Pedagogy Reflections: Teaching a Web Based Course

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Courses delivered on the Internet provide "convenience to learners both in terms of time and freedom of space" (Schlough & Bhuripanyo, 1998). In their study of a course delivered on the Internet students were surveyed in an effort to identify advantages, disadvantages, and suggestions concerning asynchronous course delivery. Beyond convenience, advantages included learners accessing and reading course materials at their own pace and richness of materials through linkages to other sites. Weaknesses of this style of instructional delivery included students having to be self-disciplined, the instructional style was not appropriate for all learners, and some course sections were confusing to use. Suggestions included establishing a chat room for learner support, improvements in the site, provide a printed version of the text, and more in-depth orientation to the course.

As the use of Internet based instruction continues to develop it will be important to examine the issues associated with this style of learning. Studies concerning instruction on the Internet have examined the student's perspective (Mory, Gambill, & Browning, 1998), provided suggestions concerning course development, technical issues (Schuttloffel, 1998), and interaction guidelines. However, studies that examine and question pedagogical concerns are not as evident.

San Diego State University has encouraged faculty to re-envision what post-secondary education looks like through the use of the multiple technologies. In response to the campus wide interests, the Department of Exercise and Nutritional Sciences changed their introductory kinesiology course from traditional learning to asynchronous learning, using the Internet. The purpose of this study was to examine and explore various pedagogical concerns from the perspective of the introductory course instructor. The results of this study will add to the collective knowledge of Web based instruction methods. It is further intended to support changes in on-line course design and presentation by describing the pedagogical issues of concern to the instructor.

Methodology

This research study was designed to examine pedagogical issues associated with a Web based course. Introduction to Kinesiology is a required course taken by all students entering the department. Course information is designed to expose students to the department, faculty, campus, and potential careers through a series of lectures, assignments, and projects. Information for the course (syllabus, lecture notes, assignments, announcements, etc.) were organized through designed web links to individual parts of the course. There were two weekly course meeting times where the instructor was available, but no on-campus student attendance was required. Communication between students and instructor could occur through class session, e-mail, telephone, and office hours.

The subject for this study was the instructor for the Web based course taught to approximate 200 undergraduate students. This instructor was very familiar with pedagogical strategies, but had not designed the Internet course. It was the first semester that the subject had taught the course. Throughout the first several weeks of the semester the subject kept notes of pedagogical concerns and reflections. After the first few weeks the subject

engaged in several informal interviews with the researcher. Both the subject and researcher kept notes, journals, and created further questions aimed at probing certain pedagogical topics identified by the subject.

Data Analysis

Qualitative methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) were used to document and describe the process of identifying pedagogical concerns. Data sources included subject and researcher notes, journals, and reflections. Researcher and teacher generated documents and interviews were analyzed using document analysis. To organize analysis of these documents, the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches of structuralism were enlisted. Structuralism views "documents" as "texts" (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 467). As such, once the data was accumulated in written form, it was read through several times. With each reading a set of tentative themes was developed and refined. The emerging themes and issues arising from the readings created the codes or interpretive frames that guided and structured the analysis.

Results

Several pedagogical issues emerged throughout this investigation including course content, testing, and communication. The subject identified concerns with the depth and breadth of lecture notes on the web sites. The question arose, how to provide focus and content emphasis for students. Many of the instructor reflections were directly impacted by feedback from the students. Student feedback was obtained through anonymous comment mailforms, e-mail message questions, questions asked during class sessions, and phone messages.

Developing an environment conducive to testing was another great concern for this instructor. Issues of honesty and integrity were an important concern, but was not overshadowed by location and proctoring problems. All of the exams were to be taken using a computer. In past semesters students were able to attend an open lab, show identification and take the exam at their convenience. This previous arrangement was not available during the semester that the study took place and resulted in several time management issues for the instructor and students.

Providing quality communication with students was another theme which emerged throughout the study. The course used e-mail, provided two weekly one hours sessions where the instructor was available, and instructor office hours. These strategies seemed to be sufficient, yet students were constantly phoning and visiting the instructor outside of these prescribed times. Previously identified suggestions for instructors of Internet courses include "don't be available to your students all the time" (Boettcher, 1997). Results from this study indicated that further examination of this web based course should occur.

References

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