A Hybrid Model for Making Online Assignments Effective In a Traditional Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Today's college student has grown up in a world filled with technology and many current college students routinely utilize the latest and most up to date forms of technology. The result is an ever-changing way of communicating between faculty members and students. Many faculty members, however, are intimidated by the use of the terms "technology", "online" and "distance education." This often results in a communication gap between faculty and students where faculty members will "lose" students on the first day of class. Advantages of incorporating online tools into the course structure include freeing up additional class time, enhancing classroom discussions, and allowing students to remain current with information in their field. This hybrid instructional model focuses on the integration of technology tools as a supplement to traditional classroom teaching.   This paper will describe how to effectively incorporate and implement technology using online course tools in a traditional classroom setting. Specific examples of online assignments, discussions, and assessments from an allied health education program and class will be discussed. Lessons learned and challenges confronted when adapting to the utilization of specific online course assignments and tools will be discussed.

Keywords: Online assignments, Technology, Hybrid, Online discussions, and Online assessments

1.   INTRODUCTION

Using online learning and teaching methods has proven to be effective in decreasing the communication and technology gap between many faculty and students. Online learning has the ability to provide learners with more choices, greater flexibility, expanded resources, and increased opportunities, while offering faculty the opportunity to teach using alternate delivery and assessment methods [5]. Also, if structured appropriately, the incorporation of virtual learning environments can offer a rich collaborative, connected and flexible system that can be accessed regardless of where learners are at any time [6].

Throughout this paper, examples will be provided from specific health education courses that are offered in a traditional classroom setting in the Pre-Professional Allied Health Program at The University of Tampa.

2.   EFFECTIVE ONLINE TOOLS

Online course tools require organization and a well thought process of implementation. Course tools should include specific and complete instructions in addition to accessibility to resources, grading rubrics and criteria, and any other information that would be provided for a traditional classroom assignment or assessment. The integration of online tools into a classroom-delivered course should be planned carefully and based on learner characteristics, course content, and the learning context of the course [8].

To effectively implement online tools into a traditional classroom, students must first agree that participation in online activities will result in learning. According to a study by Vonderwell and Zachariah, several factors that influence participation in online learning include technology and interface characteristics, content-area experience, student roles and tasks, and information overload [9].

It is important to introduce students to the delivery platform. A short tutorial and demonstration along with a handout of instructions for accessing and using the delivery platform is recommended during the first class meeting. Instructions should be specific, detailed, and repetitive to assist students, especially those who are first time users of the online system.

The following will discuss several different types of online tools and how to effectively incorporate them into a traditional face to face classroom course.

Online Assignments

Online assignments may be used in several different formats including submitting assignments as attachments, submitting student journals, and using videos and internet sites to accommodate assignments and reflections. In a study on student perceptions of various e-learning components by Buzzetto-More, the most popular feature noted was the assignment section. Students strongly agreed that they enjoyed submitting assignments online, they prefer the online submission of assignments, and most of them responded that they liked the ability to check their assignment grades online [2].

Online assignments can also be utilized to further enhance critical reflection and self-reflection in student work. Due to the lack of space and time, the use of traditional classroom learning environments to structure and manage critical reflection has been criticized [4]. Thus, conducting online reflective activities

can provide space and tools to allow the development of both personal learning and professional issues in a class [6].

In the Pre-Professional Allied Health program at The University of Tampa, online assignments are utilized in several courses. The behavior change project was an assignment in a basic health science course. This particular course met once a week and the entire assignment was submitted online. Components of the assignment included a behavior change goal sheet, five journals entries, and a behavior change summary sheet. The behavior change summary was a self-reflection of the behavior change project that was completed during the course. Each time a student submitted a part of the project, the instructor provided feedback and a grade online. Since the course met only once a week, the online journal entries provided an opportunity for students to receive feedback from the instructor without waiting until the following week.

Website assignments were also included in several of the allied health courses. The website assignments required students to research a valid health related website and present a short summary to the class. The summary was also submitted online and posted to the course website to serve as a resource for their classmates. Using this format, technology was used in the classroom for the student presentation and as a supplement to the face to face interaction.

Online Discussions

One of the more popular communication methods for online interaction is "asynchronous" or "threaded" discussion [1]. Discussions and discussion groups provide a forum for students to discuss topics related to classroom content. Discussion groups allow students to interact with their classmates and faculty by active participation. The online asynchronous discussions offer several advantages over a traditional classroom discussion including, "increased time for students to research and reflect on ideas and physical anonymity that may decrease inhibitions and foster broad participation," [1]. In the article, "The Superiority of Online Discussion," it is stated that "online discussion groups offer a technologically-rich environment for developing virtual learning communities in which students can develop strong analytic and critical thinking skills based on inherent time, reflection, and distribution advantage," [1]. Additionally, a study by Dengler in 2008 supported past research which suggested that using online learning as a complement to the classroom can both increase opportunities for student participation and enhance participation of students who feel inhibited to participate in traditional classroom setting discussions [3].

Online discussions were used in the personal health course in the Pre-Professional Allied Health program. Many students are embarrassed to raise their hand or speak up during class when discussing topics including drug and alcohol use, sexuality, and other health issues. The online discussions proved to be a great tool for discussion. The instructor always started the discussion with a question. Each student in the class could read all the responses from other students. Each student was also required to post responses to the original question and to other student responses. Student responses could not be 'I agree' or 'I disagree'. Discussions were graded and instructions for the online discussion read: "Each unit will have one discussion question. To receive full credit you must be an active participant in the discussion. Postings limited to, "I agree" or "I disagree" will receive minimal credit. Make your answers thorough and understandable. This is an opportunity for you to share information, gain insight from others, and respond to opinions different from your own. Please keep postings relevant to the topic and appropriate for discussion." The instructor read all postings from students and commented as needed. The discussion was student centered but was often focused in the appropriate direction by the instructor if necessary. It is recommended the instructor monitor student participation and patterns of participation to assist in identifying student needs and problem areas [9].

Online Assessments

Assessments are often one of the most widely questioned online tools by faculty who have not previously used such tools. Many faculty are concerned about students taking quizzes and exams outside of the classroom and outside of their direct supervision. Online quizzes and exams taken outside of regularly scheduled class meetings can provide more in class time for hands-on activities. There are also measures that can be taken to decrease the chance that students may cheat on an exam.

Specific examples from a personal health course include utilizing the online system for quizzes and exams. Ten point quizzes were administered online for each chapter. The purpose of the quizzes was to encourage students to read the chapters prior to coming to class discussions. The purpose of delivering the quizzes online was to allow more class time for discussion and eliminate the ten to fifteen minutes of class time needed to administer a face to face quiz. Due dates for quizzes were set prior to the class discussion date.

Online exams were also administered resulting in the availability of two additional class periods that were previously taken for exam time. The exams had specific deadlines but were required to be completed outside of class. Students responded favorably to online assessments. They had flexibility in scheduling the time for taking the exams. They also appreciated the instant feedback of their results. Each student was also provided feedback on which questions were incorrect and what was the correct answer.

Many faculty are concerned about the possibility of cheating when assessments are taken online and outside of the classroom. Several measures were taken to reduce the possibility of cheating. Questions banks were used for each chapter. Exams were randomly generated from the question banks. Therefore, if two students were sitting side by side and taking the exam, the likelihood of having the same exam questions was extremely low. The quizzes and exams were also timed to prevent students from looking up information in their textbooks.

3. LESSONS LEARNED

Several lessons were learned when integrating online tools into a traditional classroom setting. First, it is imperative that the instructor or faculty member stay involved in the online course tools. Sending timely feedback to the student is important in the outcome of the learning experience and important in the student's attitude toward using online tools.

Secondly, support for students and faculty is essential. Students will require support from faculty for learning the online delivery system and faculty will require technological support from the instructional technology staff in using the system. This becomes extremely important when technical issues arise. If a

troubleshooting system is in place to handle technical issues then time can be spent on the course content and not with frustration over the delivery platform and system.

Finally, instructors must listen to what students are saying about the experience. Course evaluations are a great starting place. Many students will also provide feedback during the course of the semester. Listening to what the students are saying and adapting the online course tools accordingly will provide a richer learning experience for the entire class.

4. CHALLENGES

Several challenges exist for blending online course tools with traditional classroom instruction. First, if the same online course tools are used from semester to semester, there should be a rotating review process of updating the content and resources. Secondly, the gap between traditional classroom pedagogy and instructional expertise in creating online course tools must be bridged [7]. If the faculty and students are not accustomed to working online, then a slight learning curve will have to take place to understand basic online language and resources. A tutorial or demonstration for both students and faculty members can be useful in overcoming this challenge.

Additionally, keeping instructional resources including websites, web links, online resources, and other information up to date with current and functional web addresses is critical.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the information and examples provided, it is clear that utilizing online course tools enhances the delivery of face to face courses in a traditional classroom setting. Online course tools can assist in bridging the communication gap between faculty and students. If online course tools are used, they must be organized and planned. A variety of online course tools exist including online assignments, online discussions, and online assessments. Many of these course tools can be used to free face to face class time for other activities and to further enrich the quality of the course. Incorporating online course tools in a traditional face to face classroom can be beneficial but the transition can be challenging.

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