WITHIN A STAR'S REACH: THE SIRIUS ACADEMICS INITIATIVE

Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ) has launched Sirius Academics, an initiative designed to meet the needs of e-generation learners. Named after the brightest star in the Northern hemisphere, Sirius Academics is a collection of online resources for both students and faculty, that addresses three objectives: improvement of student performance and retention; affordability of course materials; and faculty development.

Sirius Academics encompasses the re-designing of developmental and college-credit courses that have high enrollment, attrition, reading, writing, and mathematics. The Sirius Academics initiative couples innovative instructional design with engaging multimedia to create optimal learning environments in which students interact with one another, the instructor, and course content.

Sirius Academics also offers students an affordable alternative to the increasingly high cost of textbooks. A textbook replacement model, Sirius Academics dispenses with the need for costly resources. In this entrepreneurial endeavor, community college faculty members, working in teams of five, design a course that contains an online platform, a CD-ROM, and a customized book for $50. Collaborating for 12 to 18 months, faculty teams create original course content for which the college holds proprietary rights. Instructors develop materials suitable for online and blended deliveries.

Students taking a Sirius Academics course, then, receive three forms of educational media for less than the average price of one textbook. As the most robust medium, the online platform contains course information (syllabus and orientation); communications tools (discussion board, chat room, white board, email); course units (lessons, learning objects, and assessments); and other resources. A scaled-down version of the online course, the CD-ROM consists of course lessons and learning objects that students can use if web access becomes unavailable (particularly during travel, military deployments, and downed network periods). Last, a customizable book serves as a supplement to the digital media, enabling students to read printed text. (Even e-generation learners occasionally prefer the printed word over electronic text!)

Just as students learn by taking a Sirius Academics course, so instructors learn by developing and teaching one. In addition to delving deeply into course content, we collaborate closely with colleagues from whom we acquire new ideas to add to our "bag of tricks." Teachers jokingly confess to "plagiarizing" innovative ideas from colleagues, and Sirius Academics—an initiative about the scholarship of teaching and learning—provides us with multiple opportunities to "borrow" and "steal" effective practices and successful strategies from one another.

Sirius Academics immerses faculty in ongoing learning experiences, especially through technology training sessions, the Online Professor Certificate Program, and the Instructional Design Assistant. A member of the developmental writing team, I recall attending my first technology training session for the Sirius Academics initiative: The lesson concerned the design of online courses that adhere to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Our workshop facilitator assigned us the task of purchasing an airline ticket online for an upcoming trip; she then told us to close our eyes as we turned on the computer.

"What?" we protested. "How are we supposed to order an airline ticket online without being able to see?"

"Just try," she implored.

Enveloped by darkness, we each clicked tentatively on our mouse and struggled to understand robotic-sounding prompts from the JAWS screen reader—an auditory reading program for the blind and visually impaired. After 30 minutes, not one teacher had navigated successfully to the website for airline tickets. During that Sirius Academics workshop, we learned valuable lessons about online course development: *Always anticipate that you may have a student with special needs, and design your course accordingly. Remember that the more well-organized your course, the more effectively a blind student will navigate through it. Include a transcript of any audio narratives that you record so that a deaf student*

can learn, too. Avoid using flashing images that can trigger a seizure in an epileptic student.

Sirius Academics involves faculty in FCCJ's Online Professor Certificate Program. Creating courses for today's e-generation students entails more than learning how to play with the latest gizmos and gadgets; it necessitates understanding effective strategies for online teaching. Thus, while working with colleagues to develop courses, we participate in the Online Professor Certificate Program, which begins with training in our choice of two online platforms: BlackBoard or WebCT.

After completing this training, we experience the crux of the program—CREOLE, Module 4, an eight-week online course developed as part of a series of modules on **Cre**ating **O**ptimal **L**earning **E**nvironments. In CREOLE, Module 4, faculty explore such pedagogical approaches as cooperative learning, learning communities, constructivist learning, and mastery learning—all designed to enhance student success and retention. We learn how to integrate audio narratives, graphics, animations, and simulations in Sirius Academics courses; and we participate in a mentoring program that equips us with insights about creating optimal learning environments.

While enrolled in the Online Professor Certificate Program, teachers use FCCJ's Instructional Design Assistant (IDA)—an electronic tool for constructing effective and engaging courses. Based on the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation) model, the IDA guides us through the process of instructional design.

I enjoyed collaborating with my colleagues on the developmental writing team. For years, I have noticed a disparity between my students' performances on objective grammar exams and their efforts at composing imaginative, well-organized, and thoroughly developed papers. By the end of the semester, many students perform well on tests but continue to struggle on papers. The Sirius Academics initiative presented a unique opportunity for us to help students close the gap between their test-taking and writing proficiencies. Reflecting on the odyssey before us, the developmental writing team brainstormed about an approach to curriculum design. As if working on a tabula rasa, we struggled to envision how a Sirius Academics course would look. In the beginning, we found it easier to discuss how the course would *not* look—not consist solely of black words on a white page (or screen). The students would not read passively about grammar, page after page, screen after screen. The course, in short, would *not* resemble a traditional textbook.

We pictured our students sitting at the computer. What would they want to see? What would they like to hear? What activities would they find stimulating? We mapped out a series of course units, including writing, grammar, sentence structure, standard punctuation, and sentence errors. From these brainstorming sessions, a design model emerged—each unit would contain a pre-test, lesson, learning objects, and a post-test. At first glance, our agreed-upon format may appear to resemble traditional instructional design. Yet, students soon discover that this writing course differs from a traditional one. Initially developed in PowerPoint, the lessons consist of both text and multimedia enhancements—i.e., auditory narratives, graphics, animations, and simulations—designed to provide students with a stimulating environment. With the assistance of Learning Innovations (FCCJ's faculty resource center for technology) we converted the PowerPoint files into Flash files through which students can navigate more easily by clicking on "Next" and "Back" buttons. Clearly, the use of instructional technology distinguishes Sirius Academics courses from the more traditional.

Our Sirius Academics course also contains numerous learning objects—a current buzz word in instructional technology. Defined as a small chunk or segment of multimedia instruction that integrates the auditory, visual, and/or kinesthetic senses to produce an interactive learning experience, a learning object typically takes a student two to 15 minutes to complete and includes assessment with immediate feedback. Each unit in our developmental writing course abounds with learning objects on diverse subjects, ranging from the history of Velcro to the legacy of the Florida Highwaymen; from the benefits of remedial education to the French composer Claude Debussy; from Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences to stock car racing.

This innovative initiative reflects our commitment to enhancing student success and retention in courses that experience high enrollment and high attrition. And teachers, while designing instruction for e-generation students, discover that those who teach must always learn.

Kathleen Ciez-Volz, *Doctoral Student*, *Community College Leadership Program*

For further information, contact the author at The University of Texas at Austin, 1 University Station D5600, Austin, TX 78712-0378. e-mail: kciez@fccj.edu