TRAINING INSTRUCTORS TO TEACH ONLINE

In spring 2000, Bronx Community College/The City University of New York offered a web-based distance learning course for the first time, entitled Introduction to the Internet and Web Page Development. As part of the collegewide Faculty Development Initiative Program (FDIP) in Technology, a faculty workshop and a discussion forum were created to support online teaching. At the workshop, faculty accessed the CUNY networked system and received a step-by-step guide for building course components, including planning, layout, typing materials, learning the management program, and adapting materials from conventional classrooms for online use. The BCC faculty development process helped enhance pedagogical theory related to distance learning; increased faculty members' technical skills and improved their mastery of distance learning technologies; explored the potential of online communication, collaboration, interactivity; and covered other relevant topics.

Step One: Learning CourseInfo from Blackboard Features

We use CourseInfo (from Blackboard Inc.), a tool for creating web-based courses that runs on any operating system. It is a structured software program that allows any content expert to load materials and create discussion questions, assignments, and quizzes. Faculty have complete control over creating websites, adding content, and administering user accounts and security on the site. The most important component in step one is the demonstration of online courses during which new faculty can see what a complete course looks like.

Course materials can be Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) text, audio, video, Word documents, or PowerPoint presentations. At the workshop, faculty are given user names and passwords, and introduced to the program, including tools of the CourseInfo template:

- Announcements: information faculty want students to see immediately
- Course Information: course description, objectives, evaluation, standards, calendar, required materials, and quick tips
- Staff Information: e-mail address, office hours, and other important information that students will need
- Course Documents: weekly lecture notes
- Assignments: weekly assignments and activities
- Communication: tools with which instructors and students can contact students via e-mail, conduct a chat, and participate in online discussions including private, small-group discussions
- Student Tools: the DropBox, used to exchange files, uploads files from a disk or a computer to a central location for downloading to work locally
- External Links: links to sites that encourage student inquiry and research
- Control Panel: a site editing and administration area for instructors including assessment, grading, recording student log-in dates, times, and activities

Step Two: Converting Traditional Course Material for the Web

CourseInfo allows the instructor to construct the materials for the course website without learning HTML. Faculty develop their syllabus, class schedule (15 weeks), weekly assignments, and weekly class notes. Course documents are to be completed on the day the course starts, but they are to be posted on a weekly basis and integrated into communication and assessment activities.

Faculty can decide if their courses will be asynchronous or will require a real-time component. They can be available to their students at scheduled times online through e-mail and virtual chat. Many options and resources are available in an online environment to provide a rich learning experience for students.

Students do as well in distance learning as in physical classrooms *if* they are carefully chosen and advised of the characteristics of a successful distance learner,

including being a strong self-starter, self-disciplined, knowledgeable of the technology requirements of the specific format, and able to meet other students and faculty in a virtual environment (not face-to-face).

Step Three: Implementation/Course Management

The Initial Class Meeting: A necessary and vital component of an online course is the initial meeting with students, during which faculty can review the course objectives, layout and syllabus, expected outcomes, instructional materials, course schedule (weekly assignments/activities), and the CourseInfo program. A UserId and password, e-mail account, and information about browsers and Internet access are assigned and discussed.

Interaction: Responsiveness is the key to successful courses. Engaging students online is facilitated by adding interactivity to a course. Interactivity comes from the interplay between course documents, communication tools, and assessment tools. When faculty add a new course document, they are posting a new topic in the communication that refers to the document and may create a quiz or survey in the assessment area that measures the student's critical understanding of the information in the document. Common ways to add interactivity that are unique to the online experience include announcements, e-mail, discussion board, and chat. The following strategies have increased participation and learning.

• Make class participation a significant part of the students' grades (30%). Communicate expectations as to acceptable quality and quantity of participation. For example, students may be required to respond to a question the instructor poses and to the responses of at least two other students.

• Notify students of changes in assignments or due dates, and highlight new information on your site.

• E-mail correspondence person-to-person or instructor-to-students.

• Ask open-ended questions in bulletin board discussions and post to discussions frequently. Topics for forums can include Q & A, assignments, and peer reviews (assign students the task of responding to two or three peer responses).

• Have students post biographical information to the discussion board at the beginning of the semester. This networking often results in student/student mentoring.

• Provide an overview of assignments due each week. This weekly agenda will help keep students working as a cohort.

• Use virtual chat as a tool to enhance and encourage a sense of community in online classes.

• Group projects using e-mail, chat rooms, and group page will improve group collaborative experiences.

Evaluation: The CourseInfo testing feature allows the instructor to schedule exam dates and time restrictions. Students have a limited time to log on and take tests. The testing feature offers automatic grading of future tests and posting of grades to an online gradebook. A variety of materials can be used for evaluating students and determining grades, including peer-reviewed work, class discussion responses, and writing samples.

Conclusion

Online courses, using this model, allow for greater access to courses as time and place constraints are removed. However, faculty spend more time preparing the first few versions of an online course when the medium is new and they must adapt or adopt new strategies, new technologies, and effective teaching strategies.

Well-designed and carefully implemented online instruction can provide an effective educational environment and be an enjoyable experience for students and instructors—especially if the students are motivated and self-disciplined and the instructor maintains continuous interaction with them.

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