

Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom

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Abstract

Teaching in cyberspace involves more than taking traditional teaching models and transferring them to a different medium. The use of online distance learning is creating changes in the delivery of education in general. Changes in online distance learning are also occurring rapidly, predominantly in the ways courses are developed and delivered. This paper and session, based on the presenters' experience of over 7 years of online teaching and their two books, *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace* and *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom*, explores best practices in delivering online courses.

Online Distance Learning: More of the Same?

Institutions are rushing to get in on the distance learning craze, many for the wrong reasons. Administrators see it as a way to increase flagging enrollments and extend the reach of the institution or, in simple terms, an easy way to maximize profits. They believe that they will attract students from far beyond their current geographic reach. They also believe that they will save money by not needing as many classrooms and even as many faculty. All faculty need to do is to post their lectures online, right? How difficult can that be?

Many students see online courses as a more convenient way to go to school and even sometimes as a softer, easier way to earn credit. Faculty, however, given the responsibility to develop and teach online courses may not see online education in such a positive light. As they struggle to move materials and pedagogy to the web, faculty complain in ever increasing numbers about the time it takes to effectively teach an online course – a complaint that often goes unheeded.

Regardless of the motivation to engage in online teaching and learning, the use of instructional technology in higher education is having a significant impact in a number of ways. The impacts fall into four broad categories:

- Faculty/Institutional (or administrative) Relationships
- Faculty/Student Relationships
- Student/Institutional Relationships
- How Education is Delivered and Learning Happens

We will now review each of these categories in brief and conclude with the lessons learned from the

problems and successes encountered in online learning.

Faculty/Institutional Relationships

One of the major issues facing faculty and their institutions as they prepare to teach online is compensation. Because we know that it takes approximately three times as long to prepare for and teach an online course (Palloff and Pratt, 1999), the question regarding equitable compensation surfaces. At many institutions, faculty are offered incentives for the development of online courses, in the form of stipends, reduced course loads, reimbursement for attending conferences on the topic of online teaching and learning, sabbaticals, etc. However, there are still many institutions where online teaching is considered simply a part of the overall course load or, worse yet, is considered an overload and treated as such. Related to the issue of compensation is that of promotion and tenure. Online teaching is still not treated as scholarly work, although preparing an online course is often likened to writing a textbook on a given topic. Course ownership is another issue that is being hotly debated – who owns a course that has been prepared by a member of the faculty of an institution and taught online, especially if that faculty member has received a stipend for its preparation? There are no easy answers to the questions that surface regarding these issues. However, with good planning and policymaking at the institutional level, problems in these areas can be avoided.

Faculty/Student Relationships

It has been noted in research regarding the students who enroll in online courses, that the online student tends to be a mid-career adult returning to school (Hammonds, Jackson, DeGeorge, and Morris, 1997). The increasingly non-traditional student with life and career experience is not satisfied with a traditional approach to them as students (Carr, 2000). They tend to return to school with career goals in mind and a directed course of study to get them there. Thus, the more typical online student is seeking an active approach to learning and more involvement in the learning process itself. Not content with being *taught to*, the online student seeks to engage with faculty in a more collaborative learning partnership resulting in the achievement of their learning objectives (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Consequently, the faculty-centered approach found at many institutions of higher education must give way to a more learner-center approach.

Student/Institution Relationships

The demand from online students for increased involvement and responsiveness goes beyond their relationships with faculty to relationships with the institutions in which they enroll. Because they are not on campus and generally have little interest in campus life per se, the needs of the online student are different, but equally in need of attention. Issues such as ease of registration, integration of admission functions, access to library services, and access to advising all must be addressed by the institution in order to effectively retain online students in courses and programs. When their needs are not addressed, online students can become disgruntled and withdraw. Although no comprehensive research exists to date that describes retention issues with online students, it can be assumed that if a solid connection is forged with the institution through the provision of services at a distance, students will be more likely to stay in their online courses and programs.

How Education is Delivered and Learning Happens

The major impact of online education, and the area in which we are seeing the greatest amount of change, is in the area of teaching and learning. The online environment is conducive to an interactive, collaborative, facilitated approach wherein the instructor acts as a guide to the process rather than its director. By paying attention to the development of a learning community, the instructor creates the vehicle through which the learning happens (Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Through the development of a learning community, students learn that their greatest and most profound learning comes through reflection and interaction with one another. Dependence on the instructor is reduced and students are empowered to take responsibility for their own learning.

Lessons Learned

As more institutions and their instructors enter the cyberspace classroom and encounter both successes and difficulties in the process, they are coming face-to-face with the realities of online teaching and asking more, not fewer, questions about how to make the transition to this environment successfully. What, then, are the lessons learned from the experiences and noted changes that are occurring as the result of the implementation of online distance learning? How can institutions and instructors more effectively deliver instruction online? And lastly, but probably most important, how can students become effective online learners? The following are suggestions that address these questions:

- **Course development should focus on facilitation and interactivity rather than content.** Often, we are asked how instructors can “teach” the content that is the core of the class. Our response is to reframe the way in which content is delivered. When students are encouraged to embark on a process of discovery with one another, rather than being told what they need to memorize or know, the outcome is a deepening of the learning experience and satisfactory achievement of learning objectives. In general, when students evaluate a class, it is the interactions that they have had with the instructor and with other students that they often cite as the most important aspect of the class (Phipps and Merisotis, 1999). For the online student, this is where the learning occurs.
- **Faculty and student roles need to change.** In order for a high degree of interactivity to occur in a course, faculty need to let go of the control of the course and empower students to take responsibility for the learning process. For this to happen successfully, students need to be oriented to the differences in learning online. A good student orientation to the online environment would include not only training in the courseware used, but also the difference in the role of the instructor and the expectations of the student as a learner. We cannot expect that students will simply know how to learn online or that faculty will know how to teach in this environment. Training for both is essential.
- **Adequate support for faculty and students must be provided.** Many institutions are engaging in creative ways to meet this important need, such as using students to staff a help desk 24/7 or by outsourcing technical support. Regardless of how it is offered, support for both students and faculty is critical to the success of an online course or program. There is nothing more frustrating to a student who is working late at night than to be unable to access the course site. If and when this occurs, help needs to be available.
- **Good institutional planning is critical to the success of online courses and programs.** Rather than simply jumping on the bandwagon with little to no infrastructure, institutions need to engage in an inclusive planning process to address: Policy issues such as faculty compensation and course ownership; infrastructure issues such as the purchase of servers and courseware; the provision of training and support; and the future of online courses and programs in that institution, including a budget that allows for growth and development.

The Challenges

By slowing the process and paying attention to issues of quality, involvement, and empowerment, institutions and their faculties can develop effective online courses and programs that help to develop a culture of lifelong learning for all involved. As James Duderstadt (1999) notes, “Today’s technology is

rapidly breaking the constraints of space and time. It has become clear that most people, in most areas, can learn – and learn well – using asynchronous learning (that is ‘anytime, anyplace, anywhere’ education)...Lifetime education is becoming a reality, making learning available for anyone who wants to learn, at the time and place of their choice, without great personal effort or cost...Rather than an ‘age of knowledge,’ could we instead aspire to a ‘culture of learning,’ in which people are continually surrounded by, immersed in, and absorbed in learning experiences?...This may become not only the great challenge but the compelling vision facing higher education as it enters the next millennium (pp. 24-25).”

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Biographical Sketches

Rena Palloff, Ph.D. is a member of the faculty of the Fielding Institute, teaching in their completely online masters degree program in Organizational Management and Capella University, teaching in the School of Education. She is also an Assistant Professor at John F. Kennedy University, teaching in the Graduate School for Holistic Studies, an adjunct Associate Professor in the Chemical Dependency Studies Department at California State University-Hayward, and an adjunct professor in Samuel Merritt College's program in Health and Human Sciences. **Keith Pratt, Ph.D.** is a Project Manager for Datatel. Keith also teaches at the Fielding Institute, Capella University, California State University-Hayward, John F. Kennedy University, and Samuel Merritt College. In addition, Rena and Keith are the managing partners of Crossroads Consulting Group and the authors of the Frandson Award winning book *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 1999) and *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching* (Jossey-Bass, 2001). The books are based on their many years of teaching experience in the online environment and contain vignettes and case examples from a variety of successful online courses. Drs. Palloff and Pratt have been presenting this work across the United States and internationally since 1994.

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