

# Strategies for Success in Online Courses

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Many of us have walked willingly through the virtual “doorway” into the online classroom. Others have been pushed kicking and screaming across that threshold. As faculty in an instructional technology department of a regional university, it was natural for us to skip through that doorway. Faculty have the professional goal of keeping current in the discipline and the departmental goals of serving the region and providing leadership in technological innovations in education. Additionally, our university established a goal of at least 10% of all courses being delivered online.

Whether willing or reluctant, those of us who are involved in developing and delivering online courses want to provide quality learning experiences for our students. The purpose of this article is to describe five factors that contribute to an effective online learning environment. The descriptions are based on the collective experience of the faculty in our department, all of whom have conducted successful online instruction. The five essential factors are: support, resources, communication, humanization, and assessment/evaluation.

## Support

### Issue

Research has shown that, when implementing any new instructional practice, support for faculty is one of the most basic components for success. Yet this support is often inadequate or overlooked entirely. What support for faculty can be provided successful online courses?

### Solutions

Assistance was provided through several avenues: university-sponsored summer stipends and workshops; departmental reassigned time; and help from peers. Because of this support, we were able to help other faculty with their online courses through department-sponsored workshops, seminars, and consultations and through using our graduate instructional technology students as technology tutors and design consultants.

Personal, departmental, and university goals are being met for our online instruction because faculty had the support necessary for success.

## Resources

### Issue

One important question an instructor must address when planning for an online course is how resources will be provided for students. Should the online environment change the way we think about providing resources?

### Solutions

Providing resources to students in an online course can be accomplished in a variety of ways. For example, course readings and resources may be provided through links to online articles and other relevant sites. These links may be included on web pages inside WebCT or a course web page outside WebCT. Directions for activities related to the readings and topic introductions may be provided along with the links using the course content or bulletin board areas of WebCT.

Another method of delivery involves converting files or scanned documents into PDF format with Adobe Acrobat. These files can be housed on a course web site or delivered to students via attachments within WebCT. The advantage of this format is that copyright protection can be maintained through password-protected access.

Project documents, presentations, and files for downloading and uploading can be managed within the WebCT environment through file manager, student presentation areas, and attachments through private mail and the discussion area. To make the uploading process run smoothly a file name format should be established to make sure that files can be easily identified.

Resources can also be developed with graphics and illustrations to support content. It is important to maintain a high level of interaction between the students and the content whatever the delivery method.

## **Communication**

### **Issue**

Communicating effectively with students in an online course is essential to providing a supportive and interactive learning environment. Should the online environment change the way we think about class participation?

### **Solutions**

Class participation can be defined as interaction centered on content. This interaction takes essentially three forms: A single student actively considering course materials and activities; two or more students interacting with each other about content; and a student or students interacting with the instructor about content.

In the case of WebCT, the communication tools—bulletin board, mail and chat—are the primary online vehicles for insuring class participation and communication. The bulletin board (also called the web conference or discussion area) serves as the main form of group communication for the course. The Bulletin Board is an effective way for students to participate in online class discussions. The mail tool allows you to send a private message to one or more course participants. Unlike bulletin board messages, which can be read by everyone, mail is only visible to the sender and recipient(s) of the message. The chat tool allows you to have real-time, typed “conversations” with other course participants. The chat applet displays who is in a chat room at the present time. It also allows you to send private messages to selected users by clicking on their names.

## **Humanization**

### **Issue**

Potential feelings of disconnectedness from limited human interaction is a challenge faced when planning for an online course. Should the online environment change the way we think about human interactions?

### **Solutions**

To provide more personalization and interaction in an online course may require using a variety of tools to connect students. Multipoint video/audio connections provide for group discussions. These connections facilitate group activities such as group project development. Audio feedback via email and discussion area provide a more personal method of giving

feedback to students on the work they are producing in the course. This feedback is richer than traditional written feedback. Video and audio streaming to the desktop can provide a “live” presentation of information that can be reviewed as needed by the students.

There are several free tools available for downloading from the Internet that will make this personalization possible. Some of the tools that are currently in use in our courses are Real Player, Real Producer, and CUSeeMe. These tools may be used to provide or even expand the connectedness of the traditional face-to-face classroom environment.

## **Assessment and Evaluation**

### **Issues**

Online Assessment and Evaluation: Who, What, When & How? Should the online environment change the way we think about assessment and evaluation?

### **Solutions**

The strategies for success described in this paper are one framework for important areas of assessment and evaluation in online courses. The quality of institutional support can be measured and evaluated, as can the quality and adequacy of instructional resources, the amount and type of communications, and the level of humanization and “connectedness” felt and defined by the students and instructors. But these areas are not what students, instructors, department heads and program leaders think of as assessment and evaluation. Students hear about assessment and evaluation and they say, “Whaddja get?”; instructors want to know “Did the students achieve the course objectives?”, department heads wonder “Did the instructor effectively plan and deliver the course?” and program leaders look to accreditation visits and want documentation on “Did the courses achieve the program objectives?”

Measurement of success in online learning is the bottom line. Student assessment, often narrowly defined as testing, is a major concern for many who are adapting traditional courses for online delivery. They worry that students may easily cheat by having a confederate take an exam or by using unauthorized materials to help them during the test. Those concerns are addressed by organizational strategies such as having students come to a proctored lab for testing, and by technological strategies such as timed windows

of opportunity for taking exams. The concerns, however, may be best addressed by assessment strategies based in good practice. One instructor who still feels that tests are necessary in her content area requires that students pass several online quizzes in order to qualify to take the online exam. She thinks it unlikely that a student will find a confederate willing to participate that often in order to aid the student in cheating, and finds a side benefit in students more prepared for the test by the quizzes. Many instructors, however, find that the online environment not only requires new teaching and learning strategies, but new assessment strategies. There is great opportunity to have frequent and varied assessments that include an emphasis on interaction, peer review and projects rather than tests.