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Editor's Note: This is an interesting, blending model of distance learning. We look forward to the additional statistics in student's evaluation of this blended learning, and also comparative statistics from instructors regarding student achievement in each model.

From Traditional Delivery to Distance Learning: Developing the Model

Marie F. Holbein

Abstract

Today's classrooms are no longer bound by geography. Distance learning has provided an attractive and increasingly highly regarded alternative to traditional face-to-face instruction. However, effective implementation requires a shift in thinking for both students and instructors. The purpose of this article is to describe a model for applying a traditional campus-based graduate course to a distance format.

Keywords: Distance learning, teacher education; Online learning, reading education

Introduction

Globalization has impacted education in that classrooms are no longer exclusively defined or bound by geography and the physical proximity between learners and instructors (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). Distance learning has provided an attractive and increasingly highly regarded alternative for students who need more flexibility in managing their work schedules and who need to reduce their travel while pursuing their academic goals (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Dringus, 2000; O'Banion, 2005; King & Hildreth, 2001). The Internet has made a variety of sources of information accessible that expand opportunities for learning beyond material presented in lecture and textbooks (King & Hildreth). Using web-based technologies, students can engage in meaningful interaction with the instructor and with one another without being physically present in a classroom. To do so, however, requires a shift in course planning and delivery for the instructor and a shift in engagement for the students (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland). The purpose of this article is to describe a model for applying a traditional campus-based graduate course in diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties to a distance format.

Theoretical Framework

Distance learning models vary from 100% to hybrid or blended (distributed) structures (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). In a blended course, "one or more of the instructional events… occur while learners are separated by time or space (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, p. 11). These events can be synchronous, asynchronous and independent learner-centered, or asynchronous and highly interactive in a real time environment that simulates face-to-face classroom interaction (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; O'Banion, 2005). In all models, learners potentially may engage in multiple modes of interaction: learner-learner, learner-group, learner-content, and learner-instructor (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland).

Given the potential for expanding learning opportunities through the Internet, we must consider some basic precepts that govern the effective implementation of distance learning. The conceptual framework should embrace a constructivist paradigm whereby courses are structured with scaffolding to help students optimize technology tools for independent learning (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). Instructors should continually assess and reflect on their teaching in that distance learning delivery is in many ways very different from traditional classroom delivery (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Dringus, 2000). A major challenge in distance learning is overcoming the potential for students' sense of isolation. Strategic and solid structures for social learning can promote a sense of community (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Vygotsky, 1962).

Effective communication techniques, consistent and timely feedback, and clear learning outcomes help students feel secure in meeting course expectations. Another distance learning challenge is helping students understand that "online learning is not traditional face-to-face learning in an electronic format**"** (Dringus, p. 189). Using these precepts as a foundation, I developed a distance learning model for a graduate reading course taught at in a southeastern regional university.

The Model

The course was developed in response to an increasing student demand for online learning. Making the transition from traditional to online delivery was challenging as the learning outcomes for the course were developed to conform to techniques for effective diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties that require hands-on modeling and replication (Barr, Blachowicz, Bates, Katz, & Kaufman, 2007; Gillet & Temple, 2000; Jennings, Caldwell, & Lerner, 2006). The content and activities had to be modified to suit the distance environment, and students were required to become more independent in their learning and less reliant on face-to-face demonstrations.

Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) emphasize the importance of an instructor's informed perspectives in the design and delivery of distance courses. Therefore, following my participation in a series of staff development sessions on distance learning and a review of literature on effective instructional design for online applications, I developed strategies for students' acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that "maximize their online learning experience" (Dringus, 2000, p. 194). Using the WebCt Vista course management tool, I determined that the course would best be suited to a blended model with limited face-to-face participation, modular distance learning structures, and independent applications of assessment.

Face-to-Face Participation.

 Three class sessions, first day, mid-term, and last day, required face-to-face attendance in a whole group settings. According to Dringus (2000), student orientation to the distance format and learning structure is important for establishing clear expectations; therefore, attendance for the first meeting was required for continual enrollment in the course. The first day was devoted to a review of the syllabus, course requirements, procedures, and expectations (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005; Dringus, 2000; O'Banion, 2005). By meeting one another face-to-face and engaging in informal conversation, students were able to establish a sense of community (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland) that would support their development of a group project to be presented on the final night of class. Electronic issues such as ensuring computer accessibility, negotiating difficulties with technology, and providing information on tech support also were covered thoroughly during the first night orientation session (Dringus; O'Banion).

To mitigate the feelings of isolation and provide modeling (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, (2005), the mid-term second required face-to-face session was devoted to modeling the application and interpretation of the assessment instruments. Video simulations of the assessment administration were accompanied by hands-on mock interpretations of results. Students worked in their group learning communities, discussed their findings, and shared their results with the larger class.

During the last class session, also a required face-to-face meeting, the community of students shared the results of their case studies and delivered their group presentations. The purpose of the presentation was to allow the students to explore more extensively topics pertinent to diagnosis and assessment. By sharing their work with the entire class a number of topics were covered extensively for the benefit of all.

The Distance Structure: Content Learning Modules.

Learning modules (see Table 1) containing assignments and prompts were structured to help students established a conceptual understanding for diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties (Barr et al, 2007; Gillet & Temple, 2000; Jennings, Caldwell & Lerner, 2006). According to King & Hildreth (2001), assignments should be limited to "four to six questions that students could answer by referring to the notes and the textbook" (pg. 113). Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland (2005) propose that assignments should focus on quality of questioning and cognitive engagement rather than length of responses. Students were instructed to respond to three-six probing and critical prompts based on assigned readings and instructor-developed posted PowerPoint presentations. They were subsequently required to read and reflect in writing on the postings from two class

members thereby simulating the interaction that would normally occur in a classroom discussion. To provide a framework for reflection, students answered two questions: (a) What did I learn from reading the postings?" and (b) "How can I apply this learning to my teaching?"

Students need to pace themselves (King & Hildreth, 2001) and they need time to assimilate new learning (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). Thus, instructor's assignments for students were posted weekly rather than all at once, and they were highly structured to facilitate timely and sufficient coverage of all information. Students were held accountable to due dates and times. In addition to the required readings and reflections on other students' postings, they also were encouraged to read one another's postings, and share their ideas through threaded discussions. I monitored those discussions to ensure that students were not harboring and communicating misconceptions about content and requirements. I provided modular links to pertinent literature, university resources, library holdings, resources from the internet at-large, and technological support. Students were free to explore these links and use the information as they needed to guide their work.

Independent Case Study Application

Following completion of the content learning modules, students actually administered the assessment instruments to a self-selected subject and compiled the results into a case study report with an accompanying plan of instruction. Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland (2005) suggest that scaffolding can help achieve a balance between structure and independent learning. It promotes a sense of trust and support. In an effort to provide as much scaffolding and concrete example as possible, templates for the case study and the instructional plan were posted to a case study module that contained a completed sample of a case study and an instructional plan. Guidelines for assessment and using the instruments were provided along with links to pertinent literature.

Providing Feedback

Timely feedback is always important, but particularly in distance learning. Students are working rapidly to meet due dates, but if they are not given feedback as to the quality of their work, they will continue to make the same errors and become frustrated. I provided formative feedback using distance tools and engaging in telephone conferencing with face-to-face option. Most students selected the phone option. The literature suggests that a major challenge with online learning is the isolation that students feel and the alienation they sometimes experience from not having face-to-face support from one another (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005).

Dringus (2000) describes three types of feedback that can be used in online learning environments: immediate feedback (electronic tools such as group e-mail messages and postings), automated feedback (system announcements), and personal feedback (personal e-mail communications.) The three major tools I chose for communicating with students were pop-up window announcements to remind students of important due dates, group e-mail messages to answers questions and clarify instruction, and personal e-mail messages to comment on student work. King & Hildreth (2001) underscore the importance of routinely answering questions and evaluating assignments by e-mail as it promotes student-instructor interaction. The grade book application allows students to see their points accrue as work is reviewed by the instructor. However, a written comment in a personal e-mail communication provides a qualitative dimension to assessment.

Dringus (2000) suggests choosing electronic tools to maximize students' control of their learning environment. Chat rooms were structured to provide students with an opportunity to meet with one another online as they needed to share ideas and discuss their progress (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). This was an informal structure and participation was not required or evaluated. WebCt Vista e-mail was used to answers questions and provide feedback on assignments.

Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland (2005) propose that online instructors need to continually monitor learning to provide necessary "guidance and support" (p. 79). I monitored my distance learning e-mail daily. However, if students needed more immediate individual assistance, they were able to contact me through my traditional and more frequently monitored office e-mail by sending a message with a Help subject heading. I responded to all requests for help individually and I followed up on WebCt Vista e-mail with a group Response to Student Request for Clarification to assure that no student was disadvantaged by missing important information.

Netiquette

The collaborative social learning environment in distance learning requires a new set of protocols for communicating (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). I provided the following guidelines for communicating on the internet: (a) Typed communications do not reflect body language or nuances of speech. Misinterpretation of ideas is possible, therefore, choose your words carefully; (b) Promptness in posting assignments is essential for interactive participation. Late submissions disadvantage others particularly when the class is required to read and react to postings from others; and (c) Use of electronic format should be restricted to course-related conversations and purposes only.

Conclusions

Distance learning will continue to be a major format for delivering instruction. The demand is evident in that given the challenges associated with negotiating this new environment, students continue to want more offerings. Distance learning may not be for all students. Some who require a great deal of face-to-face interaction, structure, and modeling accompanied by verbal and non-verbal feedback may not be comfortable in a distance course.

Distance delivery requires instructors to spend a great deal of time preparing in advance, anticipating student questions, putting structures in place to scaffold learning, and reading/responding to students' work. Time management is at the forefront as both a benefit and a challenge. Students have the flexibility to work when and where they choose, however, they must manage their time to accommodate the increased amount of work associated with working independently.

What would normally be covered in a lecture and class discussion must now be extracted through deep and introspective probing and reflection. Instructors must be prepared to invest time in planning to ensure that students are clear about their goals and expectations.

For me, the message is clear. A graduate reading class that focuses on modeling, simulations, and hands-on applications of diagnosis that were traditionally delivered in face-to-face environments, can be successfully applied to online learning. The key factors appear to be in knowing what courses to apply and to what extent they will be online. Some courses, such as this one, will require a modicum of face-to-face interaction. But, as technology continues to evolve, new sources will become available to link students to simulations that will supplement what we have traditionally accomplished in a classroom. In the final analysis, we may find that as King & Hildreth suggest (2001), we actually have more personal contact with students, and we may discover that it is possible to have probe more deeply into learning by allowing students to independently explore the Internet resources available to them. Sitting in a classroom and listening to a lecture or small group discussion can actually be quite passive. Online learning is active and alive. Beyond the technology and instructional design lies the human element. Students want and need to be connected. The challenge for instructors is to help them build a sense of community so that while they may not see one another face-to-face, they know one another and share their ideas thereby contributing to learning for all.

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