

Beyond Carnegie: The Computer-Mediated Distance Learning Environment

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These are truly exciting times for online distance learning advocates. Internet technology has created an ideal environment favorable for the delivery of college credit courses from remote, world wide sites. The means to serve both local and distant populations is readily available to individuals and institutions of higher learning.

Since it is likely that most readers of this article have limited experience in teaching an online course, the purpose here is to offer a way to distinguish between the traditional Carnegie based model and the computer-mediated learning environment. This brief overview should prove useful to those practitioners interested in online instruction.

In the computer-mediated learning environment "virtual classrooms" are the centerpiece. They operate efficiently, allowing the end user instructional access at anytime from anywhere in the world. Rather than occupy seats in a physical location for a specific period (the Carnegie Model), students come and go as often as they wish. Once logged on they navigate to various areas created previously by the course instructor. At Shorter College we use Netforum. This private newsgroup was arranged through Mindspring, our Internet provider. Homework, assignments, professor probes and virtual time discussions are all listed and hypertext sensitive. This means that students can respond to previously posted messages with new messages of their own. For attendance purposes a Netforum feature keeps track of the user name and date of entry.

In the online classroom students are held responsible for self-learning. Unlike a tra-

ditional classroom in the online environment, the instructor plays a more active role in the facilitation of learning. Students are guided to initial points of discovery through introduction to Internet search engines.

Whenever possible, students are given the opportunity to choose areas of Internet study. The instructor provides pathways that guide rather than lead students. The reservoir of Internet materials available to students offers a means of discovery and learning that often goes beyond the immediate resource capabilities of the instructor and the institution's library. It is the instructor's task to create realistic objectives and expected outcomes that can be realized by the student. Instructional home pages play a critical role in this respect. To be truly effective the page must include links to databases and web sites that expand textbook readings and online activities. The course developer's knowledge of Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML), instructional technology design and good research skills are needed if a page is to reflect these attributes.

The online learning environment is one of rigor. Modules are the most common forms of support documentation. They define course objectives, outcomes and activities. These comprehensive learning guides detail in very specific language what is expected of a student. They also communicate the gained benefits of such activities. Additionally, modules include supplemental materials which provide examples and details that cover each aspect of the course. The module for the Communication & Technology (COM 106) course I created and teach with is more than 100 pages in length.

Documentation must be written by the instructor so that rigor is achieved. Designed tasks that challenge students' critical thinking skills are as important in the online classroom as they are in the traditional setting.

Facilitating virtual communication in the online environment achieves favorable participation among all members of the class, not just a vocal few. All online classes require that students regularly visit a MOO or "Online Forum." Here they are asked to respond to probe questions placed by the professor. Continual probing in virtual classroom environments gives students the opportunity to respond to the professor and each other regarding a topic. This record exists in real and virtual time and is revisited by class members at any point in time. Secondly, e-mail participation allows for the regular daily communication between pupil and professor. While effective interpersonal interaction is of some concern, future technology will allow for the viewing and oral communication among online participants.

Technological advancement along with significant growth nationally leads to the following three predictions: (1) online distance education over the Internet will continue to advance, (2) more schools will cooperatively participate in delivery and exchange, (3) traditional resistance to distance education will continue to subside as the new paradigm continues to evolve. Finally, administrative questions regarding the costs of using internet provider services, global registration and the transfer of credits all must be addressed as student populations move across geographical boundaries. •