

March 2009 - Teaching Tip: Developing a Distance Learning Course

Nicole Luongo, Education Department

Did you know that millions of students are currently participating in online learning courses at higher education institutions of in the United States? Unquestionably, online teaching has become a popular form of education. In today's world, it is not only a popular, but an almost necessary, component of any higher education institution's course listings. Over the past school year, I have converted several graduate and undergraduate face-to-face education courses to online and hybrid versions. These changes have permitted non-traditional and overburdened students to complete courses that they may not have been able to take if they were offered in a traditional face-to-face format. The big question on many professors minds, though, is not *why* colleges should offer online courses, but how to go about creating them.

Distance learning is a field of education that combines pedagogy, technology, and instructional design to deliver instruction to students who are not physically "on-campus". Rather than attending face-to-face courses, teachers and students communicate by exchanging printed or electronic media, or through technology that allows them to communicate in various ways. In order to view the guidelines for developing a distance education course at Saint Peter's College, please examine the following link: <http://www.spc.edu/pages/1271.asp>

There are various reasons why people want to take online, non-classroom courses. Many students are busy, and do not have the time to travel to a traditional campus four to five days a week. Additionally, students have parking and traffic concerns. The availability of online courses can lessen their stress and anxiety levels, as well as their commuting time. Fundamentally, students prefer the convenience of online learning because they can access class whenever and wherever.

Although some professors have thought about teaching an online course, some clearly do not know where to begin. Many educational administrators and supervisors assert that their schools need online courses. However, where and how does a professor begin to design one? The first step is to gather the information the instructor needs for the class. As with a traditional face-to-face class, a teacher will choose textbooks or external readings. If he or she has taught this class in the past, he can use the same textbooks or readings. However, online course materials need to be accessible to the student online in the form of a web page, .pdf file, or a Microsoft Word document. An alternative to this online presence would be to have the readings printed and mailed to students or given to them at the first face-to-face meeting. When I designed my ED301: Tests and Measurements online course, I used the same textbook and online quizzes I had used when I taught it traditionally. Whereupon I used to physically distribute additional readings (such as the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards), I provided web links to these documents and placed them into the Blackboard shell for students to access.

The next step is to create an effective syllabus. Since the online student will be working independently, the syllabus must be clear, complete, and unambiguous. It must explain what is expected and offer a concrete timeline. Once again, a professor may want to use the same syllabus he or she used in the past, with certain modifications. A detailed syllabus should contain clear learning objectives, assessment measures, and due dates. Moreover, students should have access to assignment rubrics as well as models of previously accepted assignments. When developing the Tests and Measurements online course, I used my traditional syllabus and divided it into several learning modules. These weekly modules provided students clear timelines and requirement instructions. Each module included readings, streaming videos, online quizzes, and various assignments and projects. In Blackboard, I created sections labeled “Rubrics for Assignments” and “Assignment Examples”. In these sections, I include all of the rubrics that I use to grade their papers and projects as well as several exemplars of acceptable work. Furthermore, students must know how to hand in assignments. A professor can have students submit work using email or using the Digital Dropbox in Blackboard. Another option is to have the students mail work to the professor using regular “snail” mail.

Next, the professor must request a Blackboard shell from the Instructional Technology (IT) Department. After receiving approval to develop my online class from my Department Chair, the Distance Learning Committee, and the Dean of Students, I contacted Renee Evans at revans@spc.edu and let her know it was an online course that I was developing. At this point, it is up to the professor to develop the Blackboard shell. As with a face-to-face course, a professor’s style of teaching will be reflected in this design.

Once the course begins, it is essential that the professor checks in online at least once (but usually more than once) a day. Since the online student will be working at his or her own pace (which can sometimes mean the middle of the night), assignments will arrive in the professor’s email inbox at random times. Since the teacher and student do not have the opportunity to meet face-to face, prompt feedback is essential to developing an effective online course. When at all possible, I try to give feedback within 24 hours of student submissions. If this is not possible, an email explaining that I will take longer will often ease the students’ concerns. This feedback policy should be discussed in the syllabus. Not all feedback has to provide corrected work or a graded assignment. Sometimes an acknowledgement to a student that an assignment was received is enough to make the student feel comfortable. There is nothing more frustrating to an online student than to submit assignments with no or delayed feedback.

Finally, the online professor should be prepared to deal with unmotivated students and attempt to keep them on track. One of the biggest challenges faculty face is keeping the online learner focused to make learning a priority. Since an online professor cannot physically see a sleeping student or see the

expressions of the class, he must use other tools to determine how students are reacting to the course material. Often, I will send an email to or phone a student who has not “logged in” for a while. This personal interaction can spark student interest and let them know that the professor is interested in his success.

In conclusion, distance education is here to stay. With the way the world is changing and moving, it will most likely be increasing in popularity and necessity. If created in an orderly and systematic manner, these courses can serve the needs of a wide variety of students and teachers.

References

Tips and Tricks for Teaching Online <http://www.onlineteachingtips.org/>
Sloan Consortium <http://www.sloanconsortium.org/>