportional odds regression, no significant differences were discovered, in the odds of higher versus lower responses, between the experimental and control groups. However, multiple proportional odds regressions revealed significant differences in the odds of higher versus lower responses in four of the TP subscale questions. See Table 1.

Table 1.
Significant Differences Between Experimental and Control Groups, CoI Teaching Presence Subscale Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>OR (95% CI) for higher vs. lower response levels (LL, UL)</th>
<th>p-value *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental vs. Control group</td>
<td>5.67 (1.50, 21.41)</td>
<td>0.0104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time vs. part-time enrollment in the module</td>
<td>5.74 (1.99, 16.58)</td>
<td>0.0012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction effect: Group*Module</td>
<td>1.75 (1.18, 2.59)</td>
<td>0.0057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time enrollment</td>
<td>0.61 (0.26, 1.43)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time enrollment</td>
<td>5.67 (1.50, 21.40)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental vs. Control group</td>
<td>0.77 (0.33, 1.76)</td>
<td>0.5281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort Fall 2019 vs. Fall 2020</td>
<td>0.74 (0.27, 1.99)</td>
<td>0.5485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction effect: Group*Cohort</td>
<td>4.95 (1.07, 22.89)</td>
<td>0.0405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort Fall 2019</td>
<td>3.79 (1.05, 13.65)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort Fall 2020</td>
<td>0.76 (0.33, 1.76)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multivariable proportional odds regression model for the question: "The instructor provided clear instructions on how to participate in course learning activities."

Multivariable proportional odds regression model for the question: "The instructor was helpful in identifying areas of agreement and disagreement on course topics that helped me to learn."
Effect | OR (95% CI) for higher vs. lower response levels (LL, UL) | p-value *
--- | --- | ---
Experimental vs. Control group in Full-time enrollment | 0.66 (0.30, 1.45) | 0.52
Experimental vs. Control group in Part-time enrollment | 3.24 (1.01, 10.35) | 0.03

Multivariable proportional odds regression model for the question: "*The instructor was helpful in guiding the class towards understanding course topics in a way that helped me clarify my thinking.*"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>p-value *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental vs. Control group in Full-time vs. part-time enrollment in the module</td>
<td>0.92 (0.31, 2.78)</td>
<td>0.8857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort Fall 2019 vs. Fall 2020</td>
<td>0.33 (0.12, 0.92)</td>
<td>0.0348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction effect: Group*Module</td>
<td>0.17 (0.04, 0.86)</td>
<td>0.0312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction effect: Group*Cohort</td>
<td>6.18 (1.29, 29.55)</td>
<td>0.0224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Multivariable proportional odds regression model for the question: "*Instructor actions reinforced the development of a sense of community among course participants.*"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>p-value *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental vs. Control group in Full-time enrollment and Cohort Fall 2019</td>
<td>1.51 (0.40, 5.69)</td>
<td>0.653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time vs. part-time enrollment and Cohort Fall 2020</td>
<td>0.24 (0.08, 0.74)</td>
<td>0.0348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental vs. Control group in Part-time enrollment and Cohort Fall 2019</td>
<td>8.58 (1.70, 43.31)</td>
<td>0.0224</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>p-value *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental vs. Control group in Part-time enrollment and Cohort Fall 2020</td>
<td>1.39 (0.33, 5.80)</td>
<td>0.0068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>OR (95% CI)</th>
<th>p-value *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experimental vs. Control group</td>
<td>2.17 (1.03, 4.56)</td>
<td>0.0418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>0.95 (0.92, 0.99)</td>
<td>0.0068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a Wald chi-square test

Note. N = 173. CI = confidence level; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

Discussion

The use of multiple proportional odds regression analyses resulted in significant differences in the odds of higher versus lower responses for four questions from the TP subscale of the CoI survey. Anderson et al. (2001) defined teaching presence as the "design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes (p. 5). Within a CoI based concept map, Van Schie (2008) connected the existing concept of teaching presence to three integrated dimensions: instructional design, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. This study’s significant results can be related to two of those dimensions.

Instructional Design

For the question "*The instructor provided clear instructions on how to participate in course learning activities,*" part-time students, enrolled in the experimental group, reported 5.67 times higher versus lower responses. The Cohort 1 experimental group participants similarly reported 3.79 times higher versus lower responses on the same question. This result is supported by research indicating clarity and alignment in online course design is foundational.
for a positive educational experience for learners (Avery et al., 2020; Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Hajibayova, 2017).

**Facilitating Discourse**

For the question “The instructor was helpful in identifying areas of agreement and disagreement on course topics that helped me to learn,” part-time students, from both cohorts, enrolled in the experimental group, reported 3.24 times higher versus lower responses. This result is supported by mixed-methods research stating students are more interested in the connection formed with their instructor over one formed with their peers (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018).

For the question “The instructor was helpful in guiding the class towards understanding course topics in a way that helped me clarify my thinking,” full-time students, enrolled in the Cohort 1 experimental group, reported 76% lower versus higher responses. These results for Cohort 1 experimental group students were unexpected and difficult to understand when the same group of students reported higher versus lower responses on a similar question about clear instructions provided by the instructor. The communication sent to all students in the experimental group earning less than 85% on any assessment was an invitation to seek instructor help, or academic coaching. This type of written communication is thought to communicate instructor credibility and caring to the student (Gardner et al., 2017). Further investigation of this is merited since this result is not supported by other research findings. And for the same question, part-time students enrolled in Cohort 2, reported 8.58 times higher versus lower responses. These results are similarly significant to observations by part-time students for two other questions. Part-time graduate students are usually working professionals and their desire for course content relevant to their professional roles has been documented (Ho & Kember, 2018). Furthermore, in other research, a moderately strong correlation was reported between TP and perceived learning (Caskurlu et al., 2020).

For the question “Instructor actions reinforced the development of a sense of community among course participants,” the odds or higher versus lower responses was two times higher in the experimental versus the control group, controlling for the effect of students’ age. These results are supported by similar findings where academic coaching, or co-teaching, resulted in higher ratings of SP, CP, and SP (Abbitt et al., 2018). Faculty members who attempt to relate to students, model suitable connections, and offer encouragement are considered caring by students (Jones et al., 2020). When course facilitation encourages the co-construction of knowledge, learning occurs (Lohr & Haley, 2017). Lastly, in meta-analysis research, teaching presence and student satisfaction were reported to be strongly correlated (Caskurlu et al., 2020).

**Limitations**

Among the limitations for the study is the posttest-only design does not account for the simultaneous and complex interaction of the other potential variables within the online classroom. Another unforeseeable potential impact was longitudinal data was collected over two years, with Cohort 1 data gathered pre-COVID-19 pandemic.

**Conclusion**

The significant results found in this study support the existence of the three dimensions of teaching presence related to increased instructor-learner communication. While these results cannot be deemed as universal, they do provide evidence of instructor communication, or academic coaching, as a useful way to engage online students.

**References**


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Implementing a Proctoring Service for Online Exams

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Abstract

As distance learning in higher education becomes more prevalent, so requires online proctoring during exam time. Online exam proctoring systems bring many advantages to both the student and the academic institution by allowing students to take exams on their computers from any location. Prior to Fall 2020, Fort Valley State University had not integrated a proctoring service for administering online exams but our stakeholders saw the need and decided to implement a comprehensive proctoring solution. After a review of several services, the university adopted Examity. This proctoring service was integrated into the learning management system within two weeks.

Introduction

During the impact of COVID-19, higher education institutions and its students found themselves rushed into online proctoring situations. Fort Valley State University (FVSU) was no exception of this impact. This paper will reflect on how needs were addressed, what worked well and what did not, and how the university improved upon online proctoring strategies.

During the spring 2020 semester the pandemic left many University System of Georgia Institutions (USG) scrambling to move to online proctoring due to a shutdown to manage the spread of the virus. The closure during the spring and summer semesters of 2020, limited the ability to continue with in-person testing. As a result, institutions were left with a harsh decision, move testing online or quickly reconceptualize assessment methods. This was particularly a concern in STEM related classes with fact-based assessments. The adoption of a comprehensive, remote proctoring system addressed both the short- and long-term need to ensure the academic integrity of traditional exams delivered online.

Literature Review

How to Determine the Right Platform

Distance learning in higher education has become more prevalent; therefore, the need for online proctoring during exam time is just as important. Online exams proctoring systems brings many advantages to both the student and the academic institution by allowing students to take exams on their computers from any location. The right online proctoring solution ensures that the academic integrity of a student taking an exam online is the same as that of a student sitting in front of a live proctor in a classroom or testing center. Institutions implementing online proctoring generally seek to accomplish two main goals: curtail cheating during online exams and providing a better test-taker experience. For an online proctoring platform to accomplish those goals and be supported by the various stakeholders in academia, it should fulfill four basic principles: It must instill greater exam integrity; it must be cost-effective; it must be convenient; and it must be safe and secure. It is essential to provide online security for students. Students and the institution must be comfortable that the proctoring platform and the people behind it are professional and responsible. If online proctoring solution and data collection is not secure, there is a risk that the student population will not adopt it, which can lead to increasing institutional operating costs and in turn, lead to a lack of program integrity. (PSI, 2019).

The staff of Online Learning at FVSU researched many proctoring service products; however, the determining factors would need to ensure the proctoring system must:

1. Authenticate the identity of the student and monitor real-time exams.
2. Include a model that allows a greater number of tests to be monitored by a smaller amount of resources. The administration did not want the students to incur additional charges for this service; therefore, a funding source had to be put in place to cover the cost of all proctored exams.

3. Be flexible and take the students’ lifestyles into consideration. This meant a live proctor may not be required for testing but allows the student to take the exam at any hour or location.

4. Ensure the security of the data. The university must feel comfortable that the people behind the platform are professional and responsible as well as provide technical support to the students to ensure a smooth proctoring experience.

5. Provide smooth integration into the university’s learning management system (LMS), Brightspace by D2L which allows the faculty and students to utilize a platform with which they were familiar.

6. Have already gone through a vetting process and approved, which would make it easier to meet the shorter timeline than is usual for integrations. The USG Georgiaview Integration Team would ensure that the proctoring service has completed the questionnaire that addresses data handling and security questions. The documentation would be reviewed to see how Examity addresses data security and support for the client.

The Process of Integrating Examity

The Examity Team provided a timeline that depicts a 4-week process which was divided into 4 stages that are noted in the Examity Implementation Timeline; however, due to FVSU needing to go live during the week final exams the target date had to move to full implementation within 2 weeks.

- **Stage 1**: This was the Kick-off meeting, October 30, 2020 with all the stakeholders who would integrate the product into the LMS. During this stage, the Examity representatives; USG Georgiaview Integration Team, and Online Learning staff at FVSU were able define the requirements of the LMS and determine the flow of the integration along with course reviews. It was determined that the university would proctor approximately 600 or more exams during the final exam week which was November 19-23, 2020. This also included proctored exams for the graduating seniors whose exams were offered early in some cases.

- **Stage 2**: This included an Examity setup, during the week of November 2, 2020 within the LMS which included a test simulation plan as well as courses, exams and student data automation setup. This process was not as strenuous since Examity had been implemented as an integration within Brightspace at other USG Institutions.

- **Stage 3**: During the week of November 9, 2020 which was the start of the system validation and testing included completing many internal test cycles in which test courses were identified in the LMS and configured for the Examity Proctoring Service by adding as an external linking tool. There were modules created into the courses that served as the starting point for the faculty and students who would utilize the product. These modules included an instructor’s guide for connecting their Brightspace Quiz to the Examity Proctoring; a student’s guide as to how to set up their account with Examity as well as technical requirements for their device; an external tool link that served as the access for instructors and students to log into Examity. Once the product and the LMS successfully passed all tests, an email was sent to department chairs to alert faculty as to how they would proceed if they choose to proctor their exams through Examity Proctoring Service.

- **Stage 4**: During the week of November 13th the product was launch into production and faculty were provided training through virtual delivery. Modules that included users’ guides and video tutorials were copied by the staff of Online Learning into every course that utilizes the product to ensure the instructors and students would be prepare for this new experience.
Advantages of Using as an Integration

In a blog posted by PSI Testing Excellence on May, 27, 2020 entitled: 6 Things that One Should Know about Online Proctoring and the LMS Integration can be utilized to depict FVSU’s Brightspace Environment and Examity LTI Experience.

-First, keep it familiar: Utilizing the existing learning management system, Brightspace by D2L which had been implemented at FVSU around 2012 provided a comfort level as well as reduced the stress. Faculty had already been administering exams within Brightspace and the students were very much familiar whether in a face-to-face environment; hybrid or fully online.

-Second, ensure system compatibility: Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI): Brightspace by D2L utilizes the LTI process to integrate with the Examity Proctoring Service. This made the process more secure and faster in getting it fully implemented in the rapid turnaround time needed for the university. The staff of Online Learning at FVSU was
familiar with this type of integration which other products have been integrated into the LMS (i.e. Turn-IT-In; ReadSpeaker; Collaborate Ultra; Kaltura; Gradescope; McGraw Hill; Pearson; Cengage).

-Third, reduce the workload: The faculty created their exams within Brightspace with all the needed security settings and manage their exams without having to create special login to the proctoring service. They were able to enable to log into the proctoring system through an external linking tool setup in a module within their course. Once it launched into a new window into Examity, they were able to select the restrictions for the exams and choose from different levels of proctoring (i.e. auto proctoring or live proctoring).

-Fourth, Keep it Secure: Utilizing the LTI process with this product allow only the needed data to pass through Brightspace and Examity Platforms.

-Fifth, Remove Human Error: Once the instructor created the exam in Brightspace which included password protection and registered the exam within Examity, the necessary information was shared between the two systems which eliminated some levels of stress for the instructor, student and campus support staff.

-Sixth, Review Results Easily: Once the exam was completed by students the instructor was able to review flags as well as any concerns raised by proctors whether live or record. Connections between Brightspace and Examity allowed seamless access to these materials through the external linking tools within the course. This is often a concern when a product is first utilized.

The Results:

The Faculty Examity Experience

The faculty were emailed from their department chair to send a response if they were choosing to proctor their fall 2020 Final Exams through the Examity Proctoring Service. Those that chose to use the proctoring service were required to attend training provided by representatives of Examity. They were also required to utilize the Examity Learning Module that was copied into their Brightspace Courses. The module included a guide as to how to register their Brightspace Exam within Examity; a guide to provide to their students, an external link to launch the Examity Portal. The instructor was not required to use a different login which made this process the easiest. Also, Examity captured the information (i.e. restrictions; passwords) that the instructor setup on the exam. However, when the instructor registered the exam; the process included setting rules to each exam to ensure the students knew what they could or could not do during the exam time.

The instructor was also required to setup the type of proctoring experience for each exam. This included: (1). Automated Premium (features: auto authentication; auto proctoring; violations with video; human audit); (2). Live Premium (features: live authentication; real-time, on screen support; immediate intervention; live, low-ratio proctoring; flagged violations with video; human audit); (3). Live Standard (features: live authentication; live review of exam recording; flagged violations with video; human audit); (4). Automated Standard (features: auto authentication; auto proctoring; violations with video).

Once the student completed the proctored exam the instructor had the ability review the Examity Flag System for each exam. The Flag System included notes or suggestions to offer the instructor directions on the activity that took place. Also, there was a second audit that provided another review of the exam. The flags were depicted in three colors: Green flags indicated no incidents; red flags indicated the student exhibited clear cheating behaviors; yellow flags indicated a rule had been broken but cheating did not necessarily take place.

The faculty who utilized Examity for their Fall 2020 Final Exams were surveyed in which 6 out of 16 responded. The survey was conducted utilizing Survey Monkey in which the following questions were asked: (1). How easy was your experience with Examity during fall 2020? The responses from the faculty included there was not enough time to explain to students how to use it; the urgency and lack of time to properly train was a problem; became overwhelmed at the last minute; received complaints from some students that their personal computers could not access Examity. (2). How likely are you to utilize this service for spring 2021? The responses from the faculty were evenly spread as very likely, likely, and neither likely nor unlikely. However, some comments included that the live proctoring would be the preferred method. There were also concerns that the exam date may need be extended to
accommodate students who experience technical issues with Examity. (3). Which security level did you use for your exams? The responses were shared evenly with the Automated Premium and The Automated Standard. Again the comments included that the live proctor is the preferred method in hopes that it would be a smoother experience for the student. (4). How useful were the reporting results for your exams? The responses indicated the reports were very useful; however, comments included that email notifications to the instructor about possible cheating activities were more than a week after the exam had been administered.

Additional comments from the surveyed faculty included: "ensure students are provided training on the product at least 2 weeks before the exam". (1) verbal/language problems... I couldn't understand the "heavily accented" English and I had to ask repeatedly for tech to speak slower so that I could make out what they were saying - this was very frustrating (2) response time problems... it took way too long to get a response when trying to get an exam to restart done which was usually needed because of network issues that students had experienced - by the time we got a tech to respond, the exam time had almost expired - this was also very frustrating (3) technical or functional access... I wish that I had more control over certain settings that governed the overall experience like moving students who had signed up for the wrong exam or who wanted to change exam times".

The Student Examity Experience

The students were instructed login their D2L Course to a learning module entitled Examity which included a user’s guide and a direct launch into the Examity Portal. Once students launched the Examity Portal there were quick start guides; technical support information, and video tutorials to serve as a resource for the students if they encountered technical issues during the exam. The students were required to set up a profile in the Examity Portal as well as schedule an exam time. These steps were to be completed at least 24 hours in advance. When a student was ready to take the exam they had to go through the authentication process which did not take away from the exam time. When the exam opens up for the students they were not required to enter the exam password this task was completed through the back end of Examity. The exam opens up into Brightspace with which the students were familiar. This provided a level of comfort. However, students did report technical issues accessing the exam that were related to their devices. For example, issues with screen sharing or out-of-date web browsers would interfere with loss of exam time. Students were given a survey through their Examity Portal after completing their exams. The survey below entitled Table 1: Examity Evaluation Summary depicts there were 672 tests between November 19, 2020-December 3, 2020. This date range was utilized to capture the fall 2020 Proctored Exams registered within Examity. 478 students took the survey; however, some of those students skipped the questions on the survey. Also, the summary evaluation does not capture students who took their proctored exams through an alternate source (i.e. proctored by their instructor) if their technical issues within Examity could not be resolved. The following questions were asked:

(1). How smooth was your proctoring experience? The majority of students answered their experience was very smooth. (2). what is the greatest way for us to improve your proctoring experience? The majority of students answered they would not change a thing. (3). How likely are you to suggest Examity to a student who needs proctoring? The majority of students answered never. Those that answered never to question 3 felt that the Examity Product needed to be more user-friendly in regards to the steps to be completed by the test takers. They also indicated there was a need for a faster internet connection. However, most students utilized their personal computers along with their Wi-Fi connection. Moreover, the survey provided an evaluation detail report which depicted the test takers’ names; the course in which proctored exam was given; the instructor of the course, and their response to each of the survey questions. This information is not reflected in Table 1 due to protecting the privacy of the test takers. However, in reviewing the individual test taker’s response to the survey it was determined that those students that indicated a rough proctoring experience were mostly enrolled in undergraduate math courses. It was determined that the specific math course was registered into the Examity Portal through the standalone platform which meant the courses were manually added into the portal. Their comments included: (1). Faster internet connection; (2). More user-friendly. Those test-takers that indicated a very smooth proctoring experience were mostly enrolled in undergraduate chemistry, biology, and computer science courses. Their comments included: (1). would not change a thing; (2). Faster connection. It was determined that these courses were registered into the portal through the Brightspace Platform.
Table 1. Examity Evaluation Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Summary</th>
<th>Evaluation Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Times for the week: 672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How smooth was your proctoring experience?</td>
<td>Number of students who took the survey: 472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer: 4.2</td>
<td>Support: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>30.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Likely</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Online Learning Staff Experience

When Examity launch to the faculty and students the support staff monitored support calls on the day of the exams. This included reaching out to the Examity Support Team to assist students having technical issues within the portal. If the issue could not be resolved through the Examity Support Team then the Online Learning Staff would proctor the exams through Collaborate Ultra and Zoom. There was frustration in getting some of the support tickets resolved; for example, if the student's first attempt to begin their exam failed then they were asked to make contact with the instructor to set up another attempt. The online learning staff had to send an email to the Examity Support Team requesting to allow additional attempts through the portal. This process would take away from the exam time which had to be extended to allow access. Also, there were instances in which problems were found with the exam (i.e. images not showing up); the issue had to be fixed within D2L along with submitting emails to notify the Examity Support Techs for assistance to allow students access to the exam. After the final exam period was
completed there was a meeting to discuss the proctoring experience which included representatives from Examity, The USG GeorgiaView Integration Team, and FVSU Online Learning Staff. This meeting provided an opportunity to discuss positive and negative experiences from the faculty and students. All issues were addressed and a resolution was put in place to provide a smoother proctoring experience for spring 2021.

Conclusion

The shift to online modality made some students feel uneasy. However, communicating detailed instructions for the exam upfront will help them feel better prepared. Therefore, the earlier the faculty can familiarize their students with Examity will alleviate some of the technical issues and confusion on test day. The outbreak of the pandemic made it urgent for higher education to look for scalable ways to ensure the integrity of online exams. The university recognizes that online examinations are becoming the easiest and convenient mode of taking examinations with the help of the proctoring software; first, keep it familiar; second, ensure system compatibility; third, reduce the workload; fourth, keep it secure; fifth, remove human error; and sixth, review results easily.

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Abstract

When considering course development and assessment in higher education distance learning courses, there are many components that come into play. From curriculum specialists, subject matter experts, assessment committees, and more, everyone plays an important role in making sure that stakeholders are being served in the best possible way. However, once a course is in play, the question becomes: are all students being graded consistently across all offerings of the same course? This is an important question to consider when factoring in the various educational and teaching backgrounds and experiences that faculty bring into the front lines of teaching multiple sections of a specific course (Schoepp et al., 2018). It is also important to ask whether or not faculty are grading fairly based on student work provided (Feldman, 2020). Purdue University Global uses various methods to ensure distance learning faculty are grading student work consistently and equitably. One very successful strategy has been virtual norming sessions. In this paper, leadership from Composition and Mathematics will share details on the preparation, execution, and outcomes of these beneficial norming sessions.

Introduction

To begin, in order to execute effective grade norming sessions, complex and equitable preparation must take place. In both Composition and Mathematics, two main areas of preparation focus on having a diverse and inclusive faculty representation in the sessions as well as having a clear purpose in mind. Starting with where faculty are concerned, both departments work to have faculty from all teaching levels involved to provide a wide berth of perspective. This means that full-time, full-time adjunct, and traditional adjunct faculty are involved. This is important because the three categories of faculty can teach anywhere from one to five sections of a course during a single term. The number of courses, and frequency of course assignment, faculty teach can influence how grading is perceived and executed. In addition, seasoned faculty versus newer faculty can also have differing lenses in regards to how grading is conducted.

Purpose and Goals

Once the faculty pool for the norming sessions is assembled, then the purpose must be made clear. While the purpose may seem obvious, to establish consistency, it may be more involved and complex depending on the assignment or graded item being considered for norming. Looking at whether the assignment in question is a low-stakes assignment or not, if an assignment is scaffolded strategically to dove-tail with one or more assignments, what the attached learning outcomes are, etc, must be taken into account in determining the overall purpose. Faculty and leadership must work together to determine what the sessions will be reviewing, to what extent, determine potential areas of bias, and how many samples will be reviewed to determine if the purpose is being met. In addition, end goal effects for faculty must also be considered in determining the purpose. One example might involve looking at helping faculty be more consistent yet efficient and what that might look like in post grade norming best practices documents and or training sessions.
Execution

Once preparation is complete, the focus shifts to execution of the norming sessions. The two main facets of execution are asynchronous and synchronous that both take place virtually. The asynchronous sessions focus on implementing project management software to facilitate sharing assignment samples to be reviewed, sharing data, reviewing the data of others involved, and developing best practices documents once all data has been reviewed and discussed.

The synchronous sessions focus on discussing the assignment samples, data from others on the committee, discussing processes, and determining content of best practices documents to disseminate to all faculty who are teaching sections of a specific course. Once best practices documents are finalized, department meetings are held to share the findings of the norming sessions as well as to introduce the new best practices document that will help all faculty members teaching the course find commonality in grading practices. From there, department leadership and or course leads hold any needed training/guidance sessions to help faculty adopt new methodologies and execution of grading to ensure consistency of grading across all sections of the course.

Outcomes

Lastly, grading norming sessions yielded both expected and unexpected outcomes. Beginning with some of the expected outcomes from grade norming sessions in Composition and Mathematics, the primary outcome was that the sessions provided helpful data in terms of informing next steps in course and rubric revision. The sessions provided a spotlight on what was working well in both the assignment and the assignment rubric and their overall place with the course in question. The sessions also provided previously unseen holes in the assignment, rubric, and or course. Another expected outcome was to identify potential faculty training opportunities and or professional development for faculty to help offer new perspectives and ideas on grading and assessment.

In terms of unexpected outcomes, grade norming sessions primarily yielded faculty collaborations. These collaborations focused on both grading elements, while some started with grading but evolved into other aspects of classroom management and teaching best practices. In addition, collaborations also gave way to faculty coming up with conference proposals on grade norming as well as other classroom and teaching topics. Other faculty chose to collaborate on publication ideas. Lastly, grade norming also helped further identify strong faculty who could be empowered and put in a leadership role of facilitating grading breakout sessions and or mini training or presenting events to help other faculty in the department.

Conclusion

By looking at the preparation, execution, and outcomes of grade norming sessions in the Composition and Mathematics departments at Purdue University Global, the overall benefits of such sessions are clear. Moreover, and beyond the departmental centric benefits of grade norming, sharing processes and results cross departmentally can work to derive and apply facets of grade norming that had not been considered to generate the efficacy of such sessions. Grade norming sessions are a powerful tool that, when used consistently and effectively, can work to also help curriculum development and revision in higher education distance learning. By continuously working to freshen grading best practices while working to maintain consistency, stakeholders are afforded a quality educational experience across Composition and Mathematics courses that will foster confidence, persistence, and success.
References


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Improving Rubric Quality: A Faculty-driven Process

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss a large change initiative for improving and standardizing rubrics across an online university. We discuss the importance of leadership, planning, training, and faculty involvement in the success of this project. To illustrate these points, we review one school’s experience managing the project.

Introduction

In 2020 Purdue University Global (Purdue Global) was informed that a change in our learning management system (LMS) rubric functionality would affect the way grades report to the gradebook. The leadership team determined that all course rubrics (e.g., discussion board, seminar, and assignments) needed to be converted to the LMS rubric template to circumvent the gradebook issue. The project was initiated in Fall 2020 with full implementation across the University’s seven schools scheduled for completion in June 2021.

While the impetus to update Purdue Global’s rubrics was driven by a change in our LMS, the academic and curriculum leadership viewed it as an opportunity to improve rubric quality and consistency. Because the LMS rubric format necessitated that we reformat our current rubrics in a specific way, leadership decided that using a standard format for each type of rubric across all courses would provide students with a more consistent evaluation experience.

Purdue Global employs a centralized curriculum team who collaborate with school faculty and academic leadership to design and develop Purdue Global curriculum. This collaborative, systemic approach to designing curriculum provides a consistent learning environment across schools and disciplines. A similar collaborative approach was used to develop a university-wide rubric template for each type of assessment and to determine best practices for creating and/or revising rubrics (Brookhart, 2013, Driscoll & Wood, 2007, Stevens, & Levi, 2013). Once the standard rubrics were finalized, each of Purdue Global’s seven schools developed their own process for completing the project.

In the School of General Education (SoGE), the Academic Chair for Science and the Assistant Dean of Curriculum developed a project plan that included standardized processes for the revision and review of approximately 260 SoGE assignment rubrics. The plan also included the design of a SoGE rubric model as an exemplar to help guide faculty choices. The department chairs then chose faculty to lead the rubric revisions and reviews. Once the model was developed and the processes were in place, school leadership and their faculty attended training.
Rubric Development

The Template

As stated, a team of curriculum and assessment experts established guidelines on creating quality (e.g. valid and reliable) rubrics, and a standardized assignment rubric template with four levels of achievement for each criteria (Figure 1). Entered as column headers, these levels described the fundamental levels of student performance:

- Level III: mastery (100%),
- Level II: considered to be proficient/competent (80% - 85%),
- Level I: the threshold to pass (60% - 70%), and
- Not Present: no criteria met (0%).

Figure 1. Standardized Assignment Rubric Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment Criteria</th>
<th>Level III</th>
<th>Level II</th>
<th>Level I</th>
<th>Not Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(criterion 1: 512 character limit)</td>
<td>• (1000 characters, bullets are allowed. Will appear truncated.)</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum Total Points</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum Total Points</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SoGE leadership decided to standardize the student expectations for APA requirements and Writing Conventions in order to unify the departments and provide consistency for students as they went through the General Education curriculum. As such, the department of composition and writing across the curriculum provided generic language to be included as part of the permanent template with the recommendation that no more than 20% of the total grade be allocated for these two criteria (unless course outcomes were specific to writing).

The Model

The Academic Chair of Science assembled a project team comprising the department chair, assistant chair, and four full-time and part-time faculty, to create a ‘model’ that could be utilized across all disciplines. The team selected an assignment from a science survey course to use as the model, as each participant had previous experience teaching the course. Together with this rubric template, the team collected the following:

- Unit outcomes,
- Course outcomes,
- Assignment instructions,
- Current assignment rubric,
- Competency assessment rubric, and
- Any other related materials.

In addition to these materials, the team remained mindful of several questions during the process:

- What are the skills and competencies students need to demonstrate to successfully complete the assignment?
- What is the Bloom's verb for the outcome, and what level is it?
The team proceeded to organize the key competencies and assignment requirements in a logical order. Each row was labeled with a criteria, and criteria were weighed in importance. Percentage points were allocated accordingly for an overall total of 100%. Starting with the highest level of performance (Level III), the criteria were bulleted and written using clear and concise language and action verbs to describe students’ work. Efforts were made to focus on the specific, key elements the assignment should include while steering clear of vague quality descriptors (e.g., thoughtful, superior, good). With Level III completed, descriptions for Levels I and II were then written, indicating what elements from Level III the student’s submission does or does not include at the respective level.

Rubric Model Norming

Following the initial development of the rubric model draft, it was critical to test its actual utility in assessing the assignment through a norming session. The project team wanted to be confident that any instructor utilizing the rubric would be able to assess student assignments in a consistent fashion with a high level of inter-rater reliability.

Five full-time and part-time faculty reviewed two student submissions that had been previously graded using the original assignment rubric, and were asked to apply the new rubric model. Scores were then compared between the five faculty as well as being compared to the students’ original scores. Interestingly, three of the faculty scores were similar to one another and were placed in one group. However, a second grouping was evident where the remaining two faculty were similar in their grading. The gap was found to be statistically different between the two sets of faculty, which warranted a discussion as to why this discrepancy may have occurred. Adjustments were made and another norming session was held using a third student submission. This resulted in all five faculty scores within range of one another.

School-Wide Implementation

Department leadership, course leaders, and reviewers from the four SoGE departments; Composition / Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), Mathematics, Science, and Humanities / Social Sciences, were invited to a live training session where the project as a whole was reviewed and the project team discussed the steps taken in the model’s development, as well as what considerations and best practices were incorporated. Each course leader was responsible for 8-10 course rubrics on average. To prepare, they received a copy of the rubric model, a blank rubric template, and guidelines with best practices. Google forms were created in order to allow for an orderly submission of newly developed rubrics to department specific folders for review. Department leadership was responsible for the oversight of their course rubric development. Departments followed a process whereby each newly developed rubric was reviewed and normed by their respective departmental faculty to ensure rubric accuracy. Curriculum and the Assessment & Research groups conducted final reviews for consistency and quality prior to adoption and implementation.

Considerations

One of the more challenging tasks was creating appropriate descriptors that ensured each performance Level was mutually exclusive of the others, without modifying each bullet’s descriptor/expectation. In doing so, Level II and Level I expectations were reduced based on the student’s ability to meet requirements rather than quality concerns.
This required that the most important criteria were isolated to avoid combining completely different skills. Identifying these individual skill criteria made it easier to tease out and assess when students successfully achieved one skill or the other. Another important consideration was the number of points assigned to each criteria to avoid a large point spread between Level I (60%-70%) and Not Present (0%). Although the LMS provides instructors the option to edit a score, editing the score would lead to reduced inter-rater reliability. However, by not editing the score, the issue would then become grade inflation. Being mindful of this potential challenge at the outset makes it less likely that the Level I score will need to be edited - saving instructor grading time, improving inter-rater reliability, and reducing potential grade inflation.

Conclusion

Change is unsettling (Pullan, 2001) and without appropriate leadership and stakeholder buy-in it can have the opposite intended effect. Distance learning institutions experience continuous change in technologies, demographics, needs of the workplace, and competition. While these changes affect all stakeholders, it is the learning environment, faculty, and students who are ultimately affected. Faculty involvement in curricular changes not only helped ensure that the resulting improvements produce a quality learning experience for students, but also foster a deeper understanding of the development and alignment of rubric to outcomes.

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Striving for Excellence During a Pandemic

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Abstract

Despite the chaos that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to on-ground learning institutions, online learning persisted and in many cases, even thrived. However, online leadership still faced many of the same challenges with sick faculty and students, anxiety, and stress. As such, it is important to have strategies in place that provide opportunities for teams to continue striving for excellence.

Stress and COVID-19

Long before COVID-19 became a world-wide pandemic, people have dealt with stressful and chaotic situations. In a report on stress at work, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found the following:

- 25% view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives
- 75% of employees believe that workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago
- 26% of workers said they were “often or very often burned out or stressed by their work
- Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems (American Institute of Stress, 2020).

Stress in the American workplace has long been identified as an escalating issue, and it has been compounded in the age of COVID whose impacts will likely remain long after it is finally tamed. According to a poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation (Kirzinger et al., 2020), it is predicted that the psychological impact of the pandemic will harm far more people than the virus itself because even those who have never previously experienced any mental disorder are beginning to feel many of the same symptoms as people with serious mental illness. As a result, they have concluded that the coronavirus pandemic “will be the most psychologically toxic disaster in anyone’s lifetime” (Vesta, 2020).

We want faculty to strive for excellence; however, we do not want that excellence to come with too costly a price - stress. There are many strategies available to help promote faculty wellbeing and excellence, even during these challenging times. The CDC (2021) provides simple steps to cope with stress in a healthy manner:

- Taking breaks from the media,
- Taking care of your body,
- Making time to unwind,
- Connecting with others, and
- Connecting with your community.
We have incorporated many of these practices into our day-to-day attitudes and behaviors starting with leadership promoting a healthier work-life balance by setting the example for others. Other tactics are preparing faculty for success and using wellness and community building activities to encourage a less stressful work environment.

**Work Culture - From the Top Down**

Creating a positive, supportive, and less stressful workplace starts at the top with its leadership. Leaders who step-up and embrace the challenge of creating a positive work culture create opportunities that not only help to support and meet the basic needs of their faculty, but also help to create a healthier and happier working environment for everyone. Employees often look to their leadership to determine what the norms and expectations of the work culture are. For example, if supervisors are responding to, or generating emails at 11:30 pm during the work week and/or over the weekend, employees may feel guilt, or that in order to keep pace and demonstrate their dedication to their role, they should be working during those times as well. Leadership must be cognizant of how their behaviors are interpreted and then lead by example by establishing healthy work boundaries. It is also important to have some insight of who you are working with in order to establish an effective working relationship. For example, knowing that you are working with someone with a “Type A personality” may explain their urgent need or motivation to immediately begin working on a project.

**Preparing Others For Success**

The COVID-19 pandemic created unexpected opportunities for many to consider online teaching and learning. As such, in 2020 we hired a number of new faculty, both full-time and part-time, in order to support this new influx of students. In our school, we have seen that in many cases applicants had been downsized from academia and other roles. For these new instructors, starting a new position with a new institution, coupled with the adjustment to a new normal co-existing with COVID-19, are additional unexpected stressors.

Everyone plays a role in the mentoring of new faculty. Following their initial university orientation and prior to their first course assignment, the Science Department allows new faculty to shadow a live course to better familiarize them with the course content and structure that they will be facilitating. In addition, a full-time faculty member serves as a mentor for their first term, while the chair and assistant chair also monitor the new instructor’s progress. We have found several benefits in using this process. First, it allows new faculty to meet some of their colleagues and build relationships. It also gives others an opportunity to hone their leadership skills as mentors. Finally, by delegating the mentoring role and responsibilities, it also helps prevent leadership burnout.

**Wellness Activities**

Hall and Williams (2020) have shown that discussing topics that may cause stress, in conjunction with strategies to counteract it can be beneficial. Having regular meetings with full-time faculty to discuss topics, such as stress management and other self-awareness topics, can promote faculty growth. There is value in creating these opportunities for faculty to engage with their peers (Maier, 2012) who may be experiencing or have experienced similar issues. This can lead to a breakthrough or moment of self-discovery for faculty. In the Science Department, faculty feel safe and comfortable enough to engage in conversations that have led to moments of self-reflection and understanding the importance of taking care of oneself before taking care of the needs of others.

Discussion topics have included tips on how to take a break from checking cell phones and emails, sharing apps that promote relaxation, the importance of sleep, procrastination, and scheduling time off from work. Leadership should communicate the expectation of taking time off to rejuvenate even if it is a staycation, with a reminder to unplug completely from their laptops, cell phones, and email while on vacation. Again, these are behaviors that faculty
often look to their leadership to determine what the acceptable work culture is so leadership must not only establish healthy work boundaries, but also practice them.

**Building Community**

Research has shown that when virtual employees lack emotional belonging, it may affect their performance in the classroom (Dolan, 2011). Community building activities can increase faculty engagement and motivation, and it can improve faculty productivity. Faculty teaching remotely still have the need to feel connected (Terosky and Heasley, 2014), perhaps even more so. Finding ways to connect virtually can be challenging, especially when faculty are not in the same geographical location and span across multiple time zones. Community building activities can help form connections among faculty and decrease feelings of isolation - promoting good mental health.

Understanding your faculty and their needs is essential when selecting a community building activity to help ensure it is stimulating, worthwhile, and fun. One way to get faculty buy-in is to have faculty vote on or suggest activities. The results will indicate the level of interest in each activity and the expected amount of engagement. Seeking volunteers to take the lead on an activity can generate excitement and lets them know they are a valued part of the team. There are numerous activities that can have a positive effect on faculty engagement. During the pandemic, an extra effort was made to focus on positive activities that could reduce stress and help faculty feel good. Some examples include sharing pictures of family and/or pets, recipes, photos of their hobbies or trips taken, things they are thankful for, and motivational quotes. When faculty feel good, it benefits students, the department, and the school.

Helping faculty strive for excellence can be trying due to normal stressors encountered on the job and magnified by the additional challenges presented due to a pandemic. However, it is possible to support faculty during these chaotic times by implementing strategies, such as emphasizing faculty leadership development for success initiatives, peer wellness discussions, and community building activities. Leaders can lead the way by exhibiting the attitudes and behaviors that shape a culture that promotes both excellence and a healthy work-life balance. As a result, faculty feel more motivated and less burnout due to stress which results in higher work productivity.

**References**


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Facilitating Active Engagement of Students in an Online Asynchronous Program in Biomedical Regulatory Sciences

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Abstract

Regulatory Sciences courses taught in an online asynchronous environment pose challenges for sustaining student engagement and encouraging active learning. Impediments include limited contact with the instructor and classmates, inadequate interaction with learning materials, content that can be ever-changing, and limited tools for assessing student learning. Therefore, an online program's instructional design team must create learning content that supports active learning to overcome communication barriers, employs creative interaction with the course materials, and provides for inventive student assessments to maximize student learning utilizing tools both inside and outside of the LMS. It is the purpose of this paper to describe the current learning environment for graduate-level students in an online Regulatory Sciences Program at the University of Georgia. This exploration involves identifying existing learning impediments, examining the selected learning and design theory that enhances student engagement, constructivism, and providing active learning design strategies to solve these instructional challenges.

Introduction

The University of Georgia’s Regulatory Sciences (RS) online graduate program addresses the regulatory procedures for prescription and over-the-counter healthcare products for human and veterinary applications. The primary regulatory agency on which this program focuses is the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The RS Program consists of didactic courses and research or experiential courses. The didactic courses are taught online and are primarily asynchronous. Most learning modules include a recorded video lecture (a MS PowerPoint Presentation with synchronized audio files) and supporting reading materials or video by subject matter experts that provide the necessary foundational knowledge required for students to understand the module's concepts. The recorded lecture is followed by course activities like a quiz, discussion, or writing exercise within the program’s learning management system (LMS). This content is facilitated by the RS instructional team, which includes the instructor, who is the subject matter expert, and an instructional designer.

Active learning principles encourage students to engage with the learning content by thinking, reviewing the content, discussing, constructing meaning, and investigating the subject matter (Active Learning | Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.). Research suggests that active learning is more effective than lecture-only instruction (Active Learning | Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.). Active learning implies that “Meaningful learning occurs when the learner engages in appropriate cognitive processing during learning, including attending to relevant aspects of the incoming information, mentally organizing the material into coherent cognitive representation, and mentally integrating it with existing knowledge activated from longer-term memory” (Dempsey & Van Eck, 2017, pp. 261–262).

The online asynchronous learning environment presents some unique challenges in terms of providing active learning activities. The challenge in an asynchronous online setting is to create a learning environment that encourages course engagement and active learning, such as interaction with the learning content and collaboration with other course participants. For the RS program, some potential impediments to active learning are a lack of social engagement among course members as the majority are working professionals and part-time students; limited interactive experiences with modular content; learning content that can be tedious as it can involve the review and analysis of regulatory documents, and limited assessment tools within the LMS facilitating student learning. While the evaluation and performance assessments on course material indicate learning is occurring within the current context, the implementation of selected interventions might improve student learning outcomes and experience.
This paper aims to evaluate limited student engagement within the course content in the Regulatory Sciences Program and identify design strategies to improve student engagement. This evaluation occurs within the constructivism learning model framework. Constructivism is a theory that encourages active learning (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017). This analysis relies on observation, student performance, and course evaluation data. No additional scientific study was performed. The overall goal of this analysis is to identify innovative ways to enhance student learning and performance.

Active Learning

Active learning encourages students to engage with the learning content by thinking, reviewing the content or literature, discussing, constructing meaning, and investigating the subject matter. Research suggests that active learning is more effective than lecture-only instruction (Active Learning | Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.). Active learning implies that “meaningful learning occurs when the learner engages in appropriate cognitive processing during learning, including attending to relevant aspects of the incoming information, mentally organizing the material into coherent cognitive representation, and mentally integrating it with existing knowledge activated from longer-term memory” (Dempsey & Van Eck, 2017, pp. 261–262). Active learning also emphasizes that students can control their learning (National Research Council, 2000). It requires “that students do something—read, discuss, write—that requires higher-order thinking,” (Brame, 2016, para. 1), to promote meaningful learning.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is defined as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action” (Defining Critical Thinking, n.d., para. 3). Important skills tied to critical thinking are analysis, synthesis, problem-solving, decision making, and communication (Mintzes, 2020; Nelson & Crow, 2014). It is vital for students in the health sciences “to be able to critique data, to identify whether or not conclusions are supported by evidence, and to distinguish a significant effect from random noise and variability” (Holmes et al., 2015, p. 11199).

Active learning strategies support critical thinking skills (BlueSofaMedia, 2012; Reiser & Dempsey, 2017; Walker, 2003) and are essential for all healthcare professionals, including regulatory scientists since they are often asked to problem-solve in unique and stressful situations (Sharples et al., 2017). One who engages in critical thinking will often “recognize problems and find ways to address them” (Clark, 2016, p. 1). In the exploration of a problem, critical thinking skills support the student’s investigation of that problem. This exploration process includes recognizing unstated assumptions about the issue. It requires the student to collect relevant information. It involves data interpretation, the assessment of the evidence, and an analysis of the claims or arguments. Moreover, critical thinking skills help students “recognize relationships between propositions” (Clark, 2016), test conclusions, provide solutions, and assess and evaluate the issue from different perspectives. Students then engage in reflective analysis and make decisions based on this information (This list is compiled from four resources: Clark, 2016; Lai, 2011; Nelson & Crow, 2014; Walker, 2003).

Analysis of the RS Program

The Instructional Question

The primary rationale for analyzing the RS Program is a desire for performance improvement among the students. A snippet of data on average student outcomes was extracted from two courses for this analysis. Over the last year, the RS Introduction class has shown an average student grade of 89%. The Ethics in Biomedical Research course, over the same period, shows an average grade of 92%. Our performance goal is to move the average grade from an A-/B+ grade to a strong A grade.

Like physicians, regulatory professionals need to “be skilled in critically evaluating the current status and provide options to improve” or address a problem (Morrissey & Heilbrun, 2017, p. 1). Concerning the regulatory profession, one learning technologist, when referring to compliance training programs, summarizes the standard teaching approach that many compliance-type programs take. She says, “…[they] follow a rather predictive approach of laying down the facts, policies, and impact of nonconformance and wrap up the training with a quiz. Often, the
Upon reflection, it appears that many of the RS courses have adopted this approach. At present, a standard learning module for many of the RS courses consists of a recorded lecture and reading materials followed by a module activity such as a quiz, threaded discussion, or writing assignment. The recorded lectures consist of slide-narrated video lectures that can vary in length depending on the need. Some lectures can be 45 minutes to an hour-long. The reading materials can take another 1 to 2 hours. Following the lecture and review of materials, students move to the activity, usually a writing assignment or quiz. Many RS Program courses fit Pandey’s prescriptive model, which perhaps does not optimize interaction with the content or help the students internalize the information. As a result, the student learning experience may not be fully developed resulting in a mediocre performance.

The Learners

The learners in the RS program are nontraditional graduate students enrolled in either a graduate Certificate or Masters of Science program in Regulatory Sciences or Clinical Trials Design and Monitoring. These students are often working professionals who hold either a regulatory position or related positions within their places of employment. They are enrolled in this graduate program on a part-time basis. These students are often older, having been out of college five years or more on average. Because they often work in a highly regulated industry, many students come with advanced degrees or certifications and often are intrinsically motivated to gain additional regulatory knowledge. This quality among the students is an essential factor for their continued learning ambitions. Generally, highly motivated students are eager to engage and participate in course activities such as discussions or chat forums. As Schunk notes, “motivation and instruction are linked: Good instruction can raise motivation for learning, and motivated learners seek effective instructional environments” (Schunk, 2012, p. 233).

Theoretical Framework

Constructivism is the most suitable of the learning theory frameworks for encouraging active student learning and critical thinking (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017). Of the many frameworks surrounding adult learning, constructivism is closely linked to developing higher-order thinking skills like problem-solving and critical thinking (Lai, 2011; Reiser & Dempsey, 2017), two skills essential to healthcare professions, including regulatory sciences. It is for these reasons that this approach was selected to frame this analysis.

Simply put, constructivism posits that “learners create their own learning” based on their own beliefs and experiences (Schunk, 2012, p. 230). Constructivism considers that people are active learners. It encourages the inclusion of multiple perspectives when studying a subject, such as reading about a given topic, writing about that same subject, watching a video on the topic, and perhaps engaging in an authentic experience related to that matter. It also assumes the teacher’s role becomes more of a facilitator or organizer of the learning content. The instructor’s role is to organize the content to encourage social interaction (Schunk, 2012).

A fundamental concept that is at the core of constructivism is situated cognition. Situated cognition proposes that the cognitive processes of learning and thinking occur within physical and social contexts (Schunk, 2012). In other words, “people’s knowledge is embedded in the activity, context, and culture in which it was learned” (Situated Cognition (Brown, Collins & Duguid), n.d., para. 2). Therefore, engaging the learner with well-designed content within a well-designed context promotes social learning and encourages meaningful learning (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017).

A constructivist perspective assumes “that all knowledge is constructed from previous knowledge, irrespective of how one is taught … even listening to a lecture involves active attempts to construct new knowledge…. However, teachers still need to pay attention to students’ interpretations and provide guidance when necessary” (National Research Council, 2000, p. 11). This guidance can be enhanced by the interventions proposed in the upcoming intervention section.
Program Goals

While each course has its own identified course objectives, the overall program goals are to enhance the skills of the regulatory students in solving complex regulatory problems and effectively communicating information to and from regulatory agencies. The instructors’ primary focus is, *Are the students able to work through biomedical regulatory hurdles and problems efficiently and effectively?* To achieve these goals, faculty need to help students optimize their problem-solving and critical thinking skills by employing interventions that engage the students with the content and address student social learning needs.

The Interventions

The first step in the Regulatory Sciences intervention process is to reevaluate the four main elements of the instructional situation. The four elements are 1) the instructional question/problem, 2) the learning environment, 3) the role of the learner, and 4) the role of the instructor (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017). Regarding the instructional question, B. Wilson suggests that the instruction be designed around an authentic problem. The learning problem should be complex regarding multiple interconnected factors, and it might have multiple possible solutions (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017). He also suggests that the instructor tie the learning solution with other skills needed to transfer to other applications (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017), like critical thinking. Scenario-based learning opportunities are an excellent way to incorporate levels of complexity and multiple solutions.

Regarding the learning environment, Wilson suggests that the environment should reflect a real-world setting such as those that might actually occur in a regulatory setting. This real-world quality should also be applied to the tools, resources, and information used in the problem resolution. Assessments and feedback should also contain and reflect elements of real-world consequences (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017).

In this constructivist approach, the learner's role is one where the student takes ownership of the problem while the instructor serves as a guide or facilitator rather than the all-knowing subject matter expert (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017). The instructor’s role is to encourage active engagement with the material. Intervention strategies that align with this active learning paradigm are numerous and include the following:

Table 1.
*Common Active Learning Strategies that Align with Constructivism*

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<thead>
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<th>Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Role-play, debate</td>
<td>Problem-based learning</td>
<td>Micro-learning, flashcards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept maps</td>
<td>Scenario or case-based learning</td>
<td>Student presentations</td>
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<td>Cooperative learning groups</td>
<td>Student Blogs</td>
<td>Simulations</td>
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<td>Collaborative learning activities</td>
<td>Gamification of content</td>
<td>Interactive Lectures</td>
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<td>Poll-taking</td>
<td>Threaded discussions</td>
<td>Pause for reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brainstorming</td>
<td>Inquiry Learning Techniques</td>
<td>Self-Assessment</td>
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(Sources. BlueSofaMedia, 2012; *Implementing active learning in your classroom, CRIT, UMich, para. 3; Lai, 2011; Pandey, 2017; Reiser & Dempsey, 2017; Yoders, 2014*)

Using the data from final student grades and student feedback over the last year for two required RS courses, many stakeholders and decision-makers conjecture that there is a critical need to help students achieve higher RS content competencies. The students enrolled in the Introduction and Ethics in Research courses, both foundational courses, are the focus of these improvement strategies. The expected outcomes, if achieved, are higher information retention, increased critical thinking, and improved problem-solving skills among the students. Improved student outcomes are directly linked to higher grades and increased student satisfaction.

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1 “Biomedical” is an adjective that describes scientific research that is used to study both human and animal health.
To increase student engagement in the Regulatory Sciences program, the instructional design team is implementing improvement strategies to 1) address the lack of social engagement among course participants; 2) improve interactive experiences with modular content; 3) enhance learning content that might be considered tedious; 4) “chunk” content that moves rapidly and is substantial, and 5) develop innovative assessment strategies. The following are part of the improvement implementation approach. The instructional design team selected these interventions based on student feedback and the availability of the technology.

**Social Engagement (#1)**

A fundamental component of the constructivist approach to learning is the sense of the learner’s social engagement with the course (Reiser & Dempsey, 2017; Schunk, 2012; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2006). Social engagement can take many forms. An essential component to supporting socialization is to increase instructor presence in online courses (Dixon, 2010; Rapp & Anyikwa, 2016). Recent research suggests that students preferred multiple ways of interacting with the instructor. These interactions could include “announcements on the homepage of the course delivery system, emails to students, discussion forums in which the instructor interacts, and online lectures or connect sessions and chats, to enhance engagement” (Dixon, 2010, p. 8). In summary,

Instructor presence… involves instructors facilitating course flow and content, encouraging student participation, directly interacting with students, providing timely responses to questions, and promoting involvement with discussion questions. Studies suggest that the instructor is essential to the learning community and have found learning outcomes directly tied to active instructor presence in the course (Rapp & Anyikwa, 2016, p. 3).

Most of the current RS asynchronous courses include welcome videos, a detailed course syllabus, and a course orientation video. Students are welcomed to the class with an introductory email and a live online activity (Zoom meeting or chat session) during the first week of the class. Moreover, in the content delivery, the instructor often provides recorded lectures and reading materials. Initially and at the start of the course module, the RS Program has strong instructor involvement.

RS courses that employ asynchronous threaded discussion tools help to encourage student dialogue. Course discussions, however, are often short-lived because of time constraints and the need to move on to the next modular topic. If students wish to continue the discussion or engage with the course participants, they are responsible for initiating the request. Moreover, the instructor often serves as an observer of the discussions and does not interject comments until assigning the grade. This approach is not an effective use of the discussion tool for enhancing student social engagement. Faculty in the Regulatory Sciences Program should consider participation in the discussion, not to stifle but to encourage the discussion. This simple approach can provide students with additional interaction with the instructor.

Other considerations to encourage student social engagement include “think-pair-share activities.” These include group projects, discussions, and problem-solving assignments. In this strategy, for example, following a lecture, the instructor might group the students into teams to work on collaborative projects, like group presentations or a group website, that demonstrates their learning. These kinds of approaches can easily translate to the online asynchronous environments using collaborative online and web conferencing tools where students can share documents and engage with one another, tools like Zoom, Google Suite, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Blackboard Collaborate, and other applications.

**Content Experiences (#s 2, 3, & 4)**

There are multiple strategies to more fully engage students with course content. One easily accessible tool is again using the threaded discussion tool to engage the students through peer feedback and assessment. Not only can it be used to engage the students socially, but it can also be used to engage the students with the content if appropriately designed. Assigning an activity that requires the students to reflect on the lecture or topic as a writing exercise and posting that write-up in the threaded discussion allows for this engagement. An advantage to this approach is that the students are afforded an extended “reflection time” and have the “opportunity to compose thoughtful, probing contributions” (Riggs & Linder, 2016, p. 2).
Regarding limited interactive experiences with modular content, going into this analysis, the author assumed that current RS recorded lectures were limited in their support of student learning. Some research, however, has suggested otherwise. Recorded lectures can support student engagement (Dixon, 2010; Riggs & Linder, 2016). About the existing recorded lectures, students can “re-watch recorded lectures as many times as they need to in order to understand the content and can make use of closed captions or transcripts to improve comprehension” (Riggs & Linder, 2016, p. 2).

The lecture materials in the RS Program, however, could be improved to increase comprehension and engagement. For example, multiple lectures are an hour or more in length. These could be improved by editing or recreating the video into smaller pieces, perhaps no more than 18-20 minutes in length (The Science Behind TED's 18-Minute Rule, 2014). While our lectures do not claim to be as polished as TED Talks, there is science behind their 18-20-minute rule that should be considered when including recorded video lectures. Recent research suggests that the act of listening is equally as strenuous as other cognitive exercises, and students tend to recall new information if it is presented in smaller increments (The Science Behind TED's 18-Minute Rule, 2014). For the RS Program, breaking down hour-long lectures into 2 or 3 segments will be considered.

In addition, recorded lectures and major assessments could be revised to include small exercises, games, or problem-based tools at each section's close. These activities can be included in the lecture or accessed outside the lecture. In problem-based learning, the threaded discussion tool would be an excellent area to pose problem situations and ask for feedback on how students might solve this difficulty. The “problems” discussed in these threads should also have real-world application.

With video-based lectures, another strategy that could be considered is that of concept mapping. A simple concept mapping assignment could have significant benefits for student comprehension and could easily be applied in many circumstances. This tactic helps students organize complex concepts and recognize links between the topic. While these are not the only solutions to improve engagement with the content, this strategy can be quickly adapted to the RS situation where recorded lectures are an essential part of the learning.

Materials in the RS program are often content-heavy and move at a rapid pace. These characteristics can negatively impact student learning. This characteristic can feel like “trying to drink water from a fire hose” (Monahan, 2015, para. 2), i.e., too much, too fast, and too little time to digest and reflect on the content. A possible solution is for instructors to 1) eliminate any excessive content from lectures to reading materials and 2) enhance student abilities to recognize what information is useful and accurate (Monahan, 2015), i.e., put the students in charge of identifying topics and content with instructor guidance.

Assessment Strategies (#5)

Some courses in the RS program depend on the traditional assessment tools built into the LMS, primarily the quiz tool with various question types. These types of quizzes do not include many real-world characteristics. In constructivism, the emphasis shifts to more authentic assessments (Dikli, 2003; How Do I Apply Constructivism in My Classroom?, n.d.). Authentic assessment occurs most naturally and lastingly when it is meaningful and relates to students' authentic concerns and problems. Tests … ask, “Do you know this material?” Authentic assessment activities ask, “What do you know?” (How Do I Apply Constructivism in My Classroom?, n.d., principle 5). In the case of Regulatory Science students, the question can be rephrased to “can you apply learned content to solve problems or address federal or state requirements?”

Alternative authentic assessment strategies that easily transfer to an online asynchronous environment. For quizzing, the facilitator can present case-based problems and have students propose solutions as short answers. Other open-ended questions for students to address involve using the LMS discussion board or online student presentations, either live or recorded; research projects or papers; online journaling; wikis, timeline creations; and e-

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2 Concept mapping is an instructional activity that helps students to visualize newly learned concepts. It involves the student creating a structural diagram of newly learned information. It often helps students to understand how different concepts can be related. A resource on concept mapping is https://ar.cetl.hku.hk/am_cm.htm.
portfolios (Barber et al., 2015; Berkeley Center for Teaching & Learning, 2017; Dikli, 2003; Eddy & Lawrence, 2012). Currently, the instructional team depends on research papers and presentations. The implementation of these other strategies could afford the students additional opportunities to reflect on their learning.

Case Study

Recently, the RS program completely overhauled its Ethics in Research course with the principles outlined in this document. The instructional design team created more visually engaging video lectures that were shorter in length. The team supplemented the modules with additional activities and reading materials with opportunities for the students to explore the learning content from different angles. For example, with real-world significance, the ID team added CITI Training (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) activities, a necessary training that many of the students will need for their future research projects. The course revision also included the addition of the National Institutes of Health training module called The Research Clinic. This program allows students to become four different clinical research professional characters dealing with ethical issues related to biomedical research. This exercise provides students with some real-world examples of critical problem-solving.

Each module has threaded discussion opportunities that help the students engage with one another and reflect on their learning. The instructor participates with the students using this forum. The team also added periodic webinars using Zoom for student “check-ins.” The redesigned course also includes two small ethical papers on a topic of the student’s interest. The final capstone project involves the use of a concept map activity. The use of the concept map has helped students tie together the course concepts and visualize the relationships between course concepts of ethical research and how it relates to Regulatory Sciences. The course is still about 95% asynchronous, an important desirable characteristic identified by the students. The redesign, however, has altered the activities to allow the students more opportunity to engage with the material.

To date, the feedback on this redesign has been positive. Students overwhelmingly agree that this redesign facilitated their understanding of the materials. Most felt the course was logical and easy to follow, and up-to-date. Most importantly, many commented that the redesign enhanced their understanding of regulatory concerns related to biomedical research.

Conclusion

Currently, RS Program courses that appear more teacher-centered in their approach to instruction need to shift their focus on student-centered activities to encourage more active engagement with the modular content. Through the lens of constructivism and active learning principles, the ID team has identified specific strategies that will help change this focus. Implementing the methods and strategies outlined in this reflective paper has a high probability of facilitating more active student engagement and learning, resulting in improved performance.

As educational practitioners, understanding how students learn and identifying ways to maximize their learning experience is important to support this program's active learning and critical thinking objectives. In summary, this analysis has provided the instructional design team and administrators an objective assessment to understand the current state of the courses in this online asynchronous program. This reflective process has identified areas where adjustments and improvements can be made to make the RS program more successful and beneficial to our students.

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Assessing Faculty Leadership of Online Programs

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Abstract

Enrollment from online programs has become increasingly important to the fiscal stability of colleges and universities. Given the pivotal role program directors hold in maintaining academic quality, recruiting, and retaining students in online programs, there is a remarkable lack of literature available about their work and how their work is evaluated and acknowledged in the tenure and promotion process. This research gathered data from chief academic officers in the upper Midwest about their institutional practices surrounding evaluation of online program directors. Findings suggest most colleges and universities regularly evaluate faculty who serve as online program directors, but the evaluations may not specifically pertain to the unique responsibilities of that role. While about half of respondents reported the evaluations were used for tenure and promotion, that work was generally categorized as service – the least important of the teaching-scholarship-service trifecta of tenure and promotion. Recommendations for future research are presented.

Introduction

Online academic program directors who provide leadership and oversight to fully online degree programs are critical to the academic quality, enrollment, and retention of students in online programs. The continued expansion of online programs is vital to the sustainability of many higher education institutions. In his 2018 harbinger of college failure, Grawe predicted 2025 to be “the cliff” where traditional enrollment drops dramatically – a death knell for colleges already struggling with declining enrollment and high discount rates. In his 2021 sequel, The Agile College, Grawe suggested reforms that expand recruitment and improve access to college may cushion the steep fall of traditional student enrollment. This strategy is not revolutionary; availability of and enrollment in online programs serving adult students has risen dramatically in the past decade (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2020). For many colleges, the additional revenue stream from online enrollment has been essential to maintaining traditional on campus programs (Bacow, Bowen, Gutherie, Lack & Long, 2012). Retaining quality leadership of these programs is essential to an institutional strategy that combats “the cliff.”

Operational leadership of online programs is commonly situated in academic departments or divisions, with a faculty appointee designated as program director. Program directors are often charged with responsibility for curriculum oversight, assessment, accreditation, reporting, recruiting, retention, advising, staffing, and marketing to adult students (Cockley, 2012; Giles, 2012; Wiener & Peterson, 2019). Despite the critically important role of faculty program directors in the success of online programs, and therefore their critical contribution to sustained institutional reputation and enrollment, there is remarkably almost no research surrounding evaluation or recognition of this work - particularly in the faculty tenure and promotion process. This research is intended to establish a baseline for how faculty leadership of online programs is categorized and evaluated in the traditional trifecta of service, scholarship, and teaching for tenure and promotion. Findings may lead universities to re-evaluate their policies surrounding faculty evaluation in order to appropriately assess and acknowledge leadership of online programs.

Literature Review

The growth of online programs has created new administrative structures for academic programming that include both centralized and decentralized operations. Efficiency, scale and expertise have led colleges to centralize services for admissions, financial aid, billing, academic records, technical support, learning management system support, and the library to serve both traditional and online populations simultaneously (Cockley, 2012; Garrett,
Legion, & Fredericksen, 2020; Jass, 2012; LaBelle, Lowenthal, & Rice, 2020; Williams, 2012). Decentralized operations are those led by a unit for online learning and the academic department housing the online program. These departments assume responsibility for the development and revision of curriculum, accreditation efforts, program marketing, recruitment, advising, retention, staffing and education of students.

This separation of responsibilities places directors of online academic programs as the driver for revenue generation (Giles, 2012). In a study of chief online officers, 47% of participants indicated online programs generate net revenue for their institution (Garrett et al., 2020). At institutions where the online tuition was lower than on-campus norms, that figure rose to 75% who reported their online programs were a source of net revenue (Garrett et al., 2020). While there is a growing body of literature related to chief online officers and a substantial body of literature surrounding department chairs and heads (Wiener & Peterson, 2019), almost no research exists surrounding online academic program directors despite their critical importance to institutions.

As a subset, studies on the role of graduate program directors may provide insight. Because almost 40% of graduate students are enrolled in a fully or partially online program (US Department of Education, 2019), it is logical to assume online program directors include graduate program directors. However, the number of undergraduate students enrolled in an exclusively online program is more than double the number of graduate students studying exclusively online (US Department of Education, 2019). Students enrolled in an online undergraduate degree completion program may have more in common with graduate students than traditional undergraduate students (Cockley, 2012), but very little research exists on academic directors of those undergraduate programs. Given that most colleges plan to launch at least one additional online undergraduate program and as many as 3-6 online graduate programs by 2023 (Garrett et al., 2020), research on academic leadership of online programs appears desperately needed.

Petersen, Chesak, Saunders and Wiener (2017) observed that despite the critical importance of graduate programs, the position of program director has not been fully formed or institutionalized and is under-researched. Their longitudinal study, updated in 2019 (Wiener & Peterson), resulted in preliminary findings about the role. Most program directors in their sample were faculty, and 93% held the rank of assistant, associate, or full professor. Most (73.7%) were appointed by a department chair, and over half (52.5%) had an unlimited term appointment. In their role as graduate program director, almost all were responsible for responding to requests for program information (95.7%), reviewing and signing forms (94%), advising students (91.4%), coordinating admission decisions (90.3%), recruiting new students (86.1%), and serving as a liaison between departments and other units (82.5%). These duties are significantly related to enrollment endeavors, particularly in recruiting and retention.

The research of Wiener and Peterson (2019) suggested almost all academic leaders of graduate programs are faculty. One distinct advantage of faculty leadership, particularly for programs available online, is the assurance of quality resulting from the tenure and promotion process (Williams, 2012). Unfortunately, program directors note their duties impinge on time for teaching and scholarship (Petersen et al., 2017) – both critical for success in tenure and promotion. Though no research is readily available on the topic, program leadership is most aligned to the category of internal service in the scholarship-teaching-service trifecta of T & P – similar to that of department chair, and the least important category of the three (Gaurino & Borden, 2017; Green, 2008). More, there are no standardized evaluation measures to assess or validate the quality or impact of work performed by an online graduate or undergraduate program director.

Clearly there is a conflict of interest for program directors and institutions. Faculty who lead online programs are integral to developing quality programs, and ensuring there are students enrolled in them. The enrollment is necessary for the longevity of their institutions. Regrettably, their service is most important to the success of their institution, and least important to their personal success in tenure and promotion. The purpose of this exploratory research is to establish a baseline survey of how institutions have organically evaluated and acknowledged the work of online academic program directors in tenure and promotion decisions.

Methods

Of the 132 public and private nonprofit colleges located in the upper Midwest states of Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wisconsin, email addresses for 113 chief academic officers (CAOs) were obtained from publicly available websites. CAOs were invited to participate anonymously in a brief digital survey to share data pertaining to their institutions’ approach for evaluating online program directors, and whether/how the
evaluations were included in tenure and promotion. Participants were invited to share the survey with a designate at their institution best suited to provide accurate responses if they were unable to complete it. The survey was responsive; questions were presented to participants based on their answers to previous questions using survey logic. The institutional review board of Northwestern College approved the application for research and experimentation, and survey participants provided their consent to participate by completing the survey.

Findings

Of the 113 invitations to participate, 30 participants provided answers to the survey questions for a response rate of 26.5%. Participants were invited to share their name and email address if they wished to read the completed research after it was published, and 23 of the 30 participants (76.7%) provided that information, suggesting high interest in the research question. The volunteered email addresses allowed for verification that participants were representative of the research sample. CAOs from all five states responded, 10 from public colleges and 19 from private nonprofit colleges. Four colleges were large (more than 10,000 students enrolled), three were medium (5,000 – 9,999 students), and 22 were small (fewer than 5,000 students). Most of the small college respondents were from the private nonprofit sector (18 of 22; 81.8%), and most of the large college respondents were from the public sector (3 of 4; 75%). The three colleges reporting medium enrollment were public institutions.

Of the 29 participants who responded to the question “Does your institution offer any fully online and/or hybrid online degree programs?” only 4 indicated a response of no. Two CAOs invited to participate responded directly to the researchers’ email containing the survey link to indicate their institution did not have online programs, though they were interested in the research question. IPEDs data from the fall of 2018 indicated 25 of the 132 (18.9%) institutions in the research population had fewer than 10 online enrollments, which is a likely indicator those institutions did not have online programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). As 6 of the 32 (18.75%) CAO respondents provided data that their institutions did not have online programs, the sample appears representative of the population. The one participant of 30 who did not respond to the question regarding whether the institution had fully online or hybrid programs commented their institution held partnership in a consortium to offer “very few online programs.”

Of the 25 CAO respondents who noted their institutions offered online programs, 24 (96%) indicated their online program directors held a faculty position. Only one institution, a private nonprofit college, indicated their online programs were led by staff members. Of the 24 institutions that reported faculty leadership of online programs, 19 (79.2%) noted the online program directors were tenure-track faculty and 4 (16.7%) institutions employed non-tenure track faculty for those assignments. All ten public institutions reported their faculty program directors were on the tenure track, and 9 of the 14 (64.3%) private nonprofit institutions indicated their online program directors held tenure track positions. One of the 14 private nonprofit institutions did not respond.

Regardless of tenure, CAO participants noted evaluation of online academic program directors was a common practice. Of the 4 institutions who employed non-tenure track faculty online program directors, three specifically evaluated their program directors’ performance in leading online programs. Those performance evaluations were conducted on a consistent basis; one evaluated bi-annually and one annually using a general employee performance evaluation. Both associated their evaluations with promotion in rank and salary. The other institution that employed non-tenure track online program directors evaluated their directors every three years on a faculty performance evaluation that was not tied to promotion.

Of the 19 responding institutions with tenure-track faculty online program directors, 12 (63.2%) evaluated their program directors specifically on their leadership of online programs. This practice was somewhat more common at public schools (6 of 10 respondents, 60%) than private nonprofit schools (6 of 14, 42.8%). The evaluations were conducted by a department head, division head, academic dean, promotion and tenure committee, or vice president of academic affairs.

There was little consistency in the measurement instruments used by institutions to specifically evaluate tenure-track faculty program directors’ leadership of online programs. The following instruments were mentioned by the respondents: annual review document and promotion dossier, promotion and tenure portfolio, faculty performance evaluations, departmental annual review rubric, college performance evaluation for administrative employees, reflective narrative, self-evaluation, student evaluations, internal instruments and department chair evaluation. One respondent noted the criteria for evaluation stemmed from the department by-laws, another indicated the criteria for
evaluation were provided in the agreement between the state system and the faculty organization, a third pointed to department criteria, and a fourth indicated evaluation was based on the duties listed in the job descriptions. Program directors’ leadership of online programs was considered as part of the tenure and promotion process in 11 of the 12 cases (91.7%) where the tenure-track faculty were evaluated specifically for their leadership of online programs. In the one instance where it was not considered in tenure and promotion, the respondent noted the institution was considering ways to include it. Seven of the 11 (63.6%) institutions who consider faculty leadership of online programs in tenure and promotion attributed program leadership to the service category of the promotion and tenure review process. One included it in the teaching and service categories. Another respondent stated categorization depended on the size of the program; it may be considered either service or special administrative assignment. One respondent noted “the program director and program lead roles are considered as a part of service, though work done related to curricular review and development can be counted toward teaching.” That institution also allowed for a path for scholarship for faculty with “engaged scholarship agendas.” In five of the six instances where the online program directors’ responsibilities were not specifically evaluated, respondents indicated the online program directors’ role still counted toward tenure and promotion but did not provide details on whether the work was attributed to service, teaching, scholarship, or a combination thereof.

Of the 19 respondents who reported their online academic program directors were on the tenure-track, 16 (84.2%) addressed the frequency for which their online program directors were evaluated. Eleven of the respondents’ institutions (68.8%) performed evaluations on an annual basis, four (25%) indicated it was dependent on the status of the faculty, and one respondent (6.2%) stated there was not a formal process for evaluation. All sixteen respondents indicated the online program directors were held to the same standards and expectations as face-to-face discipline-specific program directors in relation to tenure and promotion.

Discussion

This study encouraged chief academic officers to share how their institution categorized the positions of online academic program directors and reflect on their institutional practices for evaluating the work of those employees – particularly as it related to tenure and promotion. From this sample, it is clear institutions have elected to task faculty with the role of leading online academic programs as opposed to staff members or third-party vendors. The majority (79.2%) of those faculty leaders are on the tenure-track. This finding reflects previous research on the characteristics of graduate program directors (Wiener & Peterson, 2019).

More than one-third (37%) of CAO participants noted their faculty were not specifically evaluated on their work as online program directors. Of the 63% of respondents who indicated their online academic program directors were evaluated, most (91.7%) used the evaluations for tenure and promotion decisions. Despite that commonality, the actual measurement instrument, evaluator, and timetable for evaluation varied. A few CAOs noted evaluation was based on the specific job description and formalized duties for online program directors, but most identified instruments like general employee performance evaluations, self-reflections, portfolios, faculty annual review documents, student evaluations, department chair evaluations and administrative employee evaluations that may not be well aligned with the unique responsibilities of the online program director – particularly in the areas of student recruitment and retention. As student recruitment and retention are of utmost importance to institutional enrollment and financial goals, this deficit may fail to convey the value of the program directors’ work in the tenure and promotion process. One survey respondent noted “Our online programs are mostly at the grad level. In general, the work of the graduate program directors is invisible and underappreciated. I like the idea of a review process to help shed some light on how much they are doing.” Another participant stated “There is not a formal process for this for most of our programs. This survey has made me think there should be.”

As suspected, most CAO participants (91%) noted the work of online academic program directors was typically categorized as service in tenure and promotion. Research suggests program directors are responsible for functions from curriculum to marketing, admissions to accreditation, and advising to budgeting, but this is all reviewed in the service category of tenure and promotion. Since service is often the least weighty criteria in tenure and promotion, faculty may be disincentivized or disadvantaged by serving in program director roles – particularly those who are pre-tenure. It is possible institutions represented by the CAOs who participated in this research weighted the service of online program directors differently through their systems of portfolios, self-evaluations, and evaluations based on job descriptions. Delving into the weighting for service for online academic program directors was beyond the scope of this research.
Several participants observed that tenure and promotion categories are antiquated. One stated “the traditional categories of faculty evaluation do not fit the needs of today’s college, particularly the need for innovation and growth.” Another indicated a desire for a fourth category related to entrepreneurship or leadership. The traditional teaching-scholarship-service trifecta of tenure and promotion must be modernized to effectively evaluate and acknowledge the contributions of online program directors.

Areas for Future Research

Three distinct areas for future research should naturally evolve from this baseline survey of institutional practices for evaluating the work of online academic program directors, particularly in tenure and promotion. There is a void in the research about online academic program directors that must be remedied. Initial research should seek to uncover whether the common responsibilities of graduate program directors revealed in the study by Wiener and Peterson (2019) are the same as common responsibilities of online program directors, which include both undergraduate and graduate programs.

In the same way common measurement instruments have been created, tested, and adopted for online teaching, performance evaluations should be developed for online program directors based on research pertaining to their common responsibilities. It would be advantageous to recognize and evaluate the academic, enrollment, and administrative efficacy of online academic program directors. Large nonprofit organizations and accrediting bodies like the Online Learning Consortium, Southern Regional Education Board, and Quality Matters who have experience developing evaluation instruments for online learning may be particularly well positioned for this research and dissemination.

Last, future research should analyze alternative models for tenure and promotion that recognize the impact of faculty leadership outside the traditional tenure categories of teaching, scholarship and service. If institutions have been organically changing the weight of service for online program directors to exceed the weight for teaching and scholarship, that should be brought to light and normalized as an appropriate structure for this group of faculty leaders.

Conclusion

The online academic program director role is critical for maintaining academic quality and discipline-specific program expansion. Institutions need to evaluate online program directors on criteria directly tied to the online program director role. Their work as an online program director should be heavily weighted in the faculty promotion and tenure process. Online programs are expanding access to high quality education, while providing new enrollment streams and contributing significant revenue to higher education institutions. Online program directors should be recognized and rewarded for their overall contribution to the institution.

References


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An Instructional Problem-Solving Collaboration Between Two University Professors

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Abstract

This paper chronicles the interaction between two university professors with diverse expertise in content, design, and delivery aspects of teaching statistics online. Collaboration theory serves as the underlying framework for the discussion. Observations from the professors' experiences are qualitatively reported concerning their impact on the online design/delivery process.

Introduction

The delivery of online instruction is not void of unique challenges. Experienced instructors often rely on teaching strategies successfully used for years in prior face-to-face settings. Yet, when applied to online environments, these same strategies, if unaltered, often fall short of generating similar learning outcomes for students. For example, an instructor may be accustomed to using manipulatives to illustrate or explain a complex problem. In a face-to-face environment, learners typically interact with these real objects while relying more on tactile abilities and other sensory mechanisms to overcome challenges with mastering the content. In an online environment (either synchronous or asynchronous), the "landscape" shifts dramatically and often fails to approximate face-to-face interactions' richness.

Consequently, online instructors need to find ways to present content in stimulating and effective ways. Instructional technology offers several possibilities in this regard; yet, it often presents numerous challenges -- that is, requiring faculty to remain abreast of the frequent, if not seemingly, "constant" changes that accompany its use. Rare is the individual who can do both effectively. Thus, collaborations with technology specialists (e.g., instructional designers, developers, etc.) appear warranted.

Lastly, the purpose of this paper is to highlight and emphasize the benefit(s) of leveraging the synergy between two university faculty members -- situated in disparate locations -- who collaboratively engaged one another to achieve mutually beneficial goals in two areas -- namely, online teaching and scholarship.

Background

Historically, instructors have had two main positive thoughts about using technology in online settings: 1) it makes life easier, and 2) it often improves course delivery (Davis, 1989). However, mastering the technology introduces new and often unmanageable demands for instructors who otherwise spend a great deal of time preparing for content delivery, dealing with learner engagement, evaluating student learning, and so on (Brophy & Alleman, 1990). Rather than merely teaching for regurgitation, consideration for other learner cognitive abilities has to be included in the design and application of technology (Garrison, 1993).

Technology allows for better teaching but only if used in the appropriate manner (Kember, 1994). Kember further mentions the importance of developing new paradigms for activities using appropriate theories and models rather than simply a technology-driven solution. Moreover, the fidelity of interaction (e.g., instructor-student, peer-to-peer, etc.) that learners enjoy in face-to-face environments often lacks compared to their distance-learning counterparts. For example, meaningful and timely feedback, typically informed by an instructor's discernment and analysis of the instructional environment as well as the learner's immediate needs, often pales in comparison. Perhaps
astonishingly, Coyner and McCann (2004) suggest developing a complete and functionally effective online course will probably take 12 months from start to finish.

More Robust Learning Environments

Attracting, retaining, and meeting the needs of "distance-learners" requires more than a simple PowerPoint presentation delivered online. The rapid rate at which high-fidelity, real-time technology is evolving and capturing the interest and shaping the expectations of learners is astounding. Yet, perhaps more daunting is the growing fear-of-failure online instructors are experiencing, often induced by an awareness of one's inability to "keep up" with the times.

Many have suggested the importance of designing online courses using strong pedagogy as well as understanding the strengths and limitations of technology (Moallem, 2003; Reeves et al., 2004). Good online courses require sufficient time, and instructors often rely on technology to replicate previous instruction (Reeves et al., 2004). They further suggest that developing an innovative online course often requires "release time" to complete the task. They further suggest that many faculty members are content to convert their traditional courses without the proper pedagogical changes.

Designing, developing, and delivering an online course is no easy undertaking. In fact, after reviewing sixty-seven research studies, researchers found that a support system to help with the instructional design component, alone, was warranted (Wingo et al., 2017). As technology-mediated learning environments' capabilities and complexity increase, faculty also need to be up-to-date with commensurate knowledge and skills on how to use them (Sasse et., 2008; Forman, 2018).

For example, faculty may need to understand the intricacy of a Learning Management System (LMS) as well as the pedagogy to be able to work with an instructional designer (Porter et al., 2014). The joint effort of faculty and designers is to use the expertise of each to create a robust, quality online course (Halupa, 2019). Puzziferro & Shelton (2008) said, "no one person is capable of discharging all of the expertise levels and roles inherent ..." in the creation of an online course. They further suggest that creating and developing an online course that is consistent in its design and pedagogy is a complex and multifaceted process. When creating a robust asynchronous course, the roles of the faculty member and the instructional designer must be clearly defined in advance to avoid any issues in the future (Xu & Morris, 2007).

The Situation

Teaching statistics and/or research methodologies and designing/developing online course content do not necessarily present a set of unique challenges apart and different from those outlined above. In fact, there is significant overlap. The two faculty referenced in this paper can draw upon first-hand accounts resulting from a combined 50+ years of higher education experience, pointing to the early 1990s as the origin of their online teaching and technology-mediated instructional development journeys, to offer additional evidence as to the validity of claims made.

One might conclude that with such a vast knowledge and experience base, successful completion of teaching and design/development tasks would be inevitable. Yet, amid a pandemic and a cloud of uncertainty surrounding conventional practices within higher education, we found ourselves "falling behind" in several areas related to two of the pillars of our professional practice -- teaching and scholarship. The demand was too heavy to "keep up" at a comfortable pace. When it became obvious that there were potentially mutual benefits associated with our working together, coupled with the belief that such an interaction would be enhanced by personally knowing and regularly interacting with each other for 20+ years, the collaboration was birthed. Ultimately, one of us would focus on the content (statistics and/or research methods), and the other would focus on the instructional design/technology. Both, however, hoped to reap the benefits of an "action-research" approach to investigating and/or reporting on the experience.

The Result

In short, both the online course (content as well as delivery) plus acquisition of modern technology skills for both faculty members improved or increased. Perhaps more importantly, an experimental investigation designed to test further the efficacy of technologies used in the delivery of online statistics instruction also emerged (Holmes & Packard, 2021).
More specifically, higher fidelity instructional modules were introduced to the curriculum. As a result of examining the underlying research as well as "best practices" related to content and delivery, both faculty became more aware of the possibilities. They made adjustments in their professional practice. Reusable tools were also created and implemented as the "baseline development approach" for future iterations, yet requiring simple modifications to the original prototype.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Sasse et al. (2008) suggested a collaboration between faculty and instructional designers seeks to create a better learning environment. The collaborative mapping model introduced by Drysdale (2019) consists of two parts: a) the design of the learning experience; and b) the development of instructional material. Both the instructional designer and the faculty member participate in both segments. During the first, the collaborators must review the type of students, the expected knowledge to be delivered as well as the platform to be used. The second part requires a consultation from the instructional designer in concert with the faculty member, whose primary responsibility is the development of the course material. (Drysdale, 2019). It is important to note that all of the above were evident in this particular experience involving two university faculty.

Due to the advent of COVID-19, many higher education institutions canceled face-to-face classes and transitioned to providing remote learning (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020; Alqahtani & Rajkham, 2020). They further suggested that the sudden shift in instructional delivery along with the COVID virus created anxiety among both faculty and students regardless of previous experience. Smith et al.’s (2020) study found that offering a mixture of self-paced asynchronous and synchronous discussions would produce a better atmosphere to gain greater attentiveness rather than leaving students to their own devices. Many instructors were not prepared for this transition of classes requiring some knowledge about online instruction's theoretical foundations (Durak & Cankay, 2020). They suggested that there was not the time to instruct faculty with distance education skills. The practices should be called "emergency distance education."

As anticipated, all of the above attributes were evident in the specific example outlined above and cited as this paper's central theme. However, further exploration is warranted to more closely examine the impact of "emergency design, development, and implementation" of online instruction induced by the onset of a pandemic.

**Conclusions**

Given the unexpected change in course delivery for many faculty Perrotta and Bohan (2020) suggests that further studies concerning online faculty experiences should be undertaken. Findings from these future studies would add to the knowledge base in the field of higher education. Furthermore, economies of scale must be realized to respond appropriately to the likelihood of future disasters such as a pandemic.

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Higher E-Learning: Guiding Values for Online Education

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Abstract

As the wave of E-Learning has swelled in recent years, bringing a massive change in its wake, higher education administrators are left playing "catch-up" rather than leading ahead of this tsunami. Many leadership models espouse leading with "values first," but administrators are left without a standard set of distance education values or a way forward to determine them. This presentation explores applicable distance education theories leading to a suggested value orientation for leading online education in the next decade.

Introduction

As the wave of E-Learning swelled in recent years, bringing a massive change in its wake, higher education administrators were often left paddling furiously, playing "catch-up" rather than leading ahead of this distance education tsunami. The total enrollment at US higher education institutions in fall 2020 has decreased by 2.6% since the previous year (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020). Conversely, enrollment at primarily online institutions has increased by 6.1% (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020). Though some administrators may cut programs, grasping onto the last life rafts of in-seat programs with the most potential, other leaders are trying to lean into this change, attempting to ride the online wave forward.

Some literature points to why administrators are starting online programs. One common response was to increase revenue (Alstete, 2014; Betts et al., 2009; Miller, 2014; Nash, 2015). As budget concerns loom in higher education, administrators often believe distance education is a strategic choice to boost enrollment and income. While some hoped that new online programs would result in a fresh influx of cash, many have experienced that distance education increases expenses, especially upfront in development costs (Moore et al., 2015; Picciano, 2015; Saba, 2016). A second common administrative motivation was the desire to increase students' access to attend school and earn a degree (Moloney & Oakley, 2010; Stocker, 2018). Studies do suggest that there continue to be cost savings for delivering courses online (Battaglino et al., 2012; Herman & Banister, 2007).

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of how administrators lead forward. "How," not from the standpoint of the mechanics of starting online programs: marketing, technical support, course development, effective online teaching, and the like. "How" in the values shaping the pedagogy of this new growth. This "how" relates to the "heart" of education that could dangerously be left behind. Many leadership models espouse leading with "values-first." However, distance learning administrators are left without a standard set of values tuned for online education or a way forward to determine them.

In addition, how do administrators select which values will drive online leadership? People draw values from their own experiences, surrounding culture, and religious beliefs. However, value agreement among people is scarce. Our current political milieu in the US shows that even people in the same country, culture, and family can hold disparate guiding principles. The philosophical idea of metaethical moral relativism asserts that absolute or universal moral justifications do not exist but, rather, truth is relative to each people group (Zalta, 2021). Though our families, institutions, and governments are all driven by spoken and unspoken values, no agreed-upon value system exists. Neither will this paper attempt to suggest universal values for distance education, but instead will offer some guiding theories that could help administrators and institutional units thoughtfully consider, articulate, and act on their own positions. This paper first explores two "values-driven" leadership models and then applies two education theories to critique distance education. In conclusion, no list of values will be asserted; rather, a plan of action will be suggested to move readers from theory into contextual action.
Values-Driven Leadership Models

Administrators and researchers apply leadership theories widely in business, health care, and higher education. The leadership of distance education is no exception. Two applicable leadership theories are Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1985) and Transactional Leadership (Burns, 1978).

Transformational Leadership is the most often cited leadership theory concerning distance education (Barnett, 2018; Beaudoin, 2003; Fredericksen, 2017; Nworie, 2012). Leaders following this approach do not act to simply require adherence by followers, but rather to inspire a transformational change for both the follower and surrounding culture (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978, 2003). Transformational leadership also supports nurturing an ethical center in the leader, resulting in more moral decisions and actions (Northouse, 2013).

In contrast to transformational leadership, transactional leadership (Burns, 1978) is a basic transaction or exchange between leader and follower. For example, when a leader asks for a worker to do a job and the worker gets paid, that is a transactional example. In distance education development, an example would be an administrator hiring and paying a faculty person to develop an online course. In transformational leadership, the same basic transaction may exist, but in addition, an administrator might inspire the faculty with a vision for how online could transform their teaching. Or, the administrator might raise the faculty level of morality by connecting course development with increased access to underserved populations or the extended reach of the class message.

So, in summary, these two leadership approaches present a choice: Transformational or Transactional. The leadership challenge is to shift from the transactional management of online program creation and launch to the more transformational leadership tasks of inspiring and motivating stakeholders towards a new vision of education (Beaudoin, 2002; Portugal, 2006).

Critical Theories for Distance Education

An overarching challenge for administrators is that they often operate in structures bound in tradition and designed for a different era of higher education (Burnette, 2015; Nworie, 2012). Theory can help guide researchers and practitioners through critical reflection on classroom policies and practices (Higgs, 2013). Two applicable theories are the Industrialization of Education (Peters, 1994) and the Capitalization of Education (Bowles & Gintis, 1977, 2002; Braverman, 1998; Chau, 2010; Zacharakis et al., 2014). These theories are "critical pedagogies," which seek to confront power relations and justice within the educational sphere (Steinberg & Down, 2020). Justice and power issues exist in e-learning, even if they are hidden behind login screens. To note, these are just two broad critical pedagogies, and other theories may be more applicable in another administrator’s context. In this section, I will briefly describe each theory with suggested connections to distance education.

As early as 1967, Otto Peters criticized distance education as "industrialized education" (Peters, 1994). Keegan (1980), the distance education historian, went a step further, labeling it the "most industrial form of education" (p. 21). Both overall online enrollment and online school size grew rapidly in the years that followed. Beyond this "massification" (Freire, 1973) of online schools, distance education conforms to this "factory model of education" (Callahan, 1962; Sobel, 1969) by incorporating marketing, mechanization, division of labor, line management, quality control, and standardized mass production in course delivery (Powar, 2003). Borrowing Ritze's (2013) phrase, distance education has easily adapted to "McDonaldization." As schools scale larger, classes are mechanized, and consistency is enforced across courses, developing an online program may be more like operating a fast-food franchise than running an academic institution.

Lending support to the industrialization theory, Paulo Freire (1970) critically describes the "banking model" of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into students through one-way transactions. The banking model practice in online education is common (Boyd, 2016; Kash & Dessinger, 2010). Any online student knows the "content dump" type courses too well, where the majority of activity is one-way consumption of videos, text, and images. Even elements intended to increase interaction, like quizzes and discussion boards, are too often graded on how well students regurgitate the content back to the instructor. Often, the learning management system is doing most of the grading, with the instructor doing less and less as courses and programs grow. Saba (2016) theorizes that as our education delivery becomes industrialized into standardization and conformity, our learning becomes devoid of variety. The industrialization of distance education, with its massification and banking approaches, thrives in uniformity and mechanization.
A second important and applicable theory is "the Capitalization of Education" (Bowles & Gintis, 1977, 2002; Braverman, 1998). Also called "the retail model" of education (Shugart, 2013), it is more recently applied to distance education (Chau, 2010; Zacharakis et al., 2014). Capitalization uncovers the financial motivations for industrialization, which is high among administrators (Alstete, 2014; Betts et al., 2009; Miller, 2014; Nash, 2015). The capitalistic underpinnings of distance education are plain in the administrative talk of lowering the price of tuition, increasing production of courses, rushing first to market, and reducing labor costs by hiring part-time instructors. Students, too, enter into this consumer relationship as they shop around at various schools, decide on the best value for their dollar, and demand their money's worth (Beaudoin, 2003; Chau, 2010). In addition, faculty-created content is becoming monetized as online courses they have developed go beyond their teaching assignment, and universities sell them again and again (Aaron & Roche, 2015; Rhoades, 2017) even after some professors have died (Bartlett, 2021). Those at other institutions often criticize for-profit online schools for exchanging quality for quantity to increase income (Beaudoin, 2016); however, public and non-profit institutions are not immune from the same monetary motivations driving distance education development.

**Critical Theory Leading to Values-First Distance Education Leadership**

First, this paper has lauded the importance of distance education administrators using values-driven, transformational type leadership. Transformational leaders seek to positively change the followers and culture, not just act in a transactional manner. At the same time, transformational leaders also strive to act from “ethical centers.”

Second, the Industrialization of Education and Capitalization of Education theories were applied to critique the massification and banking approaches of distance education and the monetization of online courses.

One critique of critical pedagogy is that it deals with social justice issues at an abstract, political level (Bowers, 1993). However, Freire (1970) is careful to explain the essential movement from theory to liberation with three steps: name, reflect, and act. First, all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, and students together) must name the oppressive or dehumanizing pedagogy in the online teaching space. Second, they must reflect on the oppressive contradictions that exist there. It falls short just to name and reflect, so finally, they must act to change the online classroom for the better. Freire called this last step “praxis:” transformative action driven by shared values.

By leveraging critical pedagogy and our values-driven leadership theories, administrators can help shape distance education towards a positive future. Institutes of higher learning know how to deliver content online; they have for decades. Now it is time to name, reflect, and act to deliver higher e-learning.

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Overcoming Data Collection Obstacles in a Pandemic

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Abstract
Distance learning can be challenging at any level. However, having the right support is key to succeeding and reaching the finish line. The current paper discusses the strategies used to overcome data collection obstacles during the Covid-19 pandemic that resulted in the completion of a doctoral degree. The paper further discusses how these strategies were adapted to meet the needs of the pandemic. Finally, the paper identifies key concepts to mastering the process and provides a personal reflection from one of the authors.

Introduction
The use of online e-learning systems has become common with many colleges and universities at all levels of education. This has been accelerated because of the current global pandemic, Covid-19, resulting in schools being shut down across the world and as a result, online learning has significantly risen. Technology has offered many institutions the possibility to ensure learners from all levels an opportunity to continue learning. In some cases, colleges and universities have been forced to make 100% transition by offering resources to their students online in the form of eBooks, recorded lectures, quizzes, and interactive discussion forums.

The rise of online e-learning systems has provided traditional brick-and-mortar institutions new ways to explore how students learn and teachers teach in the online environment. While there is hope that this pandemic will be temporary, we know that it has changed the face of education. Many have focused on issues related to the traditional undergraduate experience, however the pandemic has also affected doctoral students undertaking traditional research. This paper discusses the practical strategies one researcher used to overcome the data collection obstacle during the Covid-19 pandemic and further outlines key concepts others can use to help master these strategies.

Barriers to Doctoral Completion

Previous research indicates student persistence, maintaining enrolment, topic selection, and maintaining a dissertation supervisor (Seagram et al., 1998) are top issues related to doctoral completion. However, many student’s complete coursework required for a doctoral degree, but never complete the dissertation becoming “All But Dissertation” (ABD) in their degree progression. Previous research estimates that up to 60% of doctoral students become ABD (Kelley & Glennon, 2016). Bottomley et al. (2020) conclude that in addition to providing student support, a focus on student behaviour is also an important component of student persistence and completion. Currently, little is known on how the Covid-19 pandemic will affect those in doctoral education overall, but it is clear the traditional research processes have been interrupted, especially related to qualitative research methods that tend to be more personal and relational in nature.

Use of Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative research is a research method used to collect and analyse non-numerical data which can be text, video, or audio to understand concepts, experiences, and opinions of others. The method is helpful in gathering in-depth insights into a problem or even new ideas.

Advantages of qualitative research studies:
- Takes place over a very short time period, normal two to three weeks
- Design is participatory
The use of selected Qualitative methods to help achieve data collection is summarized below:

(i) Use Interviews
In social science and business research using both structured and un-structured interview methods that have previously been in person and face-to-face are important to the data collection process in qualitative research such as in case studies, narrative inquiries, etc. However, because of the Covid-19 pandemic many researchers were required to conduct these relational activities through remote techniques such as phone interviews or video conferencing to enable data collection during a time where the consequences of face-to-face interviews were unknown. In other cases, face-to-face interviews were possible by limiting the number of participants, social distancing guidelines, and adherence to hygiene measures such as wearing a face covering.

Unstructured interviews may involve a smaller group of between two or three people where the researcher listens to their contribution. Structured interviews tend to have a bigger number of participants and the use of telephone calls helps to reach to a wider sample. Focus group discussion through technological platforms ensures a wider group takes part in the qualitative research. Interview questionnaire can also be sent to participants through emails. These have shown to be among some of the best ways to get participant feedback during the challenging time of the pandemic and to assist in keeping everyone safe.

(ii) Secondary Data Sources – Case Studies
Case study research provides in-depth insights on a specific subject but requires multiple sources of data to triangulate the results. While interviews and document analysis are generally primary data sources. Secondary data sources are also needed. During the Covid-19 pandemic primary data collection provided heightened level of challenge in the process. Therefore, secondary data sources were relied on more heavily for students’ dissertations. There are a wide range of secondary sources of data ranging from policy issues around the research, media analysis, and internet sources.

(iii) Online Data Collection
Another avenue is online data collection during a pandemic that can be possible for students pursuing their doctoral degree, as well as for researchers, and other stakeholders if the purpose or importance of the research is well described. Adapting to new approaches requires a good research design that will help access the participants as well as take care of ethical, administrative, and logistical factors. One of the primary issues that a researcher needs to consider is whether their research study from the standpoint of design, participant interaction, and human subject protections is a good fit for online data collection methods. In some research studies, it is vital that the researcher takes care of the potential emotional impact of the study on participants, which would not make this a good strategy to employ.

Technology Strategies to Overcome Data Collection Issues

The Coronavirus pandemic would most likely limit face-to-face interviews and to overcome this barrier, use of technology is inevitable. However, there is still the possibility of excluding participants who would have normally been included in the study because of factors such as: lack of digital literacy or even access to such digital technologies, socio-economic deprivation, lack of needed support to be able to participate in research, and the mental health issues for those who have been adversely affected by the pandemic. Other issues are that research tools would require some level of access to technology, reaching out and selection of participants, and the participatory methods.

To overcome, these preliminary design challenges some of the solutions would be to;
(i) Embrace use of mobilizers who can help reach out to required participants and providing training for research participants
(ii) Facilitation for access to internet for participants
(iii) Alternative use of secondary data instead of data collection; careful analysis of already existing materials can complement the primary data collection.
Personal Reflections

“The unknown” are the difficulties associated with conducting research and one can only hope these are minimal because preparing for the unknown is not the easiest task. Conducting research of any sort during a pandemic inevitably comes along with a unique set of challenges. Figuring out how to navigate these unforeseen circumstances can be difficult and defeating at times, especially for a novice researcher. Considering the importance of working through the unknown, the researcher should devise a plan and carefully execute, to ensure successful completion of the research process. Trusting the process and utilizing a system of support is crucial therefore my story should highlight a few major reasons as to why doing so is such a crucial aspect in the research process.

The obstacles that I faced during my data collection process were vast to say the least. Writing a document of over a hundred pages only to find that the most crucial element was missing was defeating and it almost made me give up. ABD was very appealing in those moments in time. I was so close to being finished and I found out that I needed an additional data source to triangulate my data. The pandemic made that a very scary fact for me. Considering the difficulties that I had already encountered with the participant interviews, which was my primary data source. I feared that finding an additional data source with only a few weeks to go in my course would be my demise. The difficulties that I encountered with participants made this appear to be the end of my doctoral journey. I reached out to my University Research Methodologist (URM) and Panel Validator (PV) each of them gave me a list of additional data sources that I could possibly use, but at that time all of the data sources on the list seemed very time consuming and time was not on my side. I chatted with my URM endlessly, and he one day asked, did I take notes during my interviews and if they were thorough, I stated “yes”. He expressed to me in his snarky way that my second data source has been residing with me for some time. I was able to utilize my field notes or journal entries as my secondary data source for triangulation. I posed this option to my other committee members and neither of the other two members objected.

The problem was not solved there though, I was then tasked with having to draft another chart and code things all over again, this task was not my favourite and was more challenging than the first time I had to complete it. This to me was more daunting than any of the technological glitches during my participant interviews. More challenging than all of the participants who were eliminated because of having to be subjected to the use of technology during the pandemic. Some participants were less inclined to participate in my study because of their access to technology or their inability to use the platforms provided as a resource to conduct interviews. While ensuring the safety of both myself and the participant, of course, was a major priority. At the time I was conducting my interviews the pandemic was truly at its peak and in its prime. There was so much uncertainty and to be honest aside from the technological challenges and just the unreliable nature of some participants, conducting the interviews were not challenging, finding participants that met a specific criterion that were not affected adversely by the pandemic was the true issue at hand, amongst all of the issues that came along with conducting interviews utilizing technology as a resource. My participants weren’t at liberty to be as open because we were using technology and some feared breaches of security or their personal information being leaked and compromised. All in all, I must say that my research preparation process, prepared me for the worst and my level of resilience heightened to a place that I never fathomed.

Having conducted a thorough literature review, insights from other researchers guided me on drawing a connection between the key concepts and this helped to critically evaluate the approaches from different authors in my dissertation. The way to best explain my research and data collection process is that I secured my data sources after evaluating all the theories and chose the one that aligned with my research. Utilizing member checking, participant interviews, and journal or field notes. I was able to conclude my data analyses with multiple data sources seamlessly, while also being guided and having questions answered by my University Research Methodologist (URM) at every turn. My theoretical framework sought to affirm the existing knowledge by interpreting and understanding data from existing research. In my research I relied on data from both primary sources – the 8 participant interviews – and secondary sources to guide me through the completion of my dissertation document, also with the guidance and relationship that was established with my URM.
Conclusion

Completing a dissertation during a global pandemic has been a unique moment in my life. The pandemic has tested every doctoral and distant learning student, I am certain, in many ways and especially in the data collection phase of the research. However, the ability to adapt quickly, in ways that I would not have expected, provided the opportunity to realize a life goal and complete my final milestone in the doctoral journey. Through embracing technology and qualitative research methods, I was able to collect data that would support me in my research endeavour. To overcome the challenge due to technology tools, researchers ought to ensure the participants are fully aware of the purpose of the research and have a team to support them in the mobilization of research participants to guarantee success of the research process. The Covid-19 pandemic could disappear or linger, but there is hope for researchers if they are willing to be adaptive and design their research to ensure there are minimal hurdles at every stage. Finally, it is imperative to seek guidance from one’s peers, mentors/professors, and others within their support system.

References


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Online and In-person Communications: What is the Difference and Why it Matters

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Abstract

This paper will explore the dimensions of online and face to face communications in teaching, introducing participants to applied theories of transpersonal communication and psychology. The goal is to expand understanding of communicative possibilities through virtual channels to increase learning potential. To bring together these topics, a multi-disciplinary view is employed, utilizing information from pedagogical theory, distance learning literature, communications study, and transpersonal and humanistic psychology. Also considered are the implications for understanding transcendental states, critical thinking, critical consciousness, and what is termed “transpersonal efficacy” in the shared learning spaces in online environments. The paper also examines a familiar educational construct, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, and his often overlooked pyramidion, the state of self-transcendence. The implications for a deeper understanding and appreciation of communications in both in-person and computer mediated contexts point to greater potentials for teaching effectiveness in distance learning and in-person environments.

Introduction and Background

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the necessary closing of in-person physical locations of teaching, a great migration to online teaching and learning plunged many educators into an unexpected, if necessary, change in the delivery format of their courses. In addition to quickly handling and converting basic course content, perhaps the most frustrating aspect of forced online teaching for many faculty was the sudden shift from familiar in-person communications to the unfamiliar communication channels of online learning. Institutions variously adapted models of asynchronous online courses, synchronous online courses, and a range of blended modalities (Ali, 2020; Crawford, et al., 2020; Gonzalez, et al., 2020; Petronzi & Petronzi, 2020). Many faculty have taken from this experience a view that while necessary, online instruction does not provide the same quality of interaction as their in-person course experiences and leave both them and the students in various states of unease (Galanek & Gierdowski, 2019; Lederman, 2020).

This paper will not attempt to answer a general question resonating now in popular media, “is face-to-face communication better than online communication?” The evidence to support the no significant difference argument for online instruction in higher education has been debated and vetted in volumes of research and need not be reiterated here (Allen, et al., 2004; Bernard, et al., 2004; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Nguyen, 2015; Park & Shea, 2020). Despite a proven efficacy of online teaching in achieving basic pedagogical goals, the prevailing assumption is that in-person learning is preferred over current forced e-learning modalities as parents and communities push hard to reopen schools for a variety of personal, economic, and social reasons. Especially for younger learners, the social and emotional benefits of in class school experience clearly outweigh the utilitarian solution of mass e-learning for the purpose of continuity of basic instruction (Zins & Elias, 2007). For adult learners, where instructional needs are more self-directed and supported, the present crisis has forced new considerations of the added value of in-class experience weighed against the efficacy of online instruction. For purposes of discussion, this paper will examine the experiential dimensions and quality of in-person communication and synchronous communication through computer mediated channels.

The present reality has brought a critical question about teaching and learning to the forefront: What are the qualitative differences between in-person educational experiences and those in online synchronous environments and, if in-person learning is “better,” why is that so? In this paper, I explore current understanding of how and to what ends communications take place in electronically mediated spaces especially in contrast to those typical of in-
person communications. Considered here are implications for integrating consciousness and transpersonal efficacy as elements in discussions of communicative acts and environments directed at intentional learning outcomes.

With the onset of the Covid-19 crisis and response, merging and urgent discussions focused, among other things, on the consideration of how online or virtual communication differs from more predictable and familiar patterns of in-person communicative encounters. A widely held and common assumption among faculty, students, administration, and the general public is that online communications while necessary and to some degree efficacious, are inherently inferior or less-preferred to in-person encounters. This paper interrogates this *a priori* assumption through a consideration of the general nature and efficacy of communication in teaching and learning and how this may or may not differ between direct in-person communications and communications that are mediated by electronic channels and technologies. “A screen is not a classroom” has become a popular meme and protest slogan, used in public demonstrations against forced, at-home e-learning as many schools remain shut down or with limited in-person contact or partial attendance in-person. It illustrates the prevailing (and somewhat negative) perception of synchronous computer-mediated spaces for live learning as being inferior to in-person, traditional classroom space.

As mentioned further on, some of these perceptions are countered with some research into overall efficacy of online, distance learning *versus* in-class instruction in real time. The present debate over national priorities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic includes considerations of the psychological, social, and pedagogical damage to student populations absent from the daily routines of in-class learning in schools. Most of this debate is centered on K-12 instruction, but the impact on higher education, which is largely more adaptable and flexible in terms of transitions to online learning, has been present in popular media outlets as well (Lossin & Battle, 2020; Schroeder, 2020). We know that quantity and quality of communications have tremendous impact on learning. Numerous studies in educational research literature explore the quality of communications (and to some extent, quantity) as it impacts overall effectiveness of teaching and student learning, identified primarily through academic performance and achievement (Fendick, 1992; Gayle, et al., 2009) or the negative impact of communicative apprehension (Allen & Bourhis, 1996; Bourhis & Allen, 1992). Other large studies have examined, for quite some time, this direct comparison of communicating in distance education and classroom instructional environments (Hiltz, 1986; Mothibi, 2015). Studies exploring this comparison range from the effectiveness of communication in higher education comparing online and in-person satisfaction with the course experience (e.g., Barnard, Paton, & Rose, 2008), the impact of synchronous, as opposed to asynchronous, teaching and learning, and comparisons with distance and in-class educational settings on achievement, attitude, and retention outcomes (Bernard, et al., 2004) among many other factors. If, as research literature generally suggests and when following proven methods, online teaching and learning can be just as, if not more effective in achieving desired educational goals, then what qualities attached to in-person communication in educational settings cause us to prefer this method over electronically mediated forms of teaching and learning? There must be something about in-person communication that we find inherently desirable yet describing specifically what this is remains elusive in the context of course design, teaching practice, and research.

**Communication as a Basic Function of Teaching and Learning**

The internalized concept of teaching implies communication, both as an active and intentional phenomenon and as a more subtle, unintentional consequence of the act of teaching itself (Junod Perron, et al., 2015; Rasmussen, 2001). A teacher teaches, in our most traditional understanding of that process, using communicative norms such as verbal and nonverbal speech, visual symbolic language through writing and drawing, and physical demonstration (modeling of behavior and process). Large portions of pedagogical method and theory are circumscribed by at least one assumed communicative domain or another (Laurillard, 1995). "To teach and to communicate are activities that have very close meanings," wrote Vandevelde (1982, p. 34). It is hard to imagine, for example, a “silent” or non-communicative form of learning even under auto-didactic (self-directed learning) circumstances where the individual is engaged in a form of communication with the self as both teacher and student (Hiemstra, 2004). Considering self-directed learning, Turký and Soliman (2020) point to the advantages of using social networking skills, cultivated through social media, in supporting self-directed learning goals. It is common for those pursuing self-directed learning, whether formal or informal, to form communities with fellow learners having similar interests (Asterhan & Bouton, 2017; Carter, et al., 2020). Even in self-directed learning where we might expect greater isolation in the context of remote or distance learning modalities, the form of pedagogy is not necessarily as alienating for social connections as we might think.

While human communications have been a subject of interest and inquiry, in one disciplinary form or another, throughout human existence we only have a mere half century of exploration of how electronic technology impacts
our encounters. Online communications are considered a mediated form within a broader domain of communicative acts associated with teaching practices (Okdie, et al., 2011; Singh & Thurman, 2019; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Computer Mediated Communications (CMC) has been a field of study since technology first began “mediating” human to human communication through analogue voice, text, symbolic language, real-time digitized speech, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), and through video/audio streaming through the web (Thurlow et al., 2004; Walther, 1996). Communications as a general process of formal, traditional teaching has often been characterized as transmissive, imparting information in one-way forms of verbal or visual presentation of information. Freire (1968/2018; 1970) in his critique of traditional pedagogical method likened this to the “banking concept,” where students are perceived as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge. The critique of transmissive information models for the past 5 decades at least has recast the learning experience as one where “transformative” potential for the learner is achieved through the active construction of knowledge using socially engaged approaches to information exploration (Baumgartner, 2004; Zuzovsky, 2019). Even though the critique of transmissive models is pervasive in the literature and texts of pedagogy at all levels, college and university teaching still reflects faculty preferences for transmissive approaches to information in their classrooms (Freeman, et al., 2014; Kramer, 2017). Topics at national and international conferences as well as local and regional workshops aimed at advancing university and college level teaching and faculty development frequently invoke the power of cognitive constructivist and active learning approaches to support transformative learning in modern classrooms.

Just as habitual forms of communication in classrooms impose didactic and transmissive approaches in the physical classroom space, similar communication patterns have emerged in online synchronous course communications. Radford (2011) and her colleagues explored Erving Goffman’s “face-work” theory (1967) in relation to online synchronous communication’s efficacy in contexts where individuals are motivated to communicate to achieve specific outcomes. Goffman’s face-work involves explanations of the ways in which individuals use specific patterns of self-representation to achieve communicative efficacy in various group social settings. Classrooms, whether online or in-person, typically impose rigid and structured expectations for communicative norms with some pointing to online environments being even more so (Chadwick & Ralston, 2010; Dykman & Davis, 2008). Such formal role expectations can have negative effects on authentic communications in online environments and contribute to maintaining personal and social positions, identity, and socio-cultural expectations and assumptions. All the latter can be viewed simultaneously as norms that facilitate efficient communication and as pre-defined barriers to authentic communicative encounters, especially those that breach habitual cultural and social biases. Transformation, in the pedagogical sense, seems to be an elusive goal in the online environment. Could it be that we seem to prefer the in-person contexts of teaching precisely because of our comfort with pre-defined roles, expectations, and levels of control? There is a performance element in teaching in-person that is not captured in online environments. Faculty expressing a preference for in-person teaching often comment on the ability to foster good discussions, yet some research suggests that online discussions promote more higher-level thinking, reflection, and time to consider responses and content (Meyer, 2003). Kim and Bonk (2010) explored the concept of “instructional immediacy” in comparing in-person and online transactions between professors and students, especially in relation to psychological distance inhibiting educational outcomes for online students. They concluded that the application of specific methods for synchronous and asynchronous learning can be applied to facilitate instructional immediacy, an essential quality to successful educational outcomes. Truly transformative learning environments would seem to require more flexible opportunities for open communications between all actors.

How Much (Real) Communication Occurs in Any Classroom?

The research on communications in classrooms as part of teaching and student learning is voluminous (Gayle et al., 2009). Much of it is focused on ways specific types of communication such as language, speech, dialect, directional attitude, and efficacy of specific methods or technologies as variables impact teaching effectiveness, measured by academic outcomes and achievement or teacher credibility (Finn, et al., 2009). A subcomponent of research in the broad field of communications, which is instrumental to this paper’s topic, is the comparative study of what we term “face to face,” or as will be used in this writing, “in-person” communications with communications that occur in electronically mediated formats. The latter research most often focuses on comparing in-class or in-person teaching effectiveness to similar or comparable educational goals or outcomes when they are mediated by online or virtual communications. It is some indication that the title of many of these comparative studies variably use the term “versus,” implying that there is an oppositional, superior, or qualitative judgement to be made regarding the inherent value of the form of the communication, whether in-person or electronically mediated. One given assumption, based on broad research consensus, is that there exists both effective and ineffective communications in all teaching and learning experiences, regardless of modality (Betts, 2009a).
Studies in classroom communication often differentiate between verbal and nonverbal communication as the two primary domains, and written communication as a third. These three basic domains are often further divided into 6 prevalent interactions: teacher to classroom, teacher to student, student to teacher, student to classroom, and student to student. Each of these interactive pairings evoke immediate examples for anyone familiar with classroom experiences at any level of instruction. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) theory would further include the student’s as well as the teacher’s inclusion in groupings outside of the classroom and include such interactive pairings as teacher to teacher, teacher to parent, teacher to community, student to parent, student to peer group, and other broader and overlapping societal affiliations such as religious, clubs, intentional communities, and extended family (Betts, 2009a; Tubbs & Moss, 2006).

The quality of communication in any learning environment or context needs to be examined as there can be “good” (effective) or “bad” (counterproductive) communications in all teaching and learning spaces. More than a functional element in the transfer of information, the outcomes of communicative acts depend on learner and teacher states of mind, awareness, and consciousness, what is increasingly being referred to as “mindfulness” in educational research literature (Vilvens, et al., 2020). Beyond the assumed inefficacy of traditional didactic teacher to student communications, as in the lecture (Mazer & Hess, 2017), the effects of peer-to-peer communication on learning have also been explored (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Li, et al., 2020). The impact of SEL theory on college classrooms holds promise for direct application of mindfulness to increase learning (Biber, 2020). Classroom practices that promote more peer communication, as those found in the “flipped” classroom model have demonstrated more positive effects on learning (Cheng, Ritzhaupt, & Antonenko, 2019; Shi, et al., 2020). Finally, beyond the language being used, communications are bound to cultural norms and practices and culture impacts the efficacy of communications in educational settings (Gunawardena, et al., 2003; Lefringhausen, et al., 2019). As will be explored in the next section, a question emerges as to whether online/CMC are deterministically inferior to in-person encounters with others.

From Interpersonal to Transpersonal

Educators most typically encounter the terms “interpersonal” and “intrapersonal” as part of their training in the foundational theoretical study of educational communications and psychology, especially in the contexts of social and emotional learning theories (Aben, et al., 2019; Mertens, et al., 2020). Discussion of inter-personal communications typically focus on peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student interactions while intra-personal communications target the individual’s self-esteem and self-efficacy towards given tasks or the general educational environment. Less well known are theories and practices associated with “transpersonal” communication and psychology. Transpersonal is a term derived from the humanistic psychology of Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Wilhem Reich and others who theorized that a transcendent consciousness existed outside of the individual and is a legitimate space for learning and communications among groups of individuals and between individuals. Transpersonal literally means “beyond the personal,” which relocates the focus of communicative acts in phenomenon that occur in the space between two or more actors in communication. Transpersonal spaces help define group communications, which are especially important to socio-cultural outcomes in group-oriented pedagogy such as those promoted in active learning and project-based and problem-based instructional methods (Stork, 2019).

The field of psychology evolved through four primary movements referred to as “Forces”. The First Force represented by Freud’s psychodynamic theories at the beginning of the 20th century and the study of human mental pathology through primary brain research and experimentation. The Second Force is associated with Watson and Skinner’s behaviorism from about 1920 to the mid-1950s, which posits that learning is equated with observable changes in behavior, affected by stimulus and response and environmental conditioning. Much of pedagogical theory is still rooted to some degree in the foundations of this second force of psychology, with discussions of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, behavioral objectives, and can still be found in the literature and texts used in teacher education. Educators are familiar with and refer consistently to Bloom’s Taxonomy in keeping the currency of behavioral objectives-driven pedagogical design intact (Bloom, 1959). A revised taxonomy developed later (Amer, 2006; Krathwohl, 2002) and which includes cognitive outcomes and domains in addition to those represented more by behavioral activity (Lau et al., 2018) provide the added dimension of cognition to Bloom’s schema of learning activity. Traditional approaches to instructional design (e.g., the ADDIE model) remain grounded in second force psychology of behaviorism and cognitivism. The influence of the related sub field of psychology, cognitivism, is important to the current discussion.
Cognitive psychology grew from experimental psychology and neuroscience research in the latter half of the 20th century and has been widely influential in the fields of education and pedagogy. Related to second force psychology, cognitivism grew into a foundational theory in educational practices. The “science of learning” represents a parallel development to the behavioral and humanistic, which consider the “what” and the “why” of human activity, especially in education, to the “how” of brain function and learning. Cognitive theory considers such “mechanistic” functions of the brain as sensory perception, stimulus, memory, attention, and language (Cherry, 2019). The current attention to neuroscience and learning has shaped much recent discussion in the world of distance learning, pedagogy, and instructional design (Dubinsky, et al., 2013).

A Third Force in psychology emerged in the 1940s as psychology began to consider more holistic approaches to the human mind and well-being. Humanistic psychology was a direct response to the perceived de-humanization of behavioral approaches used throughout institutional formal education in the US and in Europe (Patterson, 1987). Founded by Rogers and Maslow as two of its principal leaders and theorists, humanistic psychology became popular in the 1960s through the 1980s. Humanistic education, as an outgrowth and direct application of humanistic psychology, integrated holistic approaches to learning and the learning environment leading to such innovations as the open classroom movement, integrated learning, project-based learning, and experiential learning (Underhill, 1989; Levstik & Barton, 2001).

Course design basics, as taught to instructional design and faculty development support staff, typically focus on the mechanical assembly of course elements and are structured for effective learning using such devices as the ADDIE model, SAM, or other well-known design models. Psychology, and its constituent disciplines (and sub-disciplines) of developmental, cognitive, personality, humanistic, and behavioral psychology, among others, are required components of formal teacher training (K-12) but often absent or not emphasized in higher education pedagogy. The term pedagogy has become the conventional term for the applied theories of course design and learning experience construction, yet andragogy, the adult learning theories of Malcom Knowles (1978), another of the humanist psychologists in the Third Force, is still not as directly applied to the teaching of university and college student populations, especially graduate students. Indeed, given that most college and university students are well into their adult years, we would expect more andragogy (the teaching of adults) and less pedagogy (the teaching of children) as theory constructs for course design. Andragogical methods of teaching lean heavily on assumptions about adult motivation, sense of purpose, and self-efficacy in learning situations, which all differ considerably from methods derived from the teaching of children in different stages of human development.

In 1967 Maslow, along with other leading members of the field such as Carl Rogers, Gregory Bateson, Rollo May, and William James, created a Fourth Force in psychology, Transpersonal Psychology, which extended beyond the focus on the individual to consider a state of self-transcendence, evidenced through clinical accounts of individuals with reports of “out-of-body” or transcendent states of consciousness (Guest, 1989; Hastings, 1999). These were in some cases results of experimentation with psychotropic biochemistry or with individuals encountering deep meditative states through practiced meditation (Bourguignon, 1973; Raković, 1995; Vaitl, et al., 2005). While research on such altered states seems dated and limited in the context of latter 20th century social experimentation, there is some renewed and growing interest in the apparent connection of virtual reality (VR) technology and so-called out-of-body experiences (Sanchez-Vives & Slater, 2005; van Heugten-van der Kloet, et al., 2018). Research into transcendental states of consciousness has proceeded unabated since the early 1960s and is still a growing field of interest (Grof, 2019). Transpersonal psychology encompasses spiritual states as a phenomenon beyond individual subjective experience. Increasing awareness of the role that spiritual reality plays in health and well-being has seen an increase in research in nursing, health treatment and medicine, and counseling (Wade & Kasper, 2006).

Many educators and instructional designers involved in Distance Education, primarily through their exposure to instructional design and basic pedagogical theory, are quite familiar with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as a foundational theory applied to pedagogy studies and the training of teachers (Maslow, 1943; Frame, 1996; McLeod, 2007). It is used often in presenting models of instructional design to faculty. Education broadly aims to facilitate both the growth of the individual and the individual as a member of society (Dewey, 1923; Bass, 1997) and the continuation of society through social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973). While primarily a model for human growth, development and psychological well-being, Maslow’s hierarchy is often affiliated with pedagogy as Maslow posited that learning was inseparable from the growth and development of the individual (Maslow, 1971). In Maslow’s theory, the hierarchy of human developmental needs moves from satisfaction of basic physiological conditions (food, water, rest) through safety and security (elimination of fear), love and belonging, self-esteem and worth, to a
state of “self-actualization” where the full potential of the human mind, talent, and capabilities is possible and achievable. While most educators tacitly familiar with the hierarchy as used in educational theory would consider self-actualization the apex of the pyramid, Maslow posited a state beyond the self-actualized individual, or rather their individual pursuit to become self-actualized, as a further need for “self-transcendence,” often characterized as the individual’s need for meaning and purpose in life and one’s society or community (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Christian, 2018).

**Figure 1. Maslow’s New Hierarchy of Needs**

![Maslow’s New Hierarchy of Needs](image)

(as used by Christian, 2018)

Self-transcendence is often thought of as awareness of “something larger than yourself” and conflated with purely religious or spiritual beliefs but actually includes non-religious phenomenon such as “interconnectedness” with others, and connection to environmental and natural world realities and phenomenon (Hoot & Friedman, 2010, p. 89-100). Transpersonal psychology has been widely utilized as a theoretical framework in the fields of healthcare, counseling, and social work (Besthorn, 2001; Watson, 2002).

**From Cognition to Consciousness**

Transpersonal psychology is in essence about shared consciousness and therefore considered more a subject of philosophical inquiry, often overlooked as a location of empirical research. Recently though, attention to transpersonal and spiritual phenomenon in academic research has increased (Koenig, 2008; Koenig, 2015; Stork, 2019; Walker & Dixon, 2002). Most educational research examines characteristics of human cognition or observable behaviors of individuals and groups, seeking to describe statistically and/or qualitatively what works in promoting ideal learning, and what does not. Indeed, the present interest in the “science of learning,” – where neuroscience attempts to explain processes and conditions of learning as a physiological phenomenon – does not often include recent research into states of human consciousness. Neuroscience, after all, is more about the individual as the unit of analysis. The cognitive/behavioral model is about memory and definitions of learning from a brain perspective and would seem to have little room for consideration of transpersonal spaces and intersubjective communication.

To understand the nature of in-person communication, we need to look beyond what is practical or functionally effective since both in-person and CMC communications can be both (practical and functional) in achieving good communication. Are there elements of a communicative event that exist in real-time presence with others that do not or cannot exist through CMC? Shared consciousness, or “non-local” consciousness is one hypothesized phenomenon which theorizes a context for transpersonal encounters (Wallace, 2004). The existence of consciousness is a philosophical topic, but also has been the subject of scientific research (Penfield, 2015; Van Lommel, 2013). Anderson posited that there are two types of consciousness; the “personal or individual” consciousness (I, in relation to the world) and “transpersonal or unity” consciousness, which is characterized by the “absence of all multiplicity and the complete oneness of everything…” (1977, p. 119, emphasis in original). Eastern
philosophies, while not widespread in US curricular movements of the time, had gained wide acceptance and practice in popular culture in the latter half of the 20th century, a trend which continues today. Yoga and meditation became accepted therapies in counseling and mental health and to some limited degree in educational practice, especially in behavioral programs (Kirp, 2014). Bloom (2020) discusses the development of an age of transhuman shared consciousness as electronic media and communications have precipitated awareness of others on a global scale to a much higher degree than at any previous time in history. Consciousness then is an essential component to understanding the quality of our interactions. In education, consciousness as a concept has been used in a variety of ways.

The latter half of the 20th century also saw a great increase in the infusion of education with social activism, as society and popular culture resonated with protests of US involvement the war in Vietnam, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and activism for social justice and racial and gender equality. While at the same time, personal and individual consciousness, through applied humanistic psychology, saw the infusion of values education, human growth and potential curricula in schools. This was all reflected in classrooms and schools as curriculum dealt increasingly with issues of society and of personal values (Taylor, 2019). As one illustrative example, the idea of “consciousness in the classroom” was popularized with the publication of Paulo Freire’s overtly political Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968), which together with his essay “Cultural Action for Freedom” (1970) introduced the term “critical consciousness (conscientização) to new generations of educators and pedagogical theorists (Freire, 1968; Freire, 1970; Jemal, 2017). Critical, in this meaning, has to do with the application of a broader awareness and consciousness of social, historical, political and cultural dimensions of one’s immediate world and can be read, even with its intentional social orientation, as a form of personal consciousness. Freire posited that education could only become less of a tool of oppression as individuals (and through their cultural interactions, in groups) learned for themselves the nature of social and economic realities and inequalities shaping their lives and through taking action to counter their own oppression as part of a pedagogical project. Critical consciousness is overtly political in nature with praxis (applied theory and action), both an instrumental part and result of critical awareness directed towards specific political and cultural goals (Glass, 2001). Decades of educators have been exposed to and trained in pedagogies with intentional societal liberation and social justice at the core of their design (Apple, 2011) but less so in the foundations of consciousness rooted in transpersonal psychology (Korthagen, 2004). Freire critiqued a naïve sense of spirituality in his term magical consciousness, where individuals accepted the fatalism of supernatural or metaphysical causation to social and cultural realities that impacted their lives (Boyd, 2012). The project of conscientization was to create conditions for groups in society to come to understand, through the educational process and through praxis, that specific inequalities were the result of political and economic injustices that needed to be resisted through collective action. While Freire pointed to the religiosity of certain cultures as an obstacle to the growth of critical awareness, he was not anti-spiritual (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017). Cornell West (1988) and others have referenced a critical spirituality, especially in reference to liberation theology and the continuing struggle for social justice among African American churches in the US.

Transpersonal consciousness is not necessarily apolitical. In its orientation towards holistic self-enlightenment and reaching a passive harmony with nature and others, transpersonal consciousness creates collaborative spaces where groups work towards specified goals or problems. The end goal of a transpersonal consciousness is in working for a greater good (Hunt, 1995), beyond “enlightened self-interest” where the ego is still the dominant player (Walsh & Vaughn 1993). Dubrow (2018) discusses “transpersonal efficacy” in relation to teams of co-workers who work in virtual environments. In this sense, the transpersonal is defined as a space where the goals and activities of the team effort are part of a transcendent reality, extending beyond the individual ego space into a shared consciousness. In terms of distance learning, such methods as active learning and group problem-based pedagogy benefit from attention to constructing a group consciousness, which begins with the teacher’s awareness of their own role in creating and supporting “learning fields” in their courses (Bache, 2008, p. 53).

The intersection of higher states of consciousness, or just consciousness in general, and electronically mediated communication has been studied. Gackenbach (2007; 2008; 2011) explored video games as one rather ubiquitous form of technology where personal consciousness intersects with a simulated environment, especially those that approximate full sensory stimulus through virtual 3D reality simulation. Navarro-Haro et al. (2017) have contributed to a growing body of literature on the use of meditation in VR environments. The research being done at the Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL) at Stanford is of note. For example, Roswell and colleagues (2020) at VHIL have explored the development of empathy towards others in VR environments. The research emanating from researchers at the VHIL is more about how individuals and groups interact in virtual environments and how this technology impacts behavior than it is simply about proving the technology works. The development of communication skills
using VR and AR environments has also been a focus of some research (Kron, et al., 2017). This research has demonstrated that complex interpersonal communications are quite possible in online virtual environments and the use of VR in certain psychotherapy treatments has been documented as early as 1995.iii Lenggenhager, et al. (2007) have explored the relationship of out-of-body experiences (OBE), a focal point for scientific research on consciousness, to self-awareness in virtual reality environments, finding that individuals in virtual environments have reactions to the virtual surroundings similar to subjects with OBEs in otherwise real-world settings.

The somewhat limited sensory channels of a typical Zoom™ meeting environment, with 2-dimensional screen images and people speaking one at a time by design, do not compare to those of more sophisticated VR experiences, which intentionally approximate real-world experience. Advanced VR applications are not widespread in education, except in some training and simulation contexts in health, aerospace and aeronautics, transportation and other industries. However, the trajectory of these technologies is clear; VR environments will continue to become more common spaces for real time human interactions, and they do not, as electronically or computer-mediated forms of communication, necessarily inhibit transpersonal communication or the potential of consciousness in pedagogical experiences. Answering the original question about the quality of human communication in online and in-person contexts appears possible only when carefully considering the intended purpose of the communication. Clearly there are positive social and cognitive benefits (Hari et al., 2015) to in-person encounters, yet the efficacy of communication for learning need not be differentiated by whether it is mediated or in the presence of social realities and interactions.

Synthesis and Summary

Understanding communications from different theoretical perspectives provides greater insight when considering a commonly posed question for many educators in this time of extensive online teaching and learning: “How can my communication online be as effective as I perceive my in-person communication experience?” We, as distance learning leaders often engaged with faculty in designing and developing optimum learning experiences for students, would do well to incorporate increasingly advanced understanding of communicative phenomenon in our work. Broadening our vision of communications in such settings from effective, two-way transmissive forms to those considered more effective for group modalities is an avenue for creating truly transformative virtual learning spaces. Similarly, faculty can benefit from spaces for collaboration and support with colleagues (Betts, 2009b).

Consideration of transcendent consciousness in the individual and in the shared spaces of learning environments, both in physical space and in those mediated by electronic communications, hold some promise in creating truly transformative experiences and outcomes for students and educators. Pragmatic implications extend beyond greater clarity in communications and carries great importance for the quality of online learning. The creation of a transcendent space in virtual communication also holds promise for greater individual learner efficacy, development of social and emotional empathy, and the creation of learner outcomes that are harmonious with peaceful and meaningful goals for the individual, society and culture. If the goal of education, as stated in so many institutional strategic plans and vision statements, is for a transformative experience, then we need to understand more of what constitutes actual transformation and employ designs, methods, and experiences to facilitate transformational pedagogy. Building transpersonal efficacy into our course experiences is one step in that direction.

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Transformative, in this sense, is somewhat limited here to the cognitive dimensions of learning reflecting current understanding of neuroscience, with evidence of change states in brain activity.
While outside the scope of this paper for full discussion, the debate between logical positivism and empiricism and phenomenological social inquiry does have some bearing on our understanding of why we might prefer in-person over online interactions, especially in educational contexts (see Percy, 1958, and Biesta, 1999).

For a discussion of VR use in various therapeutical settings, see Palmer (2019).
"But I Hate Group Work!": Supporting Student Growth Through Group Work Online

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College of Coastal Georgia

Introduction

Despite students’ reticence about group work, research shows that students benefit from collaborative learning (Johnson & Johnson 1989; Pantiz 1999), especially when groups operate together for a significant portion of the course (Bean, 1996). The survey completed by my students in the Fall 2020 semester supported these claims and emphasize that complicating factors, like the course occurring online and during a global pandemic, did not negate the benefits students found in their service-learning and collaborative project experience.

This research took place in Fall 2020 with students from three sections of Composition I (one course had a co-requisite support section for struggling students). The two projects addressed in the survey (the group service-learning project and the service-learning symposium poster) were the final projects of the semester. Student groups of four were randomly auto-assigned by the course management system (CMS), so students had some acquaintance with their group members from class discussion posts and peer review for prior projects, but students, largely, did not know one another.

Methods

To recruit participants, students were offered 30 bonus points towards their “coursework” grade. These points helped them if they missed points in weekly discussion, peer review, or reading quizzes. Students who wished to participate submitted a signed consent or assent form that they and, in some cases, their guardian, signed. Students who didn’t want to take the survey but still wanted the bonus points had the option of completing a short writing assignment. Once participants uploaded their informed consent, they received a link through Qualtrics that would de-identify their information. The IRB-approved survey comprised of approximately 40 questions that addressed demographic information and how the student felt about Covid-19, service-learning (S-L), online courses, and their online service-learning experience.

Participant Description

Of the 56 students enrolled in the three courses, 31 (55%) chose to take the survey. Most of them were women (77%) and white (60%); there were 27% Black and 16% Latinx respondents. Most students were between the ages of 18-21 and college freshmen (70%); however, 26% were aged 14-17, dual-credit high school students. Most students (90%) had taken an online course before.

Results and Discussion

Overall, findings were positive. Respondents said the best parts of the class were getting to know classmates, choosing their own community partner, and helping the community while getting credit for it. The free response answers showed that professor engagement is just as important as student engagement.
Feelings about Online Service-Learning

When asked about service-learning during the pandemic, 87% of students surveyed agreed that they were happy to participate in service-learning despite the pandemic (see fig. 1). Further, 70% agreed that the service-learning element made the online course meaningful. This data shows that students respond positively to service-learning, even if there is a pandemic or if it’s occurring in an online course.

In addition, 87% of participants agreed that the online service-learning project was a valuable experience. When the data was filtered to students who rated their participation in the service-learning project as average, good, and excellent, over 92% found the service-learning experience to be valuable. This data shows that students who engage fully in S-L get the most out of S-L.

Connections with the Community & Classmates

One of the goals of S-L is to strengthen the bonds between students and their community. In this study, 83% of students agreed that they felt like they were supporting their community while staying safe, and 77% felt more in touch with the community because of the S-L project. These findings are in accordance with other studies on service learning that found students develop feelings of civic responsibility (Reising et. al, 2006) and can better recognize community needs (Bassi, 2011; Lashley, 2007) through S-L activities. In fact, one group mentioned this on their symposium poster, stating that they learned “Different ways in which [they] can potentially help different people in [their] community.”

Of respondents, 73% felt that they emerged from the S-L component with connections to professionals in our community. These are connections that may prove to be valuable resources upon graduation.

An important aspect of collaborative learning is that it helps students form a social support system (Cohen & Willis, 1985). In this study, 78% of students agreed that the online S-L component helped them get to know their classmates more than other online courses (see fig. 2).

Workplace Preparedness

To simulate the workplace, four students were randomly assigned per group, so students would not know their group members well. After completing the online S-L project, 73% of respondents felt more prepared for group projects in the workplace, and 77% felt equipped for working in a virtual environment in the future. These statistics illustrate that online S-L helps students feel more prepared for the modern workplace.

Skills Learned

Almost all respondents (97%) agreed that they learned a new skill through online S-L. Skills rated most highly were collaboration (80%), teamwork (77%), project planning (77%), and professional email skills (67%). Interestingly, college freshmen rated collaboration and project planning highest among the skills they learned, whereas the dual-credit high school students reported learning to hold and attend virtual meetings along with collaboration.

When asked what they would change about their online S-L experience, respondents said that they would rather have in-person meetings instead of virtual ones and that they would change their own time management. The college freshmen valued in-person meetings most, while the dual-credit high school students focused on changing their own time management.
**Best Practices**

Most respondents (90%) felt prepared when they began the online S-L project. Frequent group meetings, creating a framework for group communication and accountability, and consistent valuation of collaboration facilitates engagement in the group project and sets students up for success.

Frequent group meetings are essential for collaborative success. This course required weekly virtual meetings in a room set up for the groups within the course management system. Students created several forms of documentation with each meeting: they recorded the meeting, wrote and submitted meeting minutes, and noted the meeting on their project plan. These elements, especially the meeting minutes, left a paper trail of collaboration and illustrated groups’ progress on the project.

To build a framework for communication and accountability before the S-L project, student groups met to create and agree upon a communication plan and contract.

In the group communication plan and contract, group members listed their contact information, so they had multiple ways to contact each other. In addition, the groups discussed and explicitly chose the method and frequency of communication, along with setting ground rules for their collaboration. The final step of the communication plan and contract was for each group member to sign it.

The next piece of the communication and accountability framework was the project plan. Groups wrote a project plan that listed assigned tasks and outcomes for the 4½ weeks of the S-L module, broken down by week and by day, to ensure that they would complete their work within the project’s time frame. Groups submit the initial plan at the beginning of the S-L project and resubmit a finalized plan at the end of the project.

To reflect on learning and emphasize consistent valuation of collaboration, each group member submitted a “Group Reflection Memo” assignment after the S-L project and the poster. These memos were individual projects where students reflected on the experience, discussed their own participation, rated their group members’ participation and performance on a scale of 1-10, and explained what they would do differently in the future. These projects, paired with the project plan and meeting minutes, encouraged students to develop good relationships with their group members and to maintain contact with group members when they experience difficulties.

**Limitations**

Several goals exist for future research—obtaining a broader demographic and a larger sample size. Most students who took this survey were motivated by the bonus point incentive, showing that they cared about their grades. As a result, respondents were often more engaged in the S-L experience than students who didn’t take the survey. The voices of students who struggle are important and will, hopefully, be better represented in subsequent research.

**Conclusion**

This research falls in line with much of the previous research on service-learning and collaborative projects. Survey respondents found the collaborative service-learning project was beneficial and taught them new skills. Students who fully immersed themselves in the online service-learning experience gained the most benefit from the course.

**References**


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If You Build It, They Will Come:  
Two Approaches to Supporting Students

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Abstract

Faced with a sudden shift to remote instruction, faculty and staff discovered cost-effective, innovative ways to use existing technology to support students needing tutoring and writing coaching. This paper will present two ways to use Blackboard Collaborate to support learners. The pros and cons of both approaches will be discussed.

Introduction

It started with a phone call on the morning of March 9, 2020. On the surface, Gary sounded calm but there was an underlying sense of urgency in his voice. He said, “Lisa, we need your help moving the ATTIC online.” The ATTIC is the Academic Tutoring and Instruction Center at the College of Coastal Georgia, and Gary Strysick and Niki Schmauch oversee the ATTIC, housed in the campus library. They are responsible for guiding 44 student tutors and supplemental instructors (SIs). The ATTIC provides tutoring for all subjects taught at Coastal, and they average 563 unique students per semester. Students averaged 3-4 ATTIC visits per semester. Later that week, Lisa received a similar request from Jennifer Gray, English professor and writing center director. The Writing Center specializes in offering feedback on writing assignments from any course, and they typically offer over 500 sessions a semester, also housed in the library. Like many colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic, the College of Coastal Georgia had a tiny window of opportunity, 10 days, to figure out how to pivot to online instruction and convert face-to-face tutoring and writing coaching to a virtual modality. Our College needed no-cost solutions for online tutoring and writing coaching, and we needed it lickety-split. Thankfully, the College had the bones in place: a robust Learning Management System (D2L), plagiarism detection software (Turnitin), test proctoring software, and a fully featured synchronous conferencing tool, Blackboard Collaborate, a tool that would become crucial for students, faculty, staff, tutors, and writing center coaches.

In this paper, we will discuss how we built on current systems and used our existing resources to provide student support services with a pathway to continue to provide assistance for students in a different format during a pandemic. We will provide an overview of the tools that were used as well as the specific changes and training protocols used during the 10-day pivot time to prepare tutoring and coaching staff. Jennifer will provide some in-depth samples to highlight the training protocols for the writing coaches. Finally, we will share our public documents that were provided to the campus community to educate and inform users.

Tools Used: Collaborate and Email

We used a combination of synchronous and asynchronous tools to support students during the pivot to remote instruction. How did we select these tools? Simply put, we used what we had. Although one administrator suggested that we consider new options, such as rooms with Tutor.com, we concluded we needed to use the existing resources for financial and pedagogical reasons. Although the College later received some funding from The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to purchase laptops and other technologies to support learners, there were no funds available for new technologies in March 2020 (United States Department of the Treasury, 2021). Second, the time crunch meant that the writing center director and the ATTIC staff had limited time to teach the tutors and writing coaches how to work online. This was not the time to throw a new technology into the mix and add additional stress of learning (remotely) how to use a new technology. So, we went with the tools that were familiar to us and our students: email, D2L, and Blackboard Collaborate.
We used email to communicate with the student workers about our expectations once we learned they would be allowed to work online. For example, the ATTIC staff emailed the tutors and found out who was willing and able to work online. Additionally, they used email to set up times for Blackboard Collaborate training. During the training sessions, Gary gave the students an overview of Collaborate and showed them how to access their rooms. Similarly, the writing center director used email to communicate with the coaches.

**Technical Work: Adding Muscle to the Skeleton**

Prior to the pandemic, both the ATTIC and the Writing Center had D2L course sites and employees of both units knew how to use the basic features of Blackboard Collaborate, such as creating a session, using the chat box, and sharing files. Building on the existing infrastructure was the next step. The ATTIC course was the most complex, and needed the most work, so we started with it.

After several conversations with ATTIC staff, the eLearning director thought about what needed to happen to convert their tutoring into an online operation. Drawing from her background as an instructional designer, the eLearning director wanted to use the ADDIE model to develop both the D2L courses sites and develop training for the student workers. Abbreviated as ADDIE, this five-phase model is often used by instructional designers and training developers (ADDIE Model, n.d.). The ADDIE model goes hand in hand with instructional systems design. Seels and Richey (1994) define instructional systems design as “an organized procedure that includes the steps of analyzing, designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating instruction” (p. 31). The ADDIE model is often used to develop robust and learner-centered training; however, this five-step model was not appropriate for this project due to time constraints. Instead, we used a rapid prototyping approach. Simply put, rapid prototyping occurs when designers and developers work together quickly and begin developing prototypes of the training materials early and organically in the process (Gagne, Wager, Golas, & Keller, 2005). In our case, the eLearning director, writing center director, and ATTIC staff worked closely together to design and develop the course components, which included D2L courses sites with Collaborate sessions and forward-facing web pages with information about how to access the sites.

Next, the eLearning director created a new course in D2L called ATTIC online, and added Niki and Gary as site leaders. As site leaders, they had the ability to add students and tutors manually to the course, but this would have been a labor intensive process. Therefore, the director of eLearning used a process called Bulk Upload Management (BUM) to add the 44 tutors and SIs to the course. Then, she used Argos to pull a Comma Separated Values (CSV) file that contained the names and IDs of more than 3,000 current students. She created and formatted CSV files and used the BUM process to populate the new course. The entire process took about two to three hours.

Next, she contacted Gary and he got to work. First, he looked at the classlist in the D2L ATTIC online course and promoted all the tutors to an instructor role. Then, he built course sessions for the 44 tutors and SIs. He anticipated that it might be difficult for students needing tutoring to find the session they needed. So, he added directions at the top of the course explaining that students needed to click on a particular session to access a tutor’s room, but he would be in the main course room to answer questions and provide guidance.

During the pivot to remote instruction in spring 2020, Gary kept the main course room open all day. He closely monitored the main room and served as a concierge, greeting the students as they entered the online space and directing them to a breakout room or to a particular tutor’s session. While this approach worked adequately, Gary discovered that this process was cumbersome, and, more importantly, some students reported that it was difficult to figure out how to connect with a tutor. Or, a student might go into a tutor’s room, which was labelled with the tutor’s working hours, such as 2 pm to 4 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and leave if the tutor was running a few minutes late.

Unlike the ATTIC course, the Writing Center course only needed a few minor tweaks. The director employs five student coaches, so there was no need for a bulk upload. Jennifer added each coach manually. First, she created a video session with no starting or ending dates for each of the five coaches. The session was simply titled with the coach’s name, for example, Bri’s room. Then Jennifer copied the guest link for each session and pasted it on the College’s website. In theory, anyone who found the guest link could enter the session. However, even after a year of publicizing the online writing center services, there have been no security incidents. Unlike the ATTIC site, there
was no need to add all students to the course or have someone serve as a concierge and direct students to the appropriate session. From a technical point of view, this site was easier to maintain and monitor. Telephone-based sessions were also offered for students with bandwidth challenges.

Even though we used a rapid prototyping approach, we did reflect on our project at the end of the summer. After all, instructional design is an iterative process. After conversations with the ATTIC staff and writing center director, several changes were made to prepare for Fall 2020.

In August 2020, as the College began planning for Fall 2020 semester, Gary made several changes to ensure that students could more easily connect with tutors. First, he worked with Technology Services to update the ATTIC’s web page. Students could simply select the subject they needed tutoring in, and then see a list of tutors and tutoring location. Tutors with online sessions had 'The ATTIC Online (direct link)' as the tutoring location. Then students could click the link to go directly to the desired tutor's study room on Blackboard Collaborate, as illustrated below:

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**BIOLOGY I**

**WHEN:** Thursdays, from 4:00pm - 7:00pm  
**WHERE:** The ATTIC Online (direct link)  
**BY:** Diana R

---

Second, he updated the directions within the D2L Course:

**Online Tutoring**

- [Starts Jan 11, 2021 8:00 AM - Ends May 7, 2021 6:00 PM](#)

If you know the name of the tutor/SI Leader you are looking for, click the link next to their name to go directly to their ATTIC Online room. Hover over a tutor's schedule to see which classes he/she can tutor.

You can search the entire tutor schedule (in-person and online) on the ATTIC's Find-a-Tutor page. [link](#)

If you have any questions/concerns, contact the ATTIC at 912.279.5797 or [attic@ccga.edu](mailto:attic@ccga.edu)

**Updated: 2/15/2021**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutor Name</th>
<th>Tutor Schedule</th>
<th>SI Session Schedule</th>
<th>Tutor Room</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brendan B</td>
<td>Fri: 1-4pm</td>
<td>Thu: 8-9pm</td>
<td>Click Here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fri: 4-5pm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conlan B</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wed: 8-9pm</td>
<td>Click Here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca B</td>
<td>Sun: 1-3pm</td>
<td>Sun: 11:15am-12:15pm</td>
<td>Click Here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chandler C</td>
<td>Fri: 1-3pm, Sun: 4-6pm</td>
<td>Thu: 10-11am</td>
<td>Click Here</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the Writing Center, as the fall term started, Jennifer adjusted the center’s schedule to offer a wider range of hours, such as very early morning (5:30am to 7:30am) along with evenings (4pm to 9pm). Because they were
offering virtual services, they were not bound by the campus operating hours for their home in the library; they could stay open later or open earlier. In terms of technology, the Center continued using Collaborate for video sessions and email for asynchronous options. Any student that wanted a face-to-face session in the fall was met by Jennifer in a safe location.

**Training Student Workers**

*Writing Center:* As soon as the pivot to online services was announced, Jennifer knew that an extensive training protocol would be needed. Since the writing coaches were not yet trained in online procedures, she set out to train them using the very technology they would be using in active online sessions. First, she set up a training Collaborate room, and she sent the link to each writing coach. They met in the Collaborate room at a designated time, during which procedural information was shared, and the coaches figured out what times they would like to offer their services. Throughout the entire training session, Jennifer would ask the coaches to interact with the technology features in Collaborate that they would need to use in future sessions, such as the chat box, hiding their video, muting their audio, and sharing screens or attaching files. This approach helped the coaches learn the technology quickly through hands-on experiences.

In terms of the practice and pedagogy of coaching, the virtual sessions in Collaborate were similar in approach to face-to-face sessions, as the coaches could still employ the same strategies during virtual sessions that they used in face-to-face sessions, such as asking lots of questions, having the students talk about their writing, and requiring the students to actively make the repairs or changes. However, the coaches needed to learn about how to coach via email, which required a different approach than the virtual sessions in Collaborate. To address this concern, we stayed in the Collaborate room, and Jennifer sent out an email to all the coaches to ask them to respond to this student. We would hit “reply all” to the email, so all the coaches could see the different types of responses. Then, we each responded to the student, reviewed what each coach wrote via the “reply all” email, discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each response, completed some revisions to the first attempt at the email response, and then looked at a strong example of a response that Jennifer created. These training sessions worked in two ways: the coaches were using the very technology they needed to master, and the coaches were able to practice in a low-stakes environment that provided immediate feedback and mentor texts for strong models. See Appendix One for an emblematic example of the sample email and the types of responses provided by the coaches and Jennifer.

After reviewing the sample emails, we concluded our training discussion in Collaborate, and the semester started a few days later. We set up weekly staff meetings via Collaborate to help with any difficulties that sprang up that we didn’t anticipate. Jennifer felt it was important to use the technology the coaches needed to master as much as possible. During the first week of online operations, Jennifer would drop in to each coach’s Collaborate session to sit in on any active online sessions or to answer any questions the coach had. Jennifer also asked to be copied on the first few emails coaches sent for email-based sessions. These observations enabled Jennifer to see how the training was being applied and how to adjust upcoming training sessions. After a few staff meetings, it was clear the coaches had adjusted to the online writing center sessions, and the Center was able to return to monthly staff meetings, held virtually of course.

*The ATTIC:* In a similar vein, the ATTIC trained their student workers but their approach was a little different because they had to manage 44 students and a variety of academic disciplines.

Gary and Niki had one group training session for all the student workers, but they said it was really more like trial by fire. Niki explained. “We had to provide this presence once classes resumed in March after the two-week pause. We had to be there, but we had to be there online. Gary chimed in, “We were hanging on. I was logged on [to Collaborate] for 9 hours a day.” Both reported that the students had a learning curve when it came to using Collaborate, and some students had bandwidth issues.
Communicating to the Campus

D2L Postings about the ATTIC and the Writing Center

Other communication:

Here is the document that was sent out to all faculty, staff, and students, and it was placed on the Writing Center’s main website along with a D2L main campus newsfeed announcement. Hard copies of this document were pasted to the door of the physical writing center in the library.

Instructions for Writing Center Writing Coaching Access:

Welcome to the online Writing Center! We are glad you are here, and we have several options available for you. Please follow these procedures to connect with a writing coach:

Great Technology Access: Look at the list of writing coaches below, and see which coach is working at the time you are available. For example, if you want to have a session at 3pm on Tuesday, you can click on the link beside
Bobbie to access her Collaborate session room at that exact time. You might have to cut and paste the link to the Collaborate room into your browser if you are unable to get the link to work directly. Go ahead and email your paper (if you have one) to the writing coach as well.

**Email-Only Access:** If you don’t have access to Collaborate, you can email your paper to the writing coach and have an email-based session. Be sure to include information about your assignment. Coaches will respond to email during their hours listed. You can also email the director, Dr. Gray, if you’d like a response outside of these hours (or with any questions). Dr. Gray: jgray@ccga.edu

**Limited or No Internet Access:** If you don’t have access to the Internet, please call Dr. Gray’s office at 912-279-5910 and leave a message with your contact information. Telephone-based sessions are available.

Writing coach: Bobbie

Her Collaborate session room: https://us.bbcollab.com/guest/cdb23f826bbf402d82f77a40d6228e2c

Hours: 2pm to 5pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays

Email: xxxxxxxxx@ccga.edu

Writing coach: Bri

Her Collaborate session room: https://us.bbcollab.com/guest/545156a14c2b44e7a25a56773e391746

Hours: 6am to 10am on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays

Email: xxxxxxxxx@ccga.edu

Writing coach: Nicole

Her Collaborate session room: https://us.bbcollab.com/guest/394ed12acb9d471da669e82a383645e7

Hours: 8am to 11am on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesday, and Thursdays

Email: xxxxxxxxx@ccga.edu

Writing coach: Kimmy

Her Collaborate session room: https://us.bbcollab.com/guest/bf5df12def734848aa4a1552c165d184

Hours: 1pm to 4pm on Wednesdays and Thursdays

Email: xxxxxxxxx@ccga.edu

**Lessons Learned: Writing Center**

*Be Open:* For Jennifer, the immediate switch to an online mode highlighted the need to be more open to training opportunities. What was not necessary before suddenly became necessary. She was hindered by only preparing the writing coaches for the current situation. We often only focus on what is happening right in front of our faces. For example, Jennifer offered online coaching in the past, but because it is more difficult and requires more training, she decided to take on the online portion herself. She did not plan ahead and train the coaches for things they might run into. Jennifer was only training for what they were running into. Jennifer said she often brushed off technology training in the past, saying since she didn’t “use something now” so there was no need to learn something new. For example, she didn’t use the “quiz” feature in her writing classes, so she never went to any training sessions on quizzes. However, when the pandemic hit, she had a moment when she wanted to use the quiz feature. Her needs changed, and she wasn’t training herself for this type of adjustment. What Jennifer learned is that we have no idea what we are going to be using in the future, often with little to no warning, and it has been helpful to be open to all technology options for not just the classroom but for also student support services. She learned that she needed to be more visionary about the future and the different coaching options that were available. Just because they weren’t
using online coaching in the past doesn’t mean it isn’t worth spending resources on preparing for something in the future.

**Look Out for Strengths:** While Jennifer trained all of the coaches for all aspects of the online writing coaching, some of the coaches excelled in different aspects than others, for various reasons. For example, some coaches had weaker technology at their homes, so their wifi signals were not as strong. The weak wifi made their Collaborate video sessions fail, for no fault of their own. In these cases, the coaches did better with email. Some coaches enjoyed the Collaborate video sessions, as they replicated actual conversation in face-to-face sessions, and they found email-based sessions to be less dynamic. Jennifer ended up assigning some coaches to both offerings, some took email sessions only, and some took Collaborate video sessions only.

**Lessons Learned: ATTIC**

**Ease of Access:** First and foremost, make the tutoring easy to access with as few mouse clicks as possible. Make it as easy as possible for the students to get into the online tutoring space. In the early days of the pandemic, the students had to log on the portal, then go to D2L, then go into the ATTIC course, and then find the session that they needed. Pointing the students to a web site worked better. The students could simply use a drop-down menu to select the area they needed tutoring in and go directly into a tutor’s Collaborate session by clicking on a link.

**Meet the Students Where They Are:** While the online tutoring worked for some students, it did not work well for others. Niki said that a lot of student tutors rely on non-verbal communication during a tutoring session. Without those cues, tutors can miss what the students really need in the tutoring session. Niki explained, “When working online with students, you can lose the personal touch. However, I learned that we need to meet the students where they are. As of spring 2021, the ATTIC offers tutoring in four locations: the Intercultural Resource Center, library, residence halls, and online.” Before the pandemic the ATTIC was contained in a building: the library. With the onset of the pandemic, the students spread out all over the state, but they were still connected to the College through D2L and Collaborate. In reality, they were everywhere so the ATTIC needed to be everywhere, too. The ATTIC is not just in the library, but it’s in multiple locations and Niki said she is proud to offer tutoring in multiple locations. She noted that it was important that we adapted to online tutoring. Some students took nicely to it and some did not, but they met them where they were.

**Strong Working Relationship:** One of the reasons tutoring was successful was the strong working relationship between Niki and Gary, who have worked together for 15 years. Not only do they trust and respect each other, but they complement each other. For example, Gary has stronger tech skills and took the lead in creating the Collaborate sessions. Niki had a broader background in tutoring and helped to keep the big picture in mind while meeting students’ needs. Additionally, the small size of their full-time staff (two!) was an advantage. They could be nimble and make adjustments without having to call a department meeting or retrain dozens of workers.

**Lessons Learned: eLearning**

Lisa thought about several things she learned while supporting faculty and students during the pandemic. She thought about the importance of slowing down, being transparent and vulnerable, and embracing older technology.

**Slowing Down:** In *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*, Elizabeth Bailey recounts what she learned from a small snail when she was bedridden during an illness. Similarly, in 2020, we were forced to slow down and shelter in place during the spring and summer of 2020. Personally, the director learned to find joy in the simple things, such as listening to birds while walking around her neighborhood, talking with her neighbors, and reading a handwritten letter. Similarly, she modeled slowing down for the faculty enrolled in the USG online teaching certification course. Each Monday, she reflected on the week before and sent them a note of encouragement.

See Appendix Two for an example.

**Transparency and Vulnerability:** Supporting the faculty and facilitating the USG online certification course was one of the highlights of Lisa’s summer. She openly shared her struggle with motivation with the faculty in one of these emails. See Appendix Three for the email.
Older Technology: While she installed several new D2L integrations and used the advanced features of D2L and Collaborate, Lisa was surprised that she relied on older technologies, such as email, texting, and phoning. Using these older technologies had several advantages. For example, some faculty and students lived in rural areas and did not have access to high bandwidth at their homes. Their home computers were not as up to date as the ones they used while on campus. They couldn’t use Collaborate or create videos due to these limitations. However, they could effectively communicate using email, posting to Discussion forums, and making good old-fashioned phone calls. Lisa often suffered from dry eyes and screen fatigue due to long hours on the computer. She discovered that she could effectively guide students or faculty and help them solve their technology problems while standing up, talking with them on the phone, and walking around her living room.

For example, she often called or texted Jennifer about the needs of the writing center coaches. Similarly, she would frequently touch base with Gary and Niki via phone or instant messaging. Although she had a myriad of tools at her disposal, she found the simple technologies worked well for communicating with her peers and discussing how to best support the students.

Current Situation

The writing center conducted more sessions with students during the time of the pandemic in an online environment than they did during a regular semester with limited online offerings. For example, in the fall of 2019 (no pandemic), we offered 414 sessions. In the fall of 2020 during the pandemic, we offered 459 sessions. Jennifer also decided to start doing more staff meetings using Collaborate, as it was always difficult to find a time when every coach was able to meet in person in the Writing Center space. The same approach to technology and scheduling continued into the spring 2021 term, and one writing coach expressed interest in returning to face-to-face coaching for a few hours a week, so long as social distancing and masking were enforced.

The ATTIC revised their approach to tutoring in the fall and used a hybrid model that included both online and face-to-face tutoring. They are using approximately 60 percent online tutoring and 40 percent face-to-face tutoring, following CDC guidance, such as wearing face masks. By the spring, 40 percent of the tutoring was online and 60 percent was face-to-face.

Conclusion

In summary, we recommend first taking a look at what is currently in front of you, whether you are in a pandemic, a power outage, or an extreme weather event. The best option is not necessarily the shiny new technology product that costs a lot of money. We don’t need to rush out and buy the new technology. New situation/problem doesn’t mean you have to have a new technology to deal with it. New technology also brings about stress, costs, and extensive training protocols. Instead of constantly looking for the newest thing, we suggest a slower pace. Inspired by the SlowFood movement (2018), which subscribes to a slower experience- and sensory-based cooking, eating, and community mentality, we encourage reflection and collaboration that can highlight the potential options right in front of our faces. When we slow down and look around, we can “…act with purpose, taking the time for deliberation, reflection, and dialogue, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience” (Berg & Seeber, 2017, p. 11). This resilience can help us find the best solution to the problem at hand. In addition, as our work shows, collaboration between different offices is crucial. Berg and Seeber (2017) describe effective collaboration as something that “emerges locally in conversations between people, rather than being imposed top-down by funding models…” and that essentially, collaboration is about finding the time and will to think “together” (p. 89).

For faculty and staff who are interested in reflection and the slow thinking approach to supporting students, we recommend a book study. Books that have informed our thinking and educational practices include Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes (Darby & Lang, 2019) and The Slow Professor (Berg & Seeber, 2017).

References


Appendix One

The training simulation, sent out via email to the Writing Center staff:

This is a real student and a real assignment for our practice today. Go ahead and imagine this student is asking for an emailed response (no Collaborate session room). Write out your response, and then email back to us all by using “reply all.”

**Description of the assignment:** Compare and contrast the positions of two of the four candidates from the Election of 1912. Use ONLY the documents found in part 2 of *The Election of 1912* to support your arguments.

**Organization:** This is a formal essay assignment. I expect an introduction with a thesis statement that directly addresses the prompt and explains your paper's argument. The body of this paper will consist of paragraphs with topic sentences and properly cited evidence from the documents found in part 2 of the book. This evidence should support your argument. You must also have a conclusion which restates your argument and elaborates on other topics or ideas.

**Student Commentary:** We previously have submitted our writing assignments and the instructor has given them back with his feedback. This is my second draft of my first paragraph. I’m struggling with the thesis statement.

The 1912 Election: Theodore Roosevelt & William Howard Taft
Politics can sometimes turn the best of friends into the worst of enemies. This was the unfortunate outcome of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft's relationship after the presidential election of 1912. At one point in time, they were both successful members of the Republican party who opposed socialism and favored big business regulation. Their different views, personalities, and one insulting speech after another, inevitably caused the split in the Republican Party. The presidential election of 1912 consisted of one former president who supported and aimed for more strict regulations of big business and one current president who focused more on lowering tariffs. Both men campaigned to become the 28th president of the United States very differently: Roosevelt was a very passionate and exciting progressivist while Taft was a very analytical and indecisive conservative.

Here are two emblematic responses from two different coaches during the training session:
Coach 3’s response:

Dear So & So,

Thank you for sharing your work with us today! What you have included so far really grabs my attention and makes me want to read more. Some of your troubles might be fixed by just using an assertive tone in your sentences, as opposed to a passive tone. In your first sentence, you can make it stronger by taking out the word 'sometimes.' You might also consider trying to be more specific in your writing. Look at that last sentence: see the two uses of “very”? Taking out at least one of them could make your sentence more dynamic. I look forward to reading the rest of your essay!

Coach 4’s response:

Hi, {name}, I would be happy to help you out with your assignment. Thesis statements are often difficult, but don’t be scared of them. Here’s an example that uses food: if your essay was a soup, a thesis statement is a bouillon cube. Before writing the thesis you have to know what flavor (or direction) your essay will be. I see that you have a good grasp on the subject matter but you mention several topics in the first paragraph. It is like you don’t know what direction to take (or what flavor to take). I’d suggest you take a step away from your paper, take a deep breath, maybe walk a little bit outside, and think about what you would want to say in this paper. What is the most important thing(s) to talk about? Take that answer and use it for your thesis statement. And be sure to follow through by making the rest of your paper only focused on what you say in the thesis statement.

I hope this helps, let me know if you have any questions.

In these two examples, Coach 3 is focused on some surface issues of assertiveness, but this commentary is missing the main concern expressed by the student: “I’m struggling with the thesis statement.” Looking at what Coach 4 wrote, which was directly focused on not just the thesis but how to write a thesis and why it was important, the conversation in our Collaborate training session was immediately focused on making sure the email response is directly connected back to the student’s concern.

After reviewing the samples, we had a discussion about what content emails should include, and we brainstormed together some common elements for emails, such as a greeting, something positive, specific direction and teaching on the area the student needed to work on, specific information on how to fix the problem, a closing that included an invitation to return for more help, and some gratitude expressed for sharing the work. We also talked about tone and ways to signal personality and encouragement along with a more conversational sounding feel. Then we looked at Jennifer’s sample response to the same paper, which contained all of those elements:

Jennifer’s sample:

Hi, {student’s name},

Thank you for sharing your first paragraph with me this week. I hope you are doing well. After reading your work, the first thing that stood out to me was that you created an opening paragraph that gradually gets more specific and ends with your thesis statement. This thesis being in paragraph one is a requirement of the assignment, so readers should be pleased to see this. Now, you specifically asked about the thesis, so let’s get to that.

As I read through your paragraph, I struggled a bit because I originally thought your paper was going to be about the relationship between the two candidates (see sentences one and two in your paragraph about friends and relationships). Therefore, when I got to your thesis, I was wondering where the idea of the relationship went. Let’s talk more about this...

The last two sentences talk about two different elements. The second-to-last sentence mentions the specific policies and stances, and the last sentence (the thesis) mentions campaign tactics. Therefore, when I combined the start of the paragraph's point about friendship with the policies and then the campaign tactics at the end, I experienced a bit of confusion. It is like you are trying to cover a lot in such a short paper.
To fix this issue, I’d suggest you work backwards from your thesis to create content for this first paragraph that is only about the thesis. Look at your thesis ("Both men campaigned to become the 28th president of the United States very differently: Roosevelt was a very passionate and exciting progressivist while Taft was a very analytical and indecisive conservative.") What material do you need to talk about prior to this statement to get readers ready for this statement about campaigning tactics? For example, what is a passionate and exciting progressivist? What did conservatism mean at that time period? Feel free to tweak your opening paragraph a bit to stay focused on just one element and then send me another email with your revision.

I enjoyed working with you today, and I hope to "see" you again soon.

Jennifer

Appendix Two

Dear online teachers and slow professors,

Good afternoon! I want to share some thoughts about reflection before summer flies by. As you know, many faculty teach four-week or eight-week courses. It is tempting to rush through assignments, trying to cram in as much content as possible. I encourage you to take time to reflect on this summer and certification series. What have you learned? What will you do differently with your fall classes? If possible, give your summer students an assignment to reflect on what they learned. Alternatively, consider designing an activity that encourages reflection in your fall classes.

It’s not surprising that my academic hero José Bowen writes about reflection. Bowen (2017) says, “Make time for reflection. While you can’t force your students to nap after class, you can provide them with time for reflection in class [or online]. Cognitive wrappers (http://teachingnaked.com/cognitive-wrappers/) are one example, but routinely asking students to pause and reflect (without devices) will improve the quality of both their discussion and thinking. This will also help them remember. In addition, it turns out that reflection and pausing are essential for developing deeper and more complex states of empathy (Immordino-Yang, McColl, Damasio, & Damasio, 2009). Give your students the opportunity to develop as better human beings” (p. 194).

Similarly, Berg and Seeber (2017), authors of The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy write about reflection and slow thinking, a concept inspired by the Slow Food movement (https://slowfoodusa.org/about/). They write, “Slow Professors advocate deliberation over acceleration. We need time to think, and so do our students. Time for reflection and open-ended inquiry is not a luxury but is crucial to what we do. … By taking time for reflection and dialogue, the Slow Professor takes back the intellectual life of the university” (pp. ix-x).

Take some time to reflect and slow down today. Later this week, I encourage you to participate in one of the discussions. These discussions are not required, but they are an opportunity for reflection and dialogue. Tip: you can comment on a peer’s post even if you haven’t finished the course.

Take care, Lisa
Appendix Three

Dear friends,

Good morning! I have a confession. I’ve had a hard time with motivation this week. I don’t know if it’s the rainy weather or a bit of quarantine fatigue.

Last night I dined with an old friend, and she lifted my spirits. We sat at a picnic table at Epworth by the Sea, watched the sun set, talked, and laughed. Similarly, this morning, I visited another old friend, José Bowen, a scholar whose work inspires me.

As I think about this summer, this online certification series, and our critical role as teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic, I recall what Bowen wrote about building authentic relationships with students.

In *Teaching Naked Techniques: A Practical Guide to Designing Better Classes*, Bowen (2017) said:

- A single professor can make a massive difference in a student’s life.
- The most lifelong learning impact of college for students turns out to be (1) a professor who cared about you as a person, (2) a professor who made you excited about learning, and (3) a finding a mentor who encouraged you to pursue your dreams.
- You do not have to be funny and you do not have to be everyone’s friend, but you do need to appear approachable and authentic. Be authentic and personal in your examples.
- Take time to anticipate mistakes and prepare students for a new learning environment (p. 215).

Wow! The last bullet is especially relevant as we prepare our courses for fall 2020.

Bowen’s words echo many of the concepts in Course 2 – Cultivating an Online Community. If you are still working on Course 1 – Developing an Online Course, keep on going. However, there are robust discussions going on right now in Course 2. Yes, this is a self-paced series of courses, but you may get more out of Course 2 if you jump on board soon.

Be well,

Lisa McNeal
The Growth of Online Education in the Caribbean Region

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Abstract

Distance Education has existed in the Caribbean educational system since 1948 when the University of the West Indies was established in Jamaica. This region today is poised and ready to optimize the role of distance and online education in the future of the region. This paper shares how digital technology and the existing educational infrastructure of the Caribbean region provide an opportunity to demonstrate the socio-economic impact of distance learning and how it might empower generations of students to come.

Introduction

Beyond the renowned white sand beaches and turquoise waters of the Caribbean region, is a population of people whose intellectual abilities are smothered and restrained by lack of adequate educational resources. Consequently, the economic and social growth of the region is also hampered. The Caribbean region comprises an archipelago of islands stretching from Trinidad and Tobago on the eastern coast of Central America to the islands of the Bahamas off the southeast coast of Florida. Each island is an independent country, but the educational system is similar and historically there has always been a regional approach to the educational needs of the region. This approach is also used in political, social, and economic collaboration through regional organizations as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) an organization committed to “economic integration; foreign policy coordination; human and social development; and security as a means of regional economic growth and development.”

https://www.caricom.org/about-caricom/who-we-are.

Figure 1. Map of the Caribbean
For purposes of this discussion sixteen countries are included - Anguilla, Antigua & Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Trinidad & Tobago, Turks & Caicos – shown in Figure 1.

History and Development of Caribbean Education

The current system of education in the Caribbean was initiated after the Emancipation Act of 1834, following which religious groups partnered with the British government to establish primary and secondary schools throughout the British colonies, allowing ex-slaves access to literacy. Slavery had been abolished but Britain still maintained colonial control of the region and continued to establish educational entities such as the "Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (ICTA) established by the colonial authorities in Trinidad in 1921, and the University College of the West Indies (UCWI), currently the University of the West Indies (UWI) - established in Jamaica in 1948 (Coates, 3). Institutions such as these improved the quality of goods and services coming from the colonies, initiated the development of a social regional identity and empowered the ex-slaves of the Caribbean region. This empowerment culminated in all major countries in the Caribbean region gaining economic independence from Britain.

Primary and secondary schools in the region were organized according to the British system of education. High school graduates were required to choose between exams that were developed by the University of Cambridge and the University of London. The late 20th century brought unprecedented educational development to the Caribbean region when the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) was established in 1972. The CXC has gradually replaced the British exams that were previously used, providing a suite of examinations that evaluate and confirm student learning at both primary and secondary schools throughout the Caribbean. The CXC organization incorporates learning that is relevant to the region, serving to enhance skills that are appropriate and necessary to the economic development of the region.

The Status of Distance Education in the Caribbean Region

When the University of the West Indies (UWI) was established in 1948 as remote college of the University of London, correspondence courses were immediately offered. The distance learning (correspondence courses) element of the UWI has been through many changes over the course of its history. What began as an offering of a few correspondence courses became the UWI extra-mural department to the School of Continuing Studies (SCS), The Tertiary Level Institutions Unit (TLIU), and The UWI Distance Education Center (UWIDEC). This has culminated into the UWI Open Campus (UWIOC) which started in 2008, adding to three existing face-to-face campuses in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad & Tobago.

The UWIOC offers a multi-mode approach that is uniquely suited to the geographic, political, and social make-up of the region. Continuing education, undergraduate and post-graduate degrees are offered in distance, blended, online and face-to-face learning modes, and students have a choice in how they pursue their studies. The UWIOC currently has an enrollment of 20,000 students whom they serve through 50 student centers located in 17 English-speaking countries in the Caribbean region. To date they have graduated close to one thousand students and continue to seek ways to improve their network of student centers through tools and programs available to their students.

Most recently, instigated by the global COVID-19 pandemic the region has been plunged into a blended approach to learning at all levels. This has exacerbated the issue of insufficient resources to properly utilize the modes of distance learning, increasing the urgency with which educational leaders of the region must seek ways to put resources in place to bring distance education to the forefront of education in the region.

The Future

UWI Vice-Chancellor Professor Hilary Beckles states “Since its inception as a College of the University of London in 1948, and its transition as an independent regional university in 1962, it has been a pivotal force in every aspect of Caribbean development. It continues to reside at the center of all efforts to improve the well-being of our people.” (https://www.uwi.edu/featured-story/vc-70.asp) The UWIOC will play a major role in the access to educational opportunities for students who come from poorer families and lack the resources to provide the tools needed for post-secondary study. In Jamaica 97% of students enroll in primary school, 84% in secondary school and by the time they graduate from high school only 21% continue to further study. Research indicates that students who are
poor and live rural areas of the Caribbean are highly unlikely to pursue post-high school study because they lack the resources and tools to further their education. The establishment of UWIOC Student Centers provide a starting point for using distance learning modes to reach and teach rural and poor populations of the region.

Students from families with ample financial resources often leave the region to pursue studies in the United States, Canada, the UK, and other foreign countries. This has historically caused a “brain drain” from the region as these students often do not return; while those who are “left behind” have few options available to them – perpetuating the cycle of poverty and hampering the economic growth in the region.

Conclusion

Distance education options are ideal for students in the rural areas of the Caribbean Region who are from poor and underprivileged circumstances. The leadership of each country must be persuaded that this is a viable solution to the lack of opportunities for these students to pursue post-secondary educational goals. The early proponents of distance education perceived it as an opportunity for the unlikeliest of individuals to be afforded the chance to pursue their educational goals, thereby elevating their individual social and economic well-being as well as that of their countries. Professor Emeritus Alan Tait (OUUK) concurs “… it is not always easy for educators… to see education not as a thing in itself but as a set of activities that delivers outcomes for individuals and societies. But if social change is our goal, this must be so.” http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1526/2632

Planning and organizing are currently ongoing, with the goal of conducting research in a specified rural area of the Caribbean. The research will test how distance education might be used to realize personal empowerment and overall economic improvement in the region. A pilot project will establish a system that provide tools, resources and access to post-secondary distance and online learning opportunities. Students will have an opportunity to plan and train for careers and jobs that are pre-determined to be vital to the future of the region. Distance learning is afforded a chance to manifest the power of its impact on a disenfranchised population.

References


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All On Board: A Facilitated Onboarding Program Supporting Retention of Online Undergraduate Learners

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Abstract

In Fall 2020 the University of Arkansas Global Campus piloted a facilitated online onboarding course for a subset of students preparing for their first term after being admitted to an online undergraduate nursing program. The course was designed as a situated learning scenario in which a fictional character derived from common demographic characteristics of newly admitted students acts as a fellow student progressing through the same steps as real students to learn how to navigate the Learning Management System, participate in required course activities, and build relationships with other students, their academic program and the university community. Student feedback in the course indicated that along with technical skills, building rapport and relationships with other students and feelings of connectedness to the university community were key participant reported outcomes. The pilot also demonstrated strong retention and student success outcomes resulting in the planned expansion of the program to incoming online undergraduate students in other majors.

Introduction

Orientation programs are widely used in higher education to facilitate the successful transition of students to their institution, support admitted to enrolled student yield, student success, and on-time progression to graduation (Stoebe & Grebing, 2020, Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015,). In an online setting participation in an orientation program can improve student success by establishing academic and social expectations, introducing key technologies, exposing students to resources that support their success, and providing experiences that facilitate early relationship building between students, their peers, academic programs, and the university community (Hoffman, Eberhardt-Alstot & Leafstedt, 2020). Research indicates that these supports play a particularly important role for those students from historically marginalized populations and where the students may have additional barriers in forming connections with their campus community, like those studying online (Korstange, Hall, Holcomb, & Jackson, 2020). In Fall 2020, the University of Arkansas piloted a facilitated non-credit online orientation course (onboarding) for a subset of students preparing for their first term in an online undergraduate Licensed Practical Nurse to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (LPN) program. Prior to this pilot the university offered a self-directed orientation via its website which directed students through technical process related to matriculation, advising and enrollment. The pilot addressed in this paper was designed to identify effective practices to support online undergraduate student transition more holistically by meeting the unique needs of non-traditional students in the environment most relevant to their future educational experiences at the university.

Case Study

The online undergraduate Licensed Practical Nurse to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (LPN) program offered through the Eleanor Mann School of Nursing at the University of Arkansas began in Fall 2019. Students entering the program were required to hold an unencumbered Licensed Practical Nursing license, live in a state in which the university was authorized to conduct clinical experiences, and meet published admissions standards for students entering the university. The majority of students entered the program as transfer students having completed at least 24 transferable credit hours. Students entered the program as pre-nursing students to complete courses required to apply for entry into the nursing program. When students had completed all of the required prerequisite courses and met the other program standards they could apply to the nursing program and begin taking nursing courses. Some
The Licensed Practical Nurse to Bachelor of Science in Nursing (LPN) Onboarding Course at the University of Arkansas was developed in summer 2020 in response to an observed need for newly admitted students to the LPN program to quickly adapt to the demands of learning complicated course materials online in an unfamiliar environment. The onboarding course was designed as a situated learning scenario (Wenger, 2009) in which a fictional character derived from common demographic characteristics of newly admitted incoming LPN students acted as a fellow student progressing through the same steps as real students learning how to navigate the Learning Management System (LMS), participating in required course activities, and meeting others who were beginning the journey as well. Admitted students were grouped into orientation course sections based on major and stage in degree and enrolled in the non-credit course based in the university Learning Management System (LMS) for the intersession (approximately three weeks) immediately prior to their admitted term with an assigned a staff facilitator who participated in discussion boards, answer questions, provided feedback, monitored progress and graded work.

**Course Design**

As a student entered the onboarding course, they encounter Yvonne, the fictional character designed using common student characteristics, walking down a sidewalk speaking into a cellphone in a short, looped video intended to lend more life to the character than a still image. Beside the picture text quickly introduced students to the character. 

“Yvonne is a new student in the LPN-BSN program at the Eleanor Mann School of Nursing. This class will follow her through her first semester in the program. Together we’ll answer her questions, get her connected to a new community, and start her off successfully at the U of A.”

This introduction was designed so that students quickly recognized Yvonne as a new student like them and that the course was designed with them (new LPN students at the Eleanor Mann School of Nursing) in mind. The statement also built a sense of belonging and appealed to the innate desire to help others by engaging students in helping Yvonne be successful.

The character of Yvonne was intended to be as much like the actual students as possible so they could connect to her experiences and more easily transfer the knowledge and skills from the course to the required activities in their upcoming courses. Throughout the course, Yvonne gradually “learned” tips for success and offered these to the students in call-out textboxes throughout the course. These tips addressed the usual advice offered for success in online classes such as carefully reading the syllabus, planning out a semester calendar, contacting technical support, contacting a professor for class support, and reflection, but were offered in non-formal, conversational language “just-in-time” as students were learning about the task.

“Talking to my Student Liaison and my advisor helped me so much! I feel like I’m off to a great start and I know that I’ve done everything I need to do to be successful. You should reach out to your student liaison and advisor too!”

In effect, students were provided with a friend, a learner like themselves offering advice and urging them to attempt activities that would lead to their success in the program. Although originally introduced as a fellow student, Yvonne was designed to seem to be just a few steps ahead of the learners able to reach out with advice and ideas that she recently learned. She was also vulnerable in admitting that she needed help and then demonstrated the desired behavior to seek help, like showing students the email that she wrote to request assistance. The course did not depend solely on a fictional character but also used the course to introduce students to their new classmates. This involved students in authentic social participation within a community of practice (Wenger, 2009) mediated through open course discussion boards. Throughout the course students were asked to complete tasks like researching and writing a paper using the actual university systems they would be expected to use in their credit courses like the library and writing center, with Yvonne just a few steps a head of them providing them with “inside track” guidance.

Finally, the need to maintain balance and healthy habits while embarking on this new role was reinforced through animated clips of Yvonne eating a healthy lunch, engaging with family, walking in a garden and other activities designed to de-stress and refocus. Yvonne reminds her fellow students to “make time to keep doing things that you enjoy and are relaxing” as shares her favorite activities. In addition to reinforcing the course objective, these messages served to make Yvonne seem even more real and connected to the students.
Outcomes

Participation. In Fall 2020, 224 admitted students were enrolled in an onboarding course with a 79% (176) participation rate. Of those who participated in the course approximately 68% completed all the assignments including submission of a student created video and a multipage library research-based writing assignment. In assigning course sections students were grouped into two stages of degree progression; those still working to complete general education requirements and those ready to begin nursing major courses. Participation rates among those who were ready to start Nursing courses (92%) were higher (73%). Completion rates of major assignments followed a similar trend (Nursing, 70%; General Education 49%).

Skill Building. In post course surveys 92% of participants indicated they would recommend or strongly recommend participation in the onboarding course to other students and 87% indicated they found the individual feedback from their facilitator to be helpful, or very helpful. Among the skills covered in the course students noted LMS use, library navigation, peer communication, and syllabus analysis as the most applicable to their first term course success. Eighty-four percent of students indicated that the course was very helpful in increasing their knowledge of student support services with students also indicating increased comfort in accessing student support services (70%), increased confidence (70%), and increased technical skills (60%) as very helpful elements of the course.

Building Connections. During the course facilitators observed students connecting with each other over commonalities such as location, family characteristics, personal history, and occupational background. These early connections to other students are anticipated to increase success in more difficult courses as students may be more likely to look to their classmates for support and continue to develop a community of practice long after the onboarding course ended. In the post course survey students rated several connectedness outcomes as strong elements of the course with feeling connected to other students (1.92) as the highest. Other strong connectedness outcomes included: feeling connected to the university community (1.77), and the academic department (1.71).

Graph 1. Goal Attainment

Ongoing Use. Students were provided with ongoing access to the course throughout the academic year, but no direct efforts were made to encourage returning to the orientation course once it was completed. Students who participated in the course showed a strong tendency to continue to use the onboarding course as a resource with 85% percent of participants returning to the course content after the course was completed during their first term in credit courses and 50% returning to the onboarding course while preparing for or starting classes the following term.

Enrollment. Students who participated in the onboarding course were more likely to be enrolled in for-credit courses at 11th day with 76% of participants enrolled verses 26% of non-participants. Students who completed all the course assignments were the most likely to be enrolled at 11th day (90%). Among students enrolled at 11th day, those who completed all the major assignments were more likely to still be enrolled at mid-term (94%) than students who did not complete major assignments (84%). Continued enrollment at midterm varied significantly among general education (74%) and nursing students (100%) who did not complete the onboarding assignments. Among students who completed all the major onboarding assignments the variance between general education (92%) and nursing students (97%) was much smaller. These findings support the conclusion that the benefits of participation and
completion of assignments in the onboarding course may be most helpful to students who are earlier in their degree progression.

Chart 1: Enrollment in courses by participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enrolled at 11th day (N=152)</th>
<th>Continued enrollment at midterm (N=139)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing all major assignments</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Nursing courses</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking general education</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Not completing assignments</td>
<td></td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Nursing courses</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking general education</td>
<td></td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-participants</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grade Point Average. First term grade point average calculations for the Fall 2019 cohort and Fall 2020 cohort were compared. The average first term GPA for LPN students entering the program in Fall 2019 (no onboarding) was 2.42. First term GPA for LPN students entering the program in Fall 2020 (onboarding) increased by .39 to 2.81.

Conclusion

In Fall 2020, 224 students entering the LPN program participated in the onboarding orientation pilot. The use of the character driven situated learning model of course design supported the development of key competencies and outcomes including student feedback, enrollment, and cumulative GPA. Feelings of competence in accessing and using key technologies and student resources were identified as important outcomes by students along with feelings of connection with other students their academic program and the university community. Based on the outcomes of the pilot study the expansion of the program to newly admitted online undergraduate students in other majors has been planned to support additional students through this impactful student-focused program.

References


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Behind the Screens: Creating Faculty Community in the Virtual World

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Abstract

Engaging faculty in the virtual environment may be difficult, but it is not impossible. American College of Education deliberately utilizes engagement practices to foster online communities among remote employees and improve employee satisfaction. Consistent high rankings as a “Best Place to Work” in Indiana indicate successful implementation of the practices.

Introduction

American College of Education (ACE) is committed to producing satisfied and successful students. Motivated by the belief that employee happiness translates to increased productivity and reduced stress (Gavin & Mason, 2004), the College is also committed to producing satisfied, successful, and engaged employees. In fact, ACE’s commitment to employee engagement and satisfaction is demonstrated by a strategic institutional goal to be consistently recognized as a “Best Place to Work.” Each year, Indiana celebrates top employers as “Best Places to Work,” and consistently high ratings for ACE, including sixth place in 2017, seventh in 2018, and second in 2019, are a source of pride for the institution.

Need for Faculty Engagement in the Virtual Environment

Interpersonal connections are fundamental to the human experience (Keswin, 2019), and it is these very connections that support employee engagement in and, ultimately, satisfaction with the workplace. Fostering connections in the workplace—especially a virtual workplace!—requires intentional, purposeful, and sustained efforts. ACE believes that efforts to foster human connection are worth the investment. Positive connections are the basis of senses of community and belonging, both precursors for increased motivation, enhanced learning, and positive self-identification (Kennedy, 2018), or as Donovan (2015) succinctly noted, “online learning communities can be educationally and personally fulfilling” (para. 2).

More is known about engaging students online and building class-based communities than is known about engaging faculty and building professional communities. Specifically, as Wehler (2018) outlined, there are five primary practices necessary to increase engagement and build community in the online classroom, including:

1) **Be Available** by being present, being responsive, being “human” (per Keswin, 2019), and by establishing a tone that encourages connectivity and outreach;

2) **Plan Communication** by building in touchpoints for outreach, such as for birthdays, before deadlines, and around other important events;

3) **Promote Interaction** by consistently and relentlessly encourage interaction, including interactions between individuals and groups;

4) **Create “Outside Class” Spaces** by designing and encouraging non-instructional interactions that are not directly related to class; and,
5) “Bring the Outside In” by relating to events outside of class, on campus, across departments, or elsewhere.

Practices in Action

A virtual classroom and a virtual workplace are not dissimilar; both bring together a group of individuals sharing a common purpose. ACE’s community-building strategies for employees in the virtual workplace spring from what is known about building community in the online classroom or, more specifically, from Wheeler’s (2018) five practices. The practices described below stem from an understanding of and appreciation for the demands of the virtual workplace and have been consistently utilized at ACE to build community.

Be Available. Online faculty are accustomed to building a sense of community with students in their classes through welcome announcements and introductory discussion boards. This same sense of community can be encouraged by academic leaders to build connections among faculty in and across departments. In the Leadership and Administration (LEAD) Department at American College of Education, purposeful activities were planned to facilitate a smooth transition as changes were made in the department’s leadership. When a new department chair was hired, the chair sent an introductory email message to all members of the department. The message was written in a conversational tone that provided faculty members with personal information to allow the faculty members to see “behind the screen” in order to learn about the new chair. An invitation to participate in optional “Getting to Know You” activities was extended through the email. One option provided was for faculty to respond to the email to introduce themselves. Approximately 30% of the faculty replied to the email with information about themselves, with many sharing personal information and cell phone numbers. As faculty responded to the introductory email, their messages made it clear that they valued the opportunity to build community in the department. “I appreciate your warm greetings and am looking forward to working with you and continuing my relationship with others in LEAD” (R. Herring, personal communication, October 28, 2019). “What a great way to get to know everyone. I sincerely appreciate how open and willing you are to allow us to reach out to you if needed” (S. Everts, personal communication, October 22, 2019). One of the most meaningful messages was sent from the Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs, who wrote, “This is great! I have inherited many teams throughout my career, and never once did I think of sending an email like this. You taught me something new!” (S. Hinshaw, personal communication, October 22, 2019).

A second option provided was to attend one of several scheduled Skype meetings with the express purpose of getting to know others in the department. Invitations to four Skype meetings, held at a variety of times throughout a week, were sent to all faculty in the department. A total of 29% of faculty attended one or more of the Skype sessions. The meetings had no agenda except to spend time to get to know one another. Some faculty sent messages following the Skype meetings. “Thanks for taking the time to chat. The Skype check in was a great personal touch. I look forward to working with you” (H. Schmidt, personal communication, October 30, 2019) and “Thank you for already bringing the faculty closer and offering opportunities to connect with you more” (A. Evans, personal communication, November 18, 2019). The chair used her video and many faculty also turned their cameras on. At the first session, one person asked of the others if anyone had worked in any other field besides education. This one question led to faculty on the call learning a lot of about the backgrounds and experiences of others on the call. Some faculty members attended more than one session so they could meet more people in the department.

Plan Communication. Communication that encourages connections among employees is modeled by the President of American College of Education, who hosts regular “Town Hall” meetings to keep all employees informed about a myriad of topics ranging from progress on college goals to statistics on enrollment and graduation rates. These quarterly meetings always include an opportunity for participation by attendees, most of whom are attending virtually from their home offices. Questions are encouraged and electronic polls and games are used to elicit feedback. During the meetings, information is presented by several college leaders which allows everyone to get to hear the voices and see the faces of people who are most often contacted through email. After each meeting, a link to a recording is provided for all employees and surveys are utilized to gather feedback.

Each month, staff from the Human Resources department send an email to all ACE employees with a list of everyone in the College who will be celebrating a birthday or a work anniversary during the month. This simple, but deliberate action, builds a feeling of belonging among employees. Email greetings are sent by many people in the
College to celebrate colleagues’ milestones. ACE’s President uses the list to send handwritten cards by mail to employees’ homes. Receiving an actual piece of mail in 2020 is rather unusual and receiving a handwritten note from the College president certainly makes an impact on employees and their morale. Messages from leaders in Human Resources also include announcements of new employees, which include personal information about interests, hobbies, and experience as well as promotions of employees. A regular “ACE Connection Newsletter” is published that includes news about accomplishments of employees, a chance to win prizes by answering questions posed in the newsletter, and lots of pictures of the people of ACE.

In a work environment that relies so often on email, it is invigorating when a different form of communication is used. “Fun Finance Focus” videos are shared regularly by the College’s Chief Financial Officer and ACE’s Senior Director of Training and Development. These presentations, complete with avatars and graphic displays of data, accomplish their goal of keeping all employees informed, and are entertaining at the same time. The Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs provides quarterly “Faculty Update” presentations, and representatives from all areas and departments of the College host “Coffee Chats” on a variety of topics that regularly draw over one hundred attendees. Links to recordings of the Coffee Chats are provided so that all employees have access to the information shared. Surveys are also sent to elicit feedback after each Coffee Chat and to gather topics for future sessions.

ACE utilizes many platforms to share information and to build a culture where employees get to know each other. The platform used for payroll, evaluations, and time off requests is an example of a space that could be dry and devoid of any sense of human interaction. On the home page of the site, though, one of the first things that appears is a list of “Impressions.” Any employee at ACE can award an Impression to any other person in the College. The types of impressions include communication, leadership, help, passion, social responsibility, efficiency, thanks, and innovation. Comments to accompany the impressions personalize the impressions and through reading them, employees learn about others in the College. An employee directory is also part of the site with a minimum of job title and department listed. Employees can add other information including personal contact information, their picture, hobbies, interests, and any other personal information they’d like to share with colleagues.

Promote Interaction. At the start of every term, the LEAD Department has a faculty meeting. With up to 90 people invited to the meetings, it is easy for leaders to use the meetings to present information. It is important, though, to do more than present information. Extra effort must be made to engage faculty members in the conversations. Many faculty sign into the meetings a bit before the start time and all are encouraged to turn their cameras on and to visit with one another through the chat feature in Skype or by turning on their microphones. As information and data are shared, faculty feedback is elicited through check-ins after each topic. Faculty are asked, “What questions or comments do you have?” and encouraged to turn on their microphones to participate. Some faculty are more comfortable engaging through the use of the chat feature in Skype. At a few points in the meeting, opportunities for feedback are provided through Polleverywhere questions. At the end of the meeting, the room is kept open for faculty to stay on the line to ask more questions and to have more time to connect with one another. As these strategies are used more regularly, active participation of faculty members is increasing with more entries in the chat box, more verbal comments, and more people staying on the calls after the conclusion of the meeting.

Build “Outside of Work” Spaces. It is a tradition for many organizations to have a holiday party (Smith & Tischler, 2015). Every year ACE has a holiday party for staff, yet it was important to include faculty somehow. In 2015, the Department of Leadership & Administration piloted a half hour virtual holiday party to include all faculty, as interest and participation were yet to be determined. With over 60 online faculty in the department, over half were in attendance on a Thursday evening. Thursday evenings were chosen for the date of the party for two reasons. First, it was found to be a day when most faculty would be available. Also, Thursday evenings were set meeting days for term-start faculty meetings.

From 2016 thru 2017, the holiday party tradition continued within the department with similar attendance. From 2018 through 2019, the department also invited faculty from outside departments who served on dissertation committees, as the Department of Leadership & Administration housed the doctoral programs. With the exposure of the holiday party to other faculty, faculty members have asked for there to be an all-faculty holiday party. Offering an all-faculty holiday party is being explored through Faculty Council, rather than one department.
The holiday planning committee currently consists of full-time staff within the Department of Leadership & Administration to plan the half hour party. The party has previously taken place through the Zoom conferencing software with webcams turned on to show off holiday home decorations, holiday headgear, and ugly holiday sweaters. Games for e-gift card prizes that taken place include: (a) Name that Tune, (b) Trivia, (c) Scene-It, and (d) Memory. The holiday party has ended with singing a parody including lyrics about plagiarism, grading discussion posts, and other faculty-specific duties. The range in singing ability has not mattered, as many are laughing by the end of the night.

**Bring the Outside in.** Early in 2020, ACE made an unprecedented move to “bring the outside in” by hosting an organization-wide week-long retreat. Over two years in the making, this retreat brought more than 170 employees from across the nation together to interact, socialize, and work collaboratively, both across and within teams. For many employees, the retreat provided the first opportunity for face-to-face interaction with co-workers, some of whom have been working together for years. Retreat events included team-building activities, coordinated community service, state of the organization updates, networking events, and dedicated time for teams to meet and collaborate, as well as a healthy dose of shared meals and downtime for informal networking. Planning and hosting an event of such scale requires a tremendous dedication of time and resources, yet that same commitment connotes, very publicly and very concretely, the exact value the institution places on building community within the workplace. Moreover, on a very practical level, there’s simply no better way to reach “behind the screens” and bring people together than to sit them together at tables to share steaming fajitas.

**Conclusion**

ACE works hard to engage remote employees, as happy faculty can lead to happier students. Personal and human interaction within the organization are what make or break the organizational culture. The five primary practices have been consistently applied to build an online community, which has been paramount in the College becoming a “Best Place to Work” in Indiana.

**References**


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Differentiated Instruction Techniques to Reach Everyone Online

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Abstract

Due to an increasing need to reach students at all levels in the online classroom, educators can use a wide variety of tools involving technology and online discussion tools. Few will dispute the importance of differentiated instruction. As student populations become increasingly diverse, importance must be placed on diversity and inclusion practices. Regardless of the environment where one chooses to learn, differentiated instruction celebrates the unique gifts of all learners, while not forgetting stronger students to answer questions with more complex nuances. With recent advances in technology and education, it is important to explore programs, applications, and elements which assist in differentiated instruction. American College of Education has explored the increasing availability of educational technology useful for differentiating instruction in the classroom.

Introduction

Adult learners have different backgrounds, experiences, learning styles, and preferences. Differentiated instruction will meet the needs of a diverse adult learning audience, which American College of Education (ACE) applies. Educational technology is a means of reaching out to all students.

What is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiated instruction is a method of teaching in which an instructor will meet the needs of individual students by individualizing the curriculum for the classroom (Darrow, 2015). Differentiated instruction embraces student differences. To promote student learning and success for adult learners, students must be given the opportunity to learn in a way which best fits individual needs. Dimitriadou, Nari, and Palaiologou (2013) observed as instructors practice differentiated instruction, teachers developed a better understanding of diversity in the classroom.

Differentiated Strategies

Instructors must understand individuals within the classroom may have multiple interpretations. Thus, it is important to have a variety of instructional strategies, varying from digital storytelling to visual literacy. Instructors must also motivate adult learners to apply the material in a way which speaks to them (Dimitriadou, Nari, & Palaiologou, 2013). The information must be relevant. Voltz, Sims, and Nelson (2008) stated when developing strategies for differentiated instruction, one should consider: (a) materials and content, (b) the learning environment, (c) collaboration, and (d) assessment. Assessment can help determine whether the diverse students have met the course objectives. If the adult learners do not meet the objectives, the instructor can evaluate the instruction and make any necessary adjustments. Planning will be essential to organize activities.

It is important to remember every student is different. Therefore, reach out to all different learning styles in which every learner can successfully grasp the concepts in the course. Some students might appreciate receiving transcripts to read or slides of a visual based PowerPoint presentation to follow along with. Yet, if a curriculum is designed to only reach out to those who have the reading and writing learning style, it will not be fair to other learners who have a different learning style. For example, auditory learners might prefer lectures, listening to podcasts, or watching a video. Auditory learners would require a translation of information from the written word to the spoken word. On the other hand, kinesthetic learners would prefer hands-on drag and drop activities, point and click puzzles, or simulations.
For the purposes of student assessment, instructors can allow students to submit assignments according to their own learning style. Offer students with a choice. For example, students can choose to submit an assignment as a written report, PowerPoint presentation, infographic, recorded oral presentation, or a combination of the choices. As learners submit work based on their learning preference, they are able to show what they have learned, rather than how well they can write a paper or take a test (Leithner, 2011). The instructor will also have a better form of assessment.

**Differentiated Instruction and Activity Types at ACE**

To gain a better comprehension of what differentiated instruction might look like for departments in online higher education, consider the following scenario. At ACE, an organizational behavior course is offered in the Master’s of Business Administration program with a focus on Social Impact. The Module 1 Analysis Assignment consists of students creating an infographic to illustrate current-to-future perspectives, comparing and contrasting the mission statement of a small to medium size corporation (e.g. a business or a non-profit) with a large multi-national corporation. The steps of the assignment include:

- **Step 1: Examine -** Gather resources needed to organize your module 1 Analysis template. Examine the role, scope and trends of leadership through a current-to-future perspective, evaluating what approach to organizational leadership has shown best results in business and what could be potentially needed, taking into consideration modern’s human relationship views.
- **Step 2: Research -** Research commonalities between mission statements of small, medium or large corporations and unique differences as they apply to administrative and organizational theories.
- **Step 3: Analyze –** Analyze how commonalities between mission statements of varying sizes of corporations can be applied in today’s business organizations.
- **Step 4: Outline –** Based on steps 1-3, outline what has worked in organizational leadership and what could potentially be needed now, and in the future, to incorporate a more human approach.
- **Step 5: Create –** Using free online software, such as Canva (link provided on the learning object page), create an infographics which outlines the scope of mission statements including level of a company’s aims, and values depending on the corporation size, small, medium or large.
- **Step 6: Summarize-** Summarize your analysis infographic in a half-to-full page summary containing in-text citations.
- **Step 7: Submit –** Assemble and submit your title page, infographics, summary, and references following the latest APA (7th ed.).

Other examples of differentiated instructions at ACE would refer to assignments that are diversified in terms of product expectations and integrate technology such as Digital Learning Connections (DLCs). Students can apply online software or a tool from a list of Learning Objects. These Learning Objects refer to different assignment methods that will provide students with more real-world practice for any program level from bachelor’s, to master’s, to doctorate. These real-world writing practices will replace the former practice of “writing a paper” which can become redundant.

The differentiated instruction assignments consist of developing:

- proposals
- executive summaries
- letters of electronic communication
- newsletters
- infographics
- storyboards
- scripts
- literature reviews (doctorate level)
- data analysis summaries
- interview transcripts
- case studies
Online activities have a lot of benefits. Activity-based learning is appropriate for all learning types, as the instructional designer can create various activities. Students can participate in activities personalized specifically to their individual needs. Students enjoy activity-based learning because they are more involved in the instruction and learning process (Kyungrog, Yoo-Joo, Mihui, Jung-Won, Park, & Moon, 2015). However, the activities must align with the learning objectives and be relevant to the content. One must not have an activity simply to have an activity. The read and write learners will benefit from word games, involving more traditional research papers, writing down notes, discussing concepts on a discussion board, and creating presentations. The visual and auditory learners will benefit from a PowerPoint presentation with embedded videos, audio podcasts, or live virtual questions and answers. Kinesthetic students learn best when they learn by doing. Kinesthetic learners are hands-on and prefer to physically engage with the materials of the studied subject. Activities need to be energetic, outgoing and action orientated. Each of these examples can help create an environment in which different online adult learners can succeed. Students were not made to fit the material. Instead, the resources and instructions were made to fit different the learners. In doing so, an institution does not simply address one learning style, in which diversity can be embraced. To broaden the effectiveness to include other populations, create and distribute a survey to students. End of course surveys should directly ask students their thoughts about the assignments, curriculum, and resources. Doing so will allow instructors to tailor their academic freedom and instructional designers to better plan and incorporate different kinds of activities for all learners to be able to meet the course objectives. The instructors can develop lessons by creating tools, handouts, or summaries which adapt to everyone’s learning style.

Students at all program levels at ACE complete their educational journey with a comprehensive class called Capstone. All students must all create a LinkedIn professional account. They are required to demonstrate their online craft by publishing a profile to highlight skills in their field of expertise.

Conclusion

With any courses designed, differentiated instruction is quite helpful to reach various students. When meeting an individual’s learning needs, the adult student is likely to better retain the information. Respecting diversity, different abilities, and individual differences creates a better learning environment (Dimitriadou, Nari, & Palaiologou, 2013). The learning experience is also positively impacted.

References


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Supporting Adult Learners Through Alternative Learning Opportunities

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Abstract

Purdue University Global has an Alternative Credit Center to support adult learners with diverse educational and employment backgrounds. This center builds students’ skills and knowledge through learning opportunities, including assessments, open learning courses, customizable degrees, and accelerated credit options. This report will explore the current development and future directions for the center.

Introduction

This report outlines the early part of Purdue University Global’s journey to implement an inclusive alternative assessment center. This “work in progress” project has faced external and internal challenges on the pathway to success. However, even with potential obstacles ahead, there was a universal agreement that the previous assessment system was not adequate for our current and future students’ needs. With senior leadership support, the university started discussions on a new assessment strategy in early 2019. After several meetings, the university outlined the goals of this new initiative. Foremost, the university wanted to create a new and unique learning environment that provided students the necessary tools to earn credit through various assessment avenues. Not simply relocate and conform to prior assessment formats, but also reconceptualize the possibilities for students’ alternative credit options. Second, the university leadership stressed the importance of providing an inclusive assessment process (McConlogue, 2020). With the support of university leadership, faculty, and staff, this initiative commenced in the summer of 2020.

First Step: Reviewing the Current Assessment Process

The initial step in the review process included an in-depth examination of the university’s current assessment opportunities. These assessments were spread across the university in the following colleges and schools: College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, School of Business and IT, School of Health Sciences, School of General Education, and the Open College. This initiative began with interviews of leadership, faculty, and staff in the individual colleges to better understand assessment methods, procedures, and policies. These conversations assisted the university in establishing the current situation. The recommendation of the review included the following and was implemented:

1. It was determined a single university location for credit and non-credit alternative learning opportunities for students would be the best path forward.
2. This new site was given the name Alternative Credit Center (ACC).
3. The Open College closed, and the previous components were re-positioned under the ACC and the School of General Education.
4. All course assessments, opening learning, and Project Assessment of New E-Learning (PANeL) were moved from each college or school into the ACC.
5. The ACC was built, managed and maintained by the School of General Education.
6. All education learning opportunities under the ACC were moved to the learning management system, D2L’s Brightspace.
Phase I: Reimagining Alternative Learning Methods.

After completing the initial university survey, investigative research, and planning, the ACC has begun to take shape (Klein-Collins, 2020). The new ACC strives to provide inclusive assessment opportunities for all current and future students while delivering various assessment venues. Kneale and Collings stressed that “Inclusive assessment does not compromise academic or professional standards but improves the opportunities for all students to demonstrate their acquisition of the learning outcomes” (as cited in McConlogue, 2020, p. 137). The ACC started with creating a new center to encompass the various paths to alternative credit, a new type of course assessment, and re-designing the opening learning courses.

During the ACC construction, various components across the university were brought together under one location. These elements included: course assessments, open learning courses, experiential credit for work and life experience, credit for military training, external assessments, third-party course providers, and a list of college examination providers. We recognize students’ prior knowledge and experiences by providing these credit opportunities. The movement of all of these various components required a strategic relocation plan that included departments across the university. After six months, the Alternative Credit Center opened its doors on February 25, 2021. The university had accomplished the goal of providing students all forms of alternative credit under one roof.

When reengineering these course assessments, a university-wide committee met to develop ideas and recommendations. These redesigned assessments are primarily project-based, which include both the current course assessment inventory and the PANeLs. PANeLs were competency-based assessments utilized by the university’s independent version of the professional studies degree programs. In contrast, course assessments were utilized by all university students. The decision was made to combine these two types of assessments into a single model. A new name was developed to reflect the unique style and combination of learning models called the Assessments of Skills and Knowledge (ASK). The new format would be housed in a singular course platform, divided into modules based on the specific course outcomes. Although the course assessment is the same, students under the program have additional opportunities to submit assignments and are provided faculty support. With this plan in place, the ACC and the curriculum and innovation team began the process of converting the current course assessments and PANeLs into the ASK template, which took over six months.

The ACC intended to provide an open learning environment that would showcase course content and engage students in academic and career skills. To meet this goal, we transitioned the open learning courses from the learning management system Moodle into a Brightspace Course Catalog to create a consistent learning experience across the university. This second large initiative involved updating, reformatting, and transferring all open learning courses within a three-month time frame.

These MOOC-style courses were under the purview of the Open College before moving into the ACC. There has been a resurgence in MOOC-style courses in higher education after being virtually eliminated in recent times. In fact, Udacity and Coursera have recently created more evolved-style MOOCs with premier universities and corporate collaborators (Lohr, 2020). In order to be competitive, we needed to re-envision our current inventory. The result of the open learning course redesign was a self-paced learning experience with appropriate scaffolding, a new user interface that is engaging and easy to navigate, and the addition of a certificate of completion. While the courses were revised using experts from the school of origin, the redesign was handled as one project and managed through a centralized group to ensure standardization, quality control, and abidance to timelines.

Future Directions for the Alternative Credit Center

As the ACC moved out of Phase I, we entered into Phase II of the project. During this second phase, we will be targeting the following areas:

1. The university will continue to develop a marketing strategy for the ACC.
2. We are completing the updates to the Prior-Learning Assessment Portfolio System (PDAS) and the instructor-led and open learning courses tied to our portfolio development.
3. We are committed to updating and redesigning student records and communications for assessment advisors.
4. Develop new non-credit open learning opportunities with strategic partnerships and providing Continuing Education Units.
5. Create standard policies and procedures for all prior learning assessments.

As we work on these new projects throughout this second phase, we continue to strive for additional and improved alternative assessment opportunities for our students. As education continues to evolve, we need to be prepared to provide an innovative learning approach adapted for all students’ needs. Purdue Global will continue to provide outstanding educational opportunities in alternative credit as we build these additional offerings.

References


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Unbundling faculty roles has been a trending topic in higher education for many years. One unbundling method BYU-Idaho Online Learning is exploring is unbundling assessment from instruction and mentoring. This model has led to greater consistency in assessment across course sections, freeing up more time for faculty outreach to students, greater faculty and teaching assistant job satisfaction, and quicker turnaround times for scoring students' work.

Introduction

Unbundling is the intentional act of separating regular faculty duties into discrete roles. In this paper we share results of experiments which separate grading functions from instruction in online courses that employ a standardized curriculum and assessment model across all sections of given courses. These actions, to unbundle and centralize grading activities, are increasing evaluation accuracy and consistency across course sections and are enhancing faculty ability to spend more time supporting individual students.

Disaggregation or unbundling of instruction and faculty roles has a long history; it isn’t a new concept spawned by technological advancement. Unbundling occurs frequently in higher education, for example in the use of TAs for undergraduate high enrollment courses.

Our experience has shown that when roles can focus on singular tasks, they get better at them. For example, graders in our model have demonstrated that they can grade faster (turnaround from time of submission to evaluation), more consistently with less bias, and provide more targeted feedback than in our control courses. Faculty also report they have more time to connect with and support students.

The central principle that should govern decisions concerning bundling or unbundling must always be student success. Effective unbundling is not simply disaggregating faculty functions or even institutional duties and reassigning them to other entities. Unbundling should be student success focused, purpose- and data-driven, and cost-conscious.

What is Unbundled?

The concept of unbundling the faculty role in our model is the practice of separating assessment functions from instructional functions with an aim to provide both efficiencies to the organization and high quality learning experiences to students. For this model to be reliable, instruction and assessment must be aligned. Ensuring consistency and accuracy necessitates designing instruction and assessment rubrics that tightly align to learning outcomes. The reverse is also true, instruction must also align to evaluation and feedback. Thus, it is equally important that graders and instructors are trained and calibrated on how course learning objectives are taught and measured. Rubrics and scoring criteria that are explicit and clearly leveled are a key component for achieving this goal. Robust rubrics also substantially reduce, but do not eliminate, the need for norming and calibration activities.
Unfortunately, examples of well-aligned outcomes, content, assessments and rubrics can be rare, so it is critical to commit to the additional work required to prepare rubrics that meet this need. In truth, if the desired efficiencies and consistent grading practices are to be realized, this work is perhaps the most important hurdle to overcome.

The Process

Brigham Young University-Idaho is a private, 4-year undergraduate institution located in southeastern Idaho. The university serves approximately 20,000 residential students and another 20,000 online students worldwide. BYU-Idaho’s online learning model is based on a standardized curriculum. Online courses are developed by a university instructional design and development team in collaboration with faculty and departments. All faculty teaching these online courses are expected to utilize the standardized course curriculum and assessments in the university’s LMS. This centralized approach to delivering online programs makes it an ideal setting for experimentation and innovation as the curriculum remains consistent across multiple sections.

Over the last couple of years, the university’s Online Learning organization has been experimenting with managing the unbundled grading functions in a centralized model for a small number of high-enrolling, entry-level courses. While primarily motivated by a desire to seek out models that could increase section size to keep faculty costs down, the university administration was clear there was no appetite for sacrificing lower scores on key performance indicators (eg. grades, throughput, retention, student satisfaction) in the effort.

As the experiments unfolded, course rubrics were reviewed and revised, as needed, to help TAs consistently apply the scoring criteria. TA norming activities were devised to periodically calibrate the TAs, and they were all placed in a central organizational structure, reporting to a TA manager rather than to individual faculty. Online faculty were also trained in best practices for reallocating what was once grading time to mentoring and instruction time. These practices included targeted use of gradebook and course analytics to support student progress as a class and to identify and mentor students who would be most impacted by individualized mentoring.

Most recently, in Fall 2020 a simple, internally-developed grading utility was piloted, giving TAs the ability to grade student submissions across all sections of a course in a First-In-First-Out (FIFO) order. This capability reduced the need for complex TA assignment management, TAs all used the same queue and simply graded the next available assignment as it came up.

The TA manager took on a new, critical, quality assurance and training role in this model. The TA manager helped troubleshoot issues with the grading utility, closely monitored the assignment queue to ensure turnaround goals were being met and could monitor other metrics that provided insight into the work of individual TAs. Perhaps most importantly, the manager was responsible for helping ensure the grading being performed in the centralized shop was being performed to the academic department’s specifications and satisfaction. Our work in this area of auditing grading accuracy and quality is still emerging, but is key to the model’s success. Academic departments and accreditors alike need to be satisfied that the model has sufficient controls and auditing in place to guarantee student learning outcomes are being met.

Lessons Learned

Our data from over 3 semesters of experimentation in five different courses shows that unbundling evaluation from the faculty role and moving to a centrally-managed grading model has allowed the university to realize some efficiencies and improve consistency of the student experience. Importantly, we found that the experiments did “no harm” to the university’s key performance indicators for students. Doing “no harm” is hardly a lofty goal or achievement, so why do we continue to be energized about our outcomes of this centrally-managed grading model?

Early indications suggest that compared with their control groups:

- Students grades remained stable in the centrally-managed grading experimental groups (Stokes, 2020)
- Students received assignment scores and feedback much faster (Stokes, 2020)
- Departments could at the least, double course section enrollments (Stokes, 2020)
- Feedback is more consistent with rubrics from one TA to another
Online faculty are more satisfied with their new role (Stokes, 2020)
Online TAs feel more satisfied, supported and clear about expectations (Stokes, 2020)
Nearly all courses benefited from improved rubric alignment to course outcomes.
The university has a new data stream providing greater insight into, course performance, TA performance, and student achievement.
Departments and the Online Learning organization have a stronger system in which to apply incremental improvements immediately across all sections of a course.
Departments have an avenue to address faculty scarcity in some fields

Summary & Conclusion

In this format, we can’t possibly share all the pitfalls, successes, and lessons learned through hard experience regarding unbundling faculty functions and implementing a centrally-managed grading model. There are many unaddressed details surrounding TA governance, the new faculty role, training schedules, feedback libraries, and the supporting tools to make this all a success. We don’t pretend to even know all the questions yet, let alone their answers, but we have observed promising results that this model is effective and efficient and so we have attempted to describe and share some of our experiences thus far.

Seeking out ways to improve quality, increase reach and reduce cost have been hallmarks of BYU-Idaho’s Online Learning strategy for nearly 12 years. The efforts described above are made carefully and with intention. They are closely monitored and evaluated. We’ve learned not to be discouraged by the starts and stops in the unbundling process. It takes persistence and patient coordination to create buy-in for new faculty roles and distance learning models. Our data are small, yet we believe more time and observation will result in supporting our hypothesis that the unbundled model with centrally-managed grading will not simply reduce cost to the university and “do no harm” to students, but will be a foundation for incremental improvement and ultimately also increase student retention, engagement and learning.

References


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Diversity and Inclusion Issues in the New Zoom Nation

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Abstract

The growing use of Zoom and other live streaming technologies in higher education creates new challenges but also opportunities relating to the growing need for diversity and inclusion. This presentation will offer insights from one university’s experiences with synchronous video instruction and offer suggestions for meeting those needs in the online classroom.

The New Normal

The pandemic of 2020 saw unprecedented changes in almost every aspect of life worldwide. Though no facet seems to have been left unscathed, the field of education witnessed a dramatic shift as institutions from every level of the academic spectrum rapidly transitioned from the traditional classroom to the virtual one. In an attempt to replicate in-person instruction, schools and universities utilized the readily available and affordable Zoom service. The extent of this implementation was so quick and so widespread new words were added to the English language including "Zoom bombing" and "Zoom fatigue". Even as the pandemic slows and the population becomes vaccinated, there is every reason to believe that Zoom and similar technologies will remain part of the education and work experience. Castrillon (2020) notes that “the percentage of workers permanently working from home is expected to double in 2021”. A large number of employers who were forced to shift their employees to virtual are finding that the savings on overhead and the lack of commuting are attractive for both employers and employees. Educators now have the added incentive to use live video to help prepare students for the professions that are increasingly worked remotely.

Benefits of Live Video

Though seemingly sudden, the practice of synchronous live instruction has been slowly growing in online higher education for several years. In the competitive market of virtual education, universities have been integrating live online classes to supplement the asynchronous experience. While many have included these elements simply out of concern for being outpaced by competitors, others have designed courses around them to take advantage of the strengths face-to-face instruction offers while retaining the elements that make online education so attractive to modern students.

Synchronous video instruction provides several specific benefits for students. It allows students to interact with their instructors in real-time fashion. This enables instructors to answer specific questions, provide instruction, and gauge student learning. This last benefit is increased if instructors can actually "see" their online students and is one reason why many face-to-face instructors wish to see their pupils. If a student appears confused or bored, the instructor can immediately respond accordingly. The live video also allows for instructors to integrate their own personality into the classroom experience. The ability to foster a positive learning environment is increased when the teacher can demonstrate real time empathy, integrate appropriate humor, and relate personal experiences. Most of these benefits come from the students' ability to see and hear their instructors in real time. When students find themselves on the receiving end of the camera for an extended time, problems invariable arise.

Zoom Fatigue

With so many classes and business meetings being held through Zoom, many are finding themselves exhausted in new ways. The reasons for this are varied and fascinating. Jing (2020) notes that there is a substantial difference between a live in-person conversation and a Zoom conversation. Namely, students who are on camera find
themselves under the pressure to "perform" for those who are viewing them. Video conversations require substantially more concentration than even a live lecture. Silence, which is a natural part of regular conversation that gives the mind a break is seemingly uncomfortable in a Zoom meeting which further increases the energy required to engage successfully. Apart from the increased mental effort, having students on camera for live classes raises additional concerns.

**Diversity and Inclusion Issues**

The resistance of students to utilize their cameras in school Zoom classes prompted Castelli and Savary (2021) to survey their traditional undergraduate biology students regarding why they chose to keep their cameras off. The most common reason cited by their students was concern for their physical appearance. Of the male students, 36% cited this as a reason. Among female students, 45% cited this as the main reason. The disparity was also seen when they compared results of underrepresented minority students (UMR) and non-underrepresented minority students. Among the UMR students, 45% cited concern about appearance compared to just 38% of nonUMR students. Another common reason cited was concerns about other people in their own living area. This is logical when one considers the inequities in living arrangements that exist for students. Many students live with multiple family members in small areas. Some are even homeless and must rely on public areas to access their classes. Of the male students, 20% cited this as a reason not to use their cameras compared to 32% of the female students. But 38% of UMR students cited this reason compared to just 24% of non UMR students. It should also be noted that when a student turns on their camera, other inequities become apparent. It is obvious if a student is having a Zoom meeting by the family pool or inside a small closet because it is the only half-way quiet place available in their homes.

Living space inequities become apparent in the Zoom nation but are not the only concern.

While internet access is increasingly considered a "must have" utility, it is also clear that income inequalities are highlighted when internet speed and access are required for live video streaming. Moses (2020) highlights this technology inequity and argues that educators must be mindful when requiring students to engage in live video conferencing. The upload bandwidth for live video is substantially higher than just downloading video. Students with limited internet capabilities may find it difficult if their cameras are required. Furthermore, this difficulty could be readily apparent to not just the instructor but the other students. If synchronous video instruction brings such substantial benefits but requiring students raises diversity and equity issues, what then is the solution?

**Strategies and Recommendations**

The first recommendation for online educators and administrators is to simply not require students to use their cameras. It can be argued that even encouraging it could cause a student anxiety especially if there are equity issues involved. The use of cameras for students should not be mandated which also avoids violating privacy issues. Instructors should use the live video to enhance the online learning experience. This is accomplished in a variety of ways. During video classes, instructors should encourage discussion and interaction. Students may not be on camera but can still use synchronous voice or text to engage in classroom conversations and projects. The lecture time should be limited. While a student in a traditional classroom may sit for a ninety-minute lecture, it is unlikely that much information will be absorbed through lengthy live lectures given the propensity for students to become fatigued with online video conferencing. Instructors should also capitalize on the technology to create and enhance the classroom atmosphere. Live video allows an instructor to personalize their classrooms in ways that asynchronous tools simply do not allow. Finally, institutions should actively research their students to determine their needs and identify diversity and equity issues that may exist. It would be presumptive to assume all student bodies have identical challenges and opportunities. It is only when we take the effort to truly understand our students can we craft policies and practices that optimize their learning experience.

**References**


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Supporting Faculty in Online and Hybrid Teaching
Beyond the Pandemic

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Abstract

During the spring of 2020, many colleges transitioned to all-online classes in response to COVID-19, changing the face of higher education forever. This forced faculty who had once balked at the idea of teaching online to learn many new skill sets in a short amount of time. Learning more about the triumphs and trials that these individuals experienced can give instructional designers new insights into what training and support of distance and hybrid education should look like after the pandemic. In a survey sent to faculty who had never taught online before and through discussion board responses in online course training, faculty answered questions about their experience with the transition. Two questions will be the focus of this presentation. The first question focuses on what significant challenges they faced when transitioning their courses to the online environment. The second question asks if there is anything they did in their online course that will continue in face-to-face courses once they return to campus. The answers to these questions will help guide future training and assistance to support faculty in their future educational endeavors.

Introduction

Kansas State University Polytechnic is a small midwestern campus that is a part of the larger Kansas State University system. The programs at this campus include Aviation and Social Work along with various computer and engineering degrees. The campus offers many online courses and is slowly adding fully online degrees. Like most higher learning institutions, in March of 2020, all courses transitioned online due to the concern of the growing COVID-19 pandemic. This led faculty who had never taught online before to quickly learn a new skill set while ensuring their students still had a rigorous educational experience. Even those with online teaching experience had the burden of rapidly shifting their traditional face-to-face courses online at a moment's notice, as well as supporting students who may have never taken a course online. This transition due to COVID-19 led to a newly designed faculty online training course, increased instructional design assistance, and provided valuable information that will help to support faculty who continue to teach online or hybrid beyond the pandemic.

Before the Pandemic

Training for faculty who teach online existed before the pandemic. Faculty were required to participate in a 6-week online course. They were then given up to 12-weeks to create their course with the help of an instructional designer. The assistance of the instructional designer was optional, but most did take advantage of this opportunity. Once they completed designing their course and before it went live for students, the course was reviewed against the K-State Polytechnic Course Design Checklist. This checklist was adapted from various quality tools, including Quality Matters and the OSCQR rubric, and adjusted to meet faculty needs. The goal was to keep the checklist no longer than two pages making it not so overwhelming for a faculty member going through this process for the first time. While shorter than other checklists, it was designed to ensure a standard course layout and include essential organizational and quality elements.

Faculty professional development for teaching online included this course and not much follow-up. There was technology training to ensure they knew how to utilize the learning management system (LMS) and any technology that the university used for online instruction. These technology tools included Zoom and Mediasite, the video platform utilized by the university. This training was done by the campus instructional designer and individuals from Kansas State University's main campus in Manhattan.
When the campus transitioned online due to the pandemic, 65% of our faculty had been through the online training course and were currently or had taught online in the past. One issue is that many had not been through the training in years, and a few had stopped adhering to the standard course layout. This lapse ended up confusing students when all faculty were not utilizing the same course organization.

**Changes Made to Faculty Training**

Fortunately, instructional designers from both the Polytechnic and main campus had recently started discussions on revamping the faculty training for online teaching to ensure that both campuses were on the same page and to share resources and ideas. The current course was created in 2012, and while changes and assessment had occurred, it was time for a total redesign. The instructional designers got together and created the Online Course Design Institute (OCDI). The institute is a 5-week online course with synchronous events via Zoom. The course consists of five modules: Fundamentals of Online Teaching and Learning, Tools for Online Teaching and Learning, Student Success in Online Teaching and Learning, Assessment in Online Teaching and Learning, and Hybrid Teaching and Learning.

Synchronous events for the OCDI included roundtable discussions. These discussions included experienced online teaching faculty sharing how roles change for both instructor and student in online courses and a conversation with students taking online courses and the issues or successes they have experienced. The course was offered multiple times, starting in April of 2020 and throughout the summer, to accommodate different schedules and get as many faculty through as possible. The Polytechnic campus had 70% of faculty sign up to be in the course. 50% of those faculty participated in the synchronous events either live or by viewing the recording later. Very few did the assignments; only those required as part of a contract with the Professional Education and Outreach department completed them. The OCDI, renamed to the Polytechnic OCDI for our campus, was given great reviews from those who participated. 100% of survey respondents said they would recommend taking the Polytechnic OCDI to their colleagues and that they would continue to utilize the resources available when working on future online course development.

**Survey**

In order to gauge challenges that faculty faced when changing the modality of their courses due to the pandemic, a survey was created. This survey consisted of seven open ended questions which can be seen in Table 1 and was given to faculty who had never taught online before. This population would have a higher learning curve compared to their peers who have taught online.

This paper will focus on two of the survey questions:

1. List or talk about the challenges you encountered when moving your content online.
2. Of the changes you made to your course when you moved to online teaching, are there any that you will continue to use in your face-to-face course?

These two questions were the most informative to help planning for faculty professional development for immediate need and into the future after we return to normal operations on campus.

**Table 1. Survey Questions**

1. What changes did you make to your courses when K-State required all courses to be taught remotely?
2. List or talk about the challenges you encountered when moving your content online.
3. List or talk about the challenges you encountered with student communication or student interaction with course content once your course moved online.
4. List or talk about the challenges you encountered with student communication or student interaction with course content once your course moved online.
5. Of the changes you made to your course when you moved to online teaching, are there any that you will continue to use in your face-to-face course?
6. After this experience, would you choose to teach online again? Why or why not?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share regarding this transition to online/remote teaching?

Survey Results

The answers to these two questions varied little. There were three common themes in the faculty responses. The common challenges that the faculty faced when moving their content online revolved around learning the necessary software to teach online in a short amount of time. This response included learning how to grade electronically, moving paper tests to the LMS, and figuring out technical glitches with students’ work. The second theme was course organization and the communication of assignments. They struggled with the best way to organize content so students could easily understand the content setup and the assignments they needed to do, and when. Respondents also struggled with the best way to communicate these expectations to students. The third central theme to this question was time. The amount of time it took to create, record, and publish content was overwhelming since they had never used the tools available to accomplish this task. Creating new content, while learning software with a very short turn-around, was stressful and difficult.

There were also three common themes to the question of the changes you made to your course when you moved to online teaching are there any that you will continue to use in your face-to-face course? The first change that most of these faculty have decided to keep is online tests. These faculty had continued to utilize paper test years after the ability to have them online was available. With the forced move to online, they have found that giving tests online saves time once correctly set up. The system will automatically grade multiple-choice questions, and they can annotate comments on papers with ease once they learn the tools. The second theme that came of their survey responses was to continue using the flipped classroom or hybrid options for their courses. Many faculty enjoyed having students read or watch content before having a class discussion over Zoom. Spending time discussing the content and diving deeper into the concepts was something they enjoyed and wanted to continue. They found that many activities worked better online and would allow for more hands-on or discussion time in class. The third theme was utilizing LMS features for communication. These faculty had always relied on class time to let students know when things were due. Sometimes course schedules were on the syllabus, sometimes they were not, making those class reminders imperative. They learned that with LMS communication tools, they could schedule announcements ahead of time to alert students when assignments were coming due. The assignments could also have due dates assigned to them that the students could view anytime. These are tools that they will continue to use, which will benefit them and their students.

Changes to Faculty Professional Development and Support

The answers to these two questions have helped to guide faculty professional development and support for immediate and future needs. One major change made was the addition of full-time instructional design support. Before the pandemic required the pivot to all online courses the campus instructional designer was also the library director. It quickly became clear that this position needed to focus 100% on instructional design and the changes were made. This has allowed for more focused communication to faculty about training opportunities and updates to tools the university provides for online instruction like the LMS and Zoom. This reassignment of duties has also led to more just-in-time support for faculty.

Another change is the addition of monthly professional development opportunities specifically for campus. There are ample technology trainings offered by the main campus this is available to Polytechnic faculty, therefore this monthly training focuses on issues that could be helpful to faculty based on their needs and the different programs offered. The hardest part is finding new options for professional development. The instructional designer can offer training, but faculty need to hear different voices and different viewpoints to really embrace a new tool or concept. There are many different ways that we have employed to find new professional development opportunities, all of which are free. One is to focus locally. When we find that one of our faculty is doing something new or innovative, we ask them to present it to their colleagues. This is a wonderful process because it helps us to highlight our faculty and shows others what their colleagues are doing and how they can utilize it in their own courses. The next is to reach out to other instructional designers on main campus or colleagues at other universities. Often, they have faculty or training they are doing that they are more than willing to share and offer to another institution. Especially faculty on tenure track that need presentations to fulfill requirements. With everyone used to having training and meetings virtually, location is no longer an issue, and faculty like to hear from other faculty and what they are doing to innovate or create a better learning environment for students.
Another way to find professional development is to attend conferences. Often, we will come across a presentation that would be meaningful to our own faculty. When this happens, we will ask the presenter if they would be willing to present to our faculty and generally, they are more than willing to offer their expertise. We offer this opportunity to both our small campus and the larger Manhattan campus to ensure a large audience for these invited presentations. An important part of offering these trainings is recording them. There is no perfect time of the day that will work for all faculty to attend training. The recordings will allow them to watch at a time that works for them. This also allows for the building of a just-in-time training library. While technology training needs to be revised frequently, some topics like creating engaging course videos or course mapping can be utilized for longer and can be shared with faculty should the need arise.

Conclusion

The pandemic caused disruptions for all institutions of higher education and possibly changed the face of higher education forever. This is definitely the case with the faculty who responded to this survey. The hope is as faculty got more comfortable with the technology, time spent creating content lessened, allowing for them to learn and share more with their students. In talking to faculty through help sessions, this does appear to be the case. They also learned that even if they are unsure they will use it, they should pay more attention to training opportunities; at least those that pertain to the tools provided by the university to teach online. Survey results showed that until some faculty are forced to utilize tools, they don’t see the usefulness. This was evident in the excitement over the LMS communication tools which the majority of their colleagues have been using for years. With all that has transpired, institutions and faculty are listening harder than ever to their instructional designers. It is important that we take the information we learned and create better training and support for faculty. This can lead to better course content and course organization, which will benefit students taking our courses.

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What Does Copyright Mean for Online Teachers and Students Today?

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Abstract

With the expansion of online learning, definitions of “fair use” have evolved. Schools relying on digital materials must ensure copyright restrictions are understood well by teachers and students. This paper reviews current copyright guidelines, shares resources, suggests ways to avoid infringement, and examines protection of teacher and student intellectual property.

Introduction

The legislation that defines copyright today was enacted in 1976. Although language and specifications in the Copyright Act are comprehensive enough to serve today, the emergence of the Internet, changes in technology, economic issues, and an expansion of online learning have brought a new focus on copyright. Learning institutions, teachers, and students need to understand what is meant by “fair use” to avoid infringement of intellectual property rights of others, and they can benefit from understanding how to protect their own intellectual property from unauthorized use. Copyright Law covers a broad range of intellectual property, and allowable copying and distribution depends on circumstances. In this paper, we take a brief look at some aspects of copyright that are pertinent for teachers and students to raise awareness of how to avoid potential infringements and to offer some recommendations to protect their own intellectual property.

Brief Overview of Some Aspects of Copyright Law

U.S. copyright law information may be found at the U.S. Copyright Office website (https://copyright.gov). Some key aspects of the law that are pertinent for teachers and students are summarized here. First, a “copy” is a material object in which a work is “fixed” in a medium that has sufficient stability and permanence to allow it to be perceived and possibly reproduced. The work is considered to be “created” when it is fixed for the first time. Original works of authorship are protected whether or not the author (creator) registers a work with the U.S. Copyright Office; however, creators of significant works may benefit from greater protection through registration. A copyright may be owned by someone other than the original author. Works which may be protected under copyright law include those that are literary, musical, dramatic, pictorial or graphic, audiovisual, sound recordings and a few others. Works are protected whether or not they have been published. However, copyright protection does not extend to ideas, procedures, processes, concepts, principles, and the like regardless of the form in which such things may be communicated.

Summary of Fair Use and Changes in Perspectives

Before the rise of the Internet, many educators reproduced works under the concept of “Fair Use” for teaching, scholarship, criticism, and research with no concerns about copyright infringement. When reproductions were limited to photocopies or recordings shared in physical classrooms, the level of use had some built-in limitations. Since that time, several things have had an impact of the how publishers and authors view what may be fair.

Determination of fair use is based on several factors rather than specific numbers relating to a work. These factors include: 1) the purpose and character of use (commercial or non-profit); 2) the nature of the work; 3) the amount and substance of the portion of the work; and 4) the effect of use on potential market value of the work.

Movement to a digital world for communication in general as well as education has made it easy to locate, copy, and redistribute intellectual property. While some owners of intellectual property welcome sharing for education,
economic considerations have made publishers and educational institutions more protective of their works. Competition among institutions for students and the high cost of for-purchase textbooks has led to an increased use of open access educational resources to reduce education costs. As an example of an author or publisher’s possible concerns, the market value of a textbook or professional journal can be reduced if digital copies are made of a single purchase library issue and made available to online students repeatedly. Some educational institutions are now using technology to identify pirated copies of their online course materials and pursue enforcement of their copyrights.

Availability of Resources for Education and Types of Limitations

Educational materials may be available through open sources in addition to direct purchase from publishers and access through university libraries. However, it is important to check for conditions of use for any source. Conditions may vary even for sources of similar type. For example, e-books available through a library may limit the number of users and time available for access, making assignment as a course textbook inappropriate. User specifications are displayed on the library book listed under Availability. E-book publisher permissions are displayed on the book’s Detailed Record and may specify the number of pages that can be printed or saved and/or copied and pasted to another document.

Library subscriptions to professional journals may include open access for students, but that is not always the case. Harvard Business Review, a popular professional journal, restricts library use through online classroom e-reserves and requires purchase of individual copies for each student assigned to read an article. Resources shared via the library are expected to have a specific notice of copyright requirements.

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Protecting Your Intellectual Property

Although it is not required for protection, authors are encouraged to include their identification and a copyright logo and date on each work, whether or not it is published. A statement about rights reserved and permissions would also be advisable. Teachers and students may have personal websites with their own authored work, and this work may be protected by copyright (see the U.S. Copyright Office Circular 66 for information about registration at Circular 66 Copyright Registration of Websites and Website Content). Depending on the facilities used for a personal website, terms of use may require the website owner to relinquish certain rights regarding their content. A popular website builder service has been used by students to create e-portfolio sites for free; however, the terms of use...
include a provision that the service provider or their affiliates may copy, use, and redistribute the content, including for commercial purposes. Copies of these student papers have been found for numerous online courses and made available for a fee on an affiliate site. These papers also were determined to be the source of plagiarism for other students taking the courses at a later date. Whether using a service for free or a fee, it is important to read the fine print to determine how one’s content may be redistributed without further permissions being requested.

Summary

Technology has increased our ability to create, store, and share works with copyright considerations. It has also facilitated access and unauthorized use of the intellectual property of others. Although some unauthorized use is intentional, teachers and students may infringe on the intellectual property rights of others unintentionally because they lack awareness of the provisions of “fair use,” the restrictions that many authors and publishers now place on their works, and the availability of material that appears to be in the public domain but is not. On the other side, all persons need to be aware of how to protect their work that is stored digitally and accessible through the Internet. The costs for infringement can be high, whether you have violated the rights of others or someone has misused your own intellectual property.

References

Copyright.gov, U.S. Copyright Office. https://copyright.gov

Creative Commons. http://creativecommons.org

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A Digital Escape Room Whodunit About Accessible Online Course Content

Heather Wire
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Abstract

During the COVID 19 pandemic, institutions around the world have been tasked with the rapid development of online course content that can be easily accessed by all groups of learners, including people with disabilities. Creating accessible online content requires high intentions and a variety of knowledge and skills to address digital accessibility standards and laws. More often than not, organizations and institutions focus on closing these employees’ knowledge and performance gaps by providing resources and training. However, according to the Integrated Behavior Model, addressing the individual’s knowledge and skills is only part of the process for getting them to change their behaviors towards developing accessible course content. The individual’s intentions to perform the behavior (developing accessible materials) is the most critical determinant of the behavior. The other four components that directly affect the behavior are knowledge and skills, the salience of the behavior, environmental constraints, and habit.

The intent of this research in progress is to examine how a Digital Escape Room (DER) contributes to the potential change of online content designers and developers’ behavioral intentions towards developing accessible online course content.

This paper describes the design of the DER and a pilot study of its initial implementation that consists of two phases:

- a usability test with 3 participants to identify challenges and allow for adjustments prior to entering the next phase of the pilot study
- a qualitative study with 12 participants

During phase one, the researcher will conduct observations of each participant during the usability test, followed by debriefing interviews. In phase two, semi-structured elicitation interviews will be conducted with at least 12 purposively selected participants who can project their varying years of teaching experience, online learning, and content creation into their reflections of the phenomenon. The questions will explore participants’ perceptions of how the developed DER potentially influenced their intentions to develop accessible online content. Basic demographic information will be collected from each participant in the study. The usability testing data will be analyzed through the Integrated Design Framework lens, and the elicitation interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using the Integrated Behavior Model to uncover major themes.

Background

The number of online courses offered at institutions across the globe has increased due to the pandemic (Alexander et al., 2020; Ali, 2020; Daniel, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Mukhtar et al., 2020; Trust & Whalen, 2020; Zayabalaradjane, 2020). With the rapid development of so much content, the need for accessible content has also grown (Gibilisco, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Many faculty are new to teaching online and rely on personnel and resources to teach them how to develop online content (Kuhlenschmidt, 2010). The course design process changes for many faculty as it requires them to perform new behaviors such as developing course materials that are available online and meeting the guidelines for digital accessibility.

Institutions and organizations provide resources and training to help close any knowledge gaps related to the course design process (Keep teaching: COVID-19 resources for UNC instructors. 2020; Accessibility & Digital Learning @ CPCC. 2020; Teaching Commons. n.d.). However, according to the Integrated Behavior Model, addressing the knowledge and skills of faculty is only part of the process for getting faculty to change their behaviors towards
developing accessible course content. Faculty intentions to perform the behavior (developing accessible materials) is the most critical determinant of the behavior. As depicted in Figure 1, the other five components that directly impact an individual’s behavior are knowledge and skills to perform the behavior, the salience of the behavior, intention or decision to perform the behavior, environmental constraints, and habit (Glanz et al., 2015).

**Figure 1.**
*Integrated Behavior Model*

![Integrated Behavior Model](image)


The realities that many educators developing online learning have to face, like limited time, low resources, and little personnel (Leduc, 2020), create additional barriers that have widened the gap in their technical and online teaching skills as they jump into online learning for the first time with both feet (Trust & Whalen, 2020).

Organizations develop resources to help close knowledge gaps regarding teaching online, developing accessible content, and the laws regarding digital accessibility. The Access Board, Quality Matters, and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) are a few organizations that have developed standards, webinars, certifications, workshops, and standalone resources to help content developers. Institutions often use those organizational resources and standards to develop their own resources regarding online teaching, content development, and digital accessibility.

The issue is that faculty may not have received sufficient training in best practices for teaching with or developing accessible content for online learning (Kuhlenschmidt, 2010). “Unless faculty receive the appropriate knowledge and support in designing and implementing teaching strategies that meet the diversity of learning needs, barriers to access will persist for students with disabilities” (Guilbaud, 2019, p. 47).

“Key issues that are often presented by faculty as impediments to being properly trained to teach online and to support learners with disabilities are time commitment, lack of an incentive regime, and scheduling conflicts” (Guilbaud, 2019, p. 48). Often, faculty feel that creating accessible online course content is too time-consuming.
They do not have the knowledge needed, do not have the right resources, and/or the institution does not have enough funding or staff to develop accessible content (Leduc, 2020). Due to their duties and teaching schedules, they have limited time to attend training and workshops. Therefore, alternative training options would be beneficial.

It was also noted that some faculty might need a change in perspective regarding accessibility (Leduc, 2020) and using game-based learning is an alternative solution. Game-based learning may be defined as the merging of motivation and the process of learning with a game that has defined learning outcomes (Plass et al., 2015). Game-based learning is often used as a learning strategy to motivate learners intrinsically and extrinsically (Al-Azawi et al., 2016; Franciosi, 2017; Plass et al., 2015; Siew, 2018; Woo, 2014). Therefore, developing a game-based learning solution that uses affective engagement elements would provide an opportunity for faculty to look at accessibility differently.

The Digital Escape Room (DER) developed for this study will use the Integrated Design Framework (IDF), which outlines game design elements and the theoretical foundations of game-based learning based on empirical research (Plass et al., 2015). The framework is divided into the affective, motivational, cognitive, and sociocultural foundations built into the game’s learning game design elements.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the DER will include learning game design elements such as a narrative, an aesthetic design, and an incentive system. To incorporate affective, motivational, and cognitive elements into the DER, emotional design, attitudes, incentives, goal orientation, scaffolding and feedback, meaningful interactions, and situated in context are all elements that were incorporated into the game.

**Figure 2.**
*Integrated Design Framework*

Rationale for the Study

The literature contains an abundance of information regarding digital accessibility to include websites, training, webinars, and other resources on Section 504 and 508 compliance, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, Universal Design for Learning, and more. There are programs and workshops like the Deque’s Accessibility Empathy Lab that try to evoke compassion and empathy for those with disabilities who use digital materials and resources. However, a gap exists as there is very little, if any, literature on influencing the behaviors of content developers like faculty to create accessible online course content. A second gap was identified as no other Digital Escape Room exists that targets content developers’ intentions to create accessible content. This study intends to close the gaps using the Digital Escape Room.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the potential effects of the Digital Escape Room (DER) on user intentions and saliency of behavior and to provoke self-reflection on the obstacles for developing accessible content by placing the faculty in scenarios that simulate what it may be like for learners with disabilities in the online classroom.

Gomez (2020) stated that “[q]ualitative studies examining the attitudes of participants along with quantitative studies examining the benefits of digital escape room participation offer opportunities to better understand the role digital escape rooms can play in our classrooms” (p. 431). This study will use qualitative methods to gather the participants’ perceptions of the DER’s design and the DER experience as a whole. The DER in this study could play a role in training by providing an alternative method to reaching faculty regarding the development of accessible content.

Intervention Description

A digital escape room (DER) is an escape room that uses a game-based active learning approach to enhance the learner’s problem solving and critical thinking skills in an immersive environment (Ang et al., 2020). All escape rooms are made of four common components: a story, puzzles, locks, and some escape (Gomez, 2020).

Google Sites websites are commonly used to develop digital escape rooms. However, the game in this study was developed in Articulate Storyline 360, and most of the graphics were purchased from Adobe Stock. The user plays the role of the investigator who works for the cruise line, Gala International (GI), who investigates a murder. As the investigator, the user must visit each member/suspect to find out what they know. The witness statements/clues that the participant must decipher will highlight potential, but not all, online learning obstacles that they must overcome to solve the clues. The user acting as the investigator must hurry to solve the clues and make an arrest before someone else dies.

The design strategy used in the DER is putting the user in the shoes of a learner who may have a disability as they interact with inaccessible content within an online environment. Each suspect is associated with an issue that may make learning difficult for online learners who have disabilities, as shown in Table 1.

For example, Hugh (hue) Hunter is a suspect, and his clue is related to color. He saw someone behaving suspiciously the night of the murder. He could not tell who the person was, but their suite door is red. The investigator is tasked with selecting all the red doors to narrow down who the murderer may be. However, all of the doors that the investigator has to choose from are white. Many clues in the DER are similar in notion as they will be impossible to solve without simply guessing. Feedback is provided with each guess to limit the amount of frustration that the user may feel. This activity will show the user how a learner with colorblindness or visual impairments may find this activity difficult if color was the only way to determine which door to select. Therefore, the next time the user develops online course materials, they can empathize with the learner and incorporate it into the process. Hugh’s clue is associated with Principle 1, Guideline 1.4, and Success Criterion 1.4.1, as referenced in Table 1.
Table 1.
Digital Escape Room Suspects and Coordinating WCAG Principle, Guideline, and Success Criterion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suspect</th>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Guidelines</th>
<th>Success Criterion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capt. Closed</td>
<td>1 – Perceivable: Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.</td>
<td>1.2 Time-based Media: Provide alternatives for time-based media.</td>
<td>1.2.2 Captions (Prerecorded): Captions are provided for all prerecorded audio content in synchronized media, except when the media is a media alternative for text and is clearly labeled as such.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bea Raille</td>
<td>1 – Perceivable: Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.</td>
<td>1.2 Time-based Media: Provide alternatives for time-based media.</td>
<td>1.2.5 Audio description (Prerecorded): Audio description is provided for all prerecorded video content in synchronized media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugh Hunter</td>
<td>1 – Perceivable: Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.</td>
<td>1.4 Distinguishable: Make it easier for users to see and hear content including separating foreground from background.</td>
<td>1.4.1 Use of color: Color is not used as the only visual means of conveying information, indicating an action, prompting a response, or distinguishing a visual element.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al Tex</td>
<td>1 – Perceivable: Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.</td>
<td>Text Alternatives: Provide text alternatives for any non-text content so that it can be changed into other forms people need, such as large print, braille, speech, symbols or simpler language.</td>
<td>1.1.1 Non-text Content: All non-text content that is presented to the user has a text alternative that serves the equivalent purpose. (There are exceptions that are not listed here.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linkon Clear</td>
<td>2 – Operable: User interface components and navigation must be operable.</td>
<td>2.4 Navigable: Provide ways to help users navigate, find content, and determine where they are.</td>
<td>2.4.4 Link Purpose (In Context): The purpose of each link can be determined from the link text alone or from the link text together with its programmatically determined link context, except where the purpose of the link would be ambiguous to users in general.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabitha Order</td>
<td>2 – Operable: User interface components and navigation must be operable.</td>
<td>2.1 Keyboard accessible: Make all functionality available from a keyboard.</td>
<td>2.1.1 Keyboard: All functionality of the content is operable through a keyboard interface without requiring specific timings for individual keystrokes, except where the underlying function requires input that depends on the path of the user's movement and not just the endpoints.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Questions**

**Usability test**

RQ1. After completing usability testing, what are the major issues that require correction before the initial implementation of the Digital Escape Room in phase one, if any?

**Qualitative Study**

RQ2. What are the participants’ perceptions of their Digital Escape Room experience and the associated design elements?

RQ3. How does the Digital Escape Room experience potentially influence the participants’ intentions and salience of their behavior towards developing accessible content?

RQ4. How does the Digital Escape Room experience potentially influence the participants’ self-reflection on their habits, environmental constraints, and necessary knowledge and skills for developing accessible content?

**Conceptual Framework**

Both the Integrated Design Framework and the Integrated Behavior Model influenced the research questions, data collection methods, data analysis plan, and game design of this study, as shown in the conceptual framework in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Conceptual Framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integrated Design Framework</th>
<th>Integrated Behavior Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usability Testing (Phase 1)</td>
<td>Participants perceptions of experience and design of DER (Phase 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Salience of the Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reflection on digital accessibility after DER experience</td>
<td>Knowledge and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td>Environmental Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Habit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ3</td>
<td>Impacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ4</td>
<td>Impacts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Methodology

Data Collection Plan

This qualitative pilot study will be separated into two phases, usability testing and qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews. Calendly will be used to schedule observations and interviews for both phases. Calendly has a built-in Zoom integration and will automatically generate Zoom meeting details when the participant selects a time and date that works for them.

Usability Testing - Phase one

The first phase will be a usability test with three conveniently selected participants to identify any challenges (i.e., navigational issues on clues) that will need to be corrected prior to entering the next phase of the pilot study. The researcher will conduct semi-structured observations of each participant individually and at a time and location that works best for the participant. During the usability test, all safety precautions will be considered, including wearing masks and maintaining a safe social distance between researcher and participant. A checklist (structured observation) will be used to collect data on specific tasks. Free notes (unstructured observation) will be used to notate relevant information or any unexpected delays that the participant may experience, if any. The researcher will provide help, if necessary, but only after giving enough time for the participant to try and figure the problem themselves. Following each observation, the researcher will conduct a debriefing session and record the audio with consent to be later transcribed and analyzed. Refer to Table 2 for the data collection instrument for phase one.

Table 2.
Phase One Data Collection Instrument by Research Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ#</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Instrument</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After completing usability testing, what are the major issues that require correction before the initial implementation of the Digital Escape Room in phase one, if any?</td>
<td>Observations (2-3 people) Structured observation (for each participant) 1. Total time of completion. 2. The participant was able to escape: (Yes or No) 3. The participant had navigational issues: (Yes or No) If yes, on which clue(s)?</td>
<td>Category in the Corresponding Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unstructured observations The observer takes notes of unexpected delays the participant may experience, if any. The observer provides help, if necessary, after giving time for participants to figure it out by themselves.</td>
<td>Debriefing session 1) Have you ever attended an escape room? 2) Have you ever participated in a digital escape room? 3) Was the project load time reasonable? (Yes or No) 4) Did you escape or give up? If give up, why? 5) Was total design uniform in appearance? (Yes or No) 6) Were the hints and feedback provided in the DER helpful? (Yes or No) If yes, how? If no, why not? 7) Did any patterns and textured backgrounds interfere with legibility? (Yes or No) Do you recall the clue?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ#</td>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>Data Collection Instrument</td>
<td>Interpretation Category in the Corresponding Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>8)</td>
<td>Is language clear and concise? (Yes or No)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9)</td>
<td>What was motivating and/or engaging about the experience, if at all?</td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrated Design Framework: Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10)</td>
<td>What would you change or improve about the design of the DER? (i.e., story narrative, aesthetic design, time of completion)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrated Design Framework: Design elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11)</td>
<td>Did the experience make you feel any emotions? If yes, explain what you felt.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrated Design Framework: Affective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12)</td>
<td>What connections were you able to make between the clues and what online learners with disabilities may experience when using inaccessible materials?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Interviews – Phase Two

Before the interviews in phase two, the 12 subjects will individually participate in the Digital Escape Room (DER). They will be provided a link to explore the DER at their convenience from a location of their choice. Due to participants experiencing the DER outside of a controlled environment, there is no time limit. After their DER experience, semi-structured elicitation interviews will be conducted and recorded with the purposively selected participants to project their varying years of teaching experience, online learning, and content creation into their reflections of the DER experience. Each interview will be divided into three parts based on the research questions as reflected in Table 3. The questions will explore the participants’ perceptions of how the developed DER potentially influenced their intentions and saliency to develop accessible online content, as well as any barriers that may hinder their ability to create accessible online content.

Table 3.
Phase Two Data Collection Instrument by Research Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ#</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection Instrument</th>
<th>Interpretation Category in the Corresponding Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>What are the participants’ perceptions of their Digital Escape Room experience and the associated design elements?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interview Part 1:</td>
<td>Integrated Design Framework: Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1) What was motivating and/or engaging about the experience, if at all?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) What would you change or improve about the design of the DER? (i.e., story narrative, aesthetic design, time of completion)</td>
<td>Integrated Design Framework: Design elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3) Did the experience make you feel any emotions? If yes, explain what you felt.</td>
<td>Integrated Design Framework: Affective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4) What connections were you able to make between the clues and what online learners with disabilities may experience when using inaccessible materials?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ#</td>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>Data Collection Instrument</td>
<td>Interpretation Category in the Corresponding Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>5)</td>
<td>What are your biggest positive and/or negative takeaways from the experience?</td>
<td>Semi-structured Interview Part 2:</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Intentions – Experiential attitude (Feelings about the behavior)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>6) Describe your feelings and possible changes about developing accessible content after exploring the Digital Escape Room?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7) What is your perception of the benefits of accessible content for OL students with disabilities?</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Intentions – Instrumental attitude (Behavioral beliefs)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8) Who are the people pushing you develop accessible content, if any?</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Intentions – Injunctive norm (Others’ expectations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9) Do you know people who are developing accessible content in your work circle?</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Intentions – Descriptive norm (Others’ behaviors)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10) With everything you have to do with developing accessible content, how difficult do you think is the task of developing accessible content?</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Intentions – Control Beliefs (Perceived control)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11) Given your knowledge and skills, how confident are you in your ability to perform the task of developing accessible content?</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Intentions – Efficacy Beliefs (Self efficacy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12) How would you rate the degree of importance of developing accessible content?</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Salience of the behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13) How has your level of importance of developing accessible content changed, if any, after your experience with the Digital Escape Room?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Semi-structured Interview Part 3:</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Knowledge and Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14) After your experience with the Digital Escape Room, identify the potential barriers to develop accessible content as they relate to your a) habits, b) environmental constraints, and c) necessary knowledge and skills? Please provide potential solutions for any barriers.</td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Environmental constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrated Behavior Model: Habit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis Plan**
The usability testing data from phase one will be analyzed through the Integrated Design Framework lens to determine how the game's design elements could be improved. The data will drive the necessary improvements to be made to the Digital Escape Room before phase two begins.

During phase two, the elicitation interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the thematic analysis approach to uncover major themes based on the constructs of the Integrated Behavior Model (knowledge and skills, the salience of the behavior, intentions, environmental constraints, and habit) and the Integrated Design Framework as depicted in Table 3. Atlas.ti will be used to analyze and code the collected text and video data.

Summary

“The COVID-19 epidemic’s impact on learning should be a wake-up call to accessibility researchers to study online learning technologies and their impacts, and higher education in general, from a disability perspective” (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 3) because when “faculty additionally have to make very rapid changes to their courses due to the pressure to go to online quickly, it is even less likely that they will make time to attend to an issue they are unsure of, like accessibility” (Zhang et al., 2020, p. 4). Hope (2020) states that as “instructors become more aware of the challenges students with disabilities face, they are more willing to put the time into making their courses accessible” (p. 6). The Digital Escape Room (DER) in this study aims to positively influence content developers’ intentions to create accessible online content by putting them into the shoes of online learners with disabilities through a game-based learning environment. The DER will stimulate self-reflection on barriers based on the Integrated Behavior Model that may be hindering the participant’s desire, intentions, or abilities to develop accessible content. The study will add to the field a product that may be used a professional development to create a memorable and enjoyable experience as games can be fun, challenging, engaging, interactive (Al-Azawi et al., 2016; de Klerk & Kato, 2017; Kientz & Brahm, 2016; Plass et al., 2015; Siew, 2018; Woo, 2014), and satisfy the need for achievement (Woo, 2014).

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*Teaching Commons.* (n.d.). https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/


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Transformative, in this sense, is somewhat limited here to the cognitive dimensions of learning reflecting current understanding of neuroscience, with evidence of change states in brain activity.

While outside the scope of this paper for full discussion, the debate between logical positivism and empiricism and phenomenological social inquiry does have some bearing on our understanding of why we might prefer in-person over online interactions, especially in educational contexts (see Percy, 1958, and Biesta, 1999).

For a discussion of VR use in various therapeutical settings, see Palmer (2019).