The Value of Online Teaching for Developmental English Students

 At Lone Star College–CyFair, three out of four developmental courses are offered as distance learning (DL) classes. Hybrid classes, which meet once a week with an online component or online supplements, are also offered. As we examine our student success rates, we need to look at the three components that affect success for online students: the student, the instructor, and the institution.

Student

When determining whether transitional classes should be offered online, one must ask the question: "What are the qualities of a successful online student?" We have found that the success rate for transitional online courses is similar to the success rate of credit-level online courses. So is the problem truly that the students are "developmental" or that there are other issues we have to consider?

- **No experience in college:** Certainly, one of the issues that will affect transitional students online in general is that these will be the first courses they will have taken in college. At this point, they may not have yet learned to manage their time. They need to learn not to over-extend themselves with too many courses and with too much going on in their personal lives. While this also happens in regular courses, it seems to happen even more in online courses because students feel that they have much more flexibility since the course is online. They think that they will "get to it" at some point.

- **Intensive reading and writing in online courses:** The other issue that could affect transitional online students that may not affect credit-level students as much is the amount of reading and writing that an online course requires. Since transitional students, particularly the ones who are in transitional reading and writing courses, have problems with reading and writing, the reading and writing load may adversely affect them. Intensive reading and writing requirements are obstacles that can be overcome by having the instructor provide different types of media such as videos and audio for students.

- **Technology:** Although this affects all online students, transitional students often overestimate their technological knowledge and resources. For instance, they are able to send pictures via text message, yet they are unable to attach a file of their assignments into the appropriate drop boxes. Students may also have Internet crashes and not know how to resolve these issues or will not have a back-up plan. They may not have a program to complete their work that is compatible with the instructor's program (e.g., students do not have Word, only Microsoft Works, and the instructors' computers cannot open Works).

- **Lack of awareness of/or inability to access resources:** Although we have tutoring available to students, many are unable to show up because of other issues. Students are unaware that there is childcare available to them at the college so that they can get help at the tutoring center or study at the library. Of course, some DL students are joining the class from other states or foreign countries where English tutoring is not readily available.

- **Levels of motivation/misunderstanding of nature of DL courses:** Although we have not measured the levels of motivation in DL students and compared them to the levels of

motivation for face-to-face students, there is anecdotal evidence that the levels are lower for some students who enroll in online classes. Some students think that the class will be easier online than face-to-face, and they also think they will not have as much work to do as in a regular course. Faced with a more intense workload and the need to have discipline to do their work, these students with an already lower motivation level will drop or stop completing their work.

Instructor
Another crucial component of a successful online experience is the instructor. There are many things that instructors can do to help students succeed. They can create quality course materials, respond to students in a timely manner, have an active presence in the course, read research or attend professional development on online teaching, and incorporate multiple forms of delivering lessons (e.g., lecture notes, videos, audio, etc.), and communicate with other online instructors to have an active dialogue about best DL practices.

Most online instructors have practiced the above-mentioned strategies, but the last strategy needs additional work. Communication among online instructors is key to tracking what does and does not work. In addition, communication is something that needs to be fostered because one of the biggest challenges to teaching online courses is the immense amount of time it takes to prepare the course and manage it, as well as keep up with the grading and communication with the students. Part of the communication among the instructors could be strategies to manage the overwhelming amount of work.

Institution
There are some areas in which the institution could help instructors and students succeed.

- **Stability of LMS platforms**: Within the past eight years, our system changed platforms for the online courses four times. Even though the online courses are migrated over to the new system for the instructors, the instructors have to relearn a new system and rethink ways of organizing their courses every time this happens. For instance, when we had Vista, we could use modules to organize the course material in the order we wanted it to be presented. When the new platform was established in Angel, we did not have the same option and had to think of how we could use folders or other organizational tools. Although the changes in the learning platforms were necessary for one reason or the other, the time spent retraining and relearning how a new LMS works could be better spent interacting with students. Furthermore, the constant new platform challenges the ability of an instructor to try out different best practices or implement new ideas for the course when he or she is constantly learning a new platform.
- **Little opportunity for DL instructors to interact and share ideas:** Unless a DL instructor takes the initiative to find another DL instructor who has the time to sit down and show what she has done in the course, new DL instructors have no clue what other courses look like. The college has purchased the first course developed through each discipline, but those courses have not been posted in places where they can be viewed by other faculty constructing their own courses. Having those courses available in some way would be very helpful.
- **Workload and instructor support:** Instructors who teach DL have an overwhelming amount of work to do, especially in the first semester that they are creating a course from scratch. These instructors are not given any type of release so that they can focus on their course(s), and, therefore, instructors may not perform to their optimal level. Additionally, many instructors have found wonderful programs to use in their courses to enhance the

learning, but they have also found that the college is unwilling or unable to purchase the necessary software.

Looking Ahead

Sometimes I ask myself if teaching DL to our transitional students is a worthwhile venture, given the fact that there are so many obstacles to overcome for the students, instructor, and the institution. However, I have come to the conclusion that it is indeed worthwhile. Teaching DL courses allows us to provide access to students who would otherwise not be able to attend college or would be limited in the amount of courses they could take. Some are single parents who work full time and cannot afford to pay for additional childcare so that they can go to school at nights or on weekends. Other students have jobs that make them travel often and are unable to remain in face-to-face courses. Still other students have no means of transportation and are unable to get to classes without paying ridiculously high taxi fares to get to school, or they are dealing with illnesses or family responsibilities. Several instructors structure their courses to be self-paced, so some students finish their courses early. Because of their circumstances, these students may not have been able to persist through a traditional class. For these students, what we do is worth it.

DL courses are relatively new, and this is a new field that we are pioneering in our institution. If we continue teaching these courses and reflecting, we will be able to improve these courses and learn what does and does not work. Instructors are forced to think outside the box and figure out how to deliver instruction, and many of those same concepts can then be applied to face-to-face courses. For example, when one of our faculty members created short Camtasia digital film clips for her DL students, she shared them with other instructors who use an online component in their DL, hybrid, and traditional classes

Not only do students and instructors benefit from DL courses, but the institution does as well. While DL courses cannot and should not replace face-to-face courses, more and more students will be going online to complete their education. In order to continue being viable and relevant, the institution needs to foresee this change and capitalize on it by enhancing its support for the DL program.

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