

THE CUSTOMIZATION OF ONLINE EDUCATION IN A THIRTY-ONE FLAVORS WORLD

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ABSTRACT

As we develop better knowledge delivery systems, online education has an important and ever growing role. However, to optimize student learning, the design of the online experience should be customized to match the unique features of the course and its students. This paper illustrates the development of three very different online formats, each based on the requirements and restrictions of a specific course, its students and the available technology. The first format is a synchronous chat, held twice a week to “discuss” a selection of business bestsellers. The second format, also synchronous, offers the option of participating in the classroom or offsite using a camera and microphone. The third format is asynchronous and is designed around recorded lectures available only online. The strengths and weaknesses of each of the three formats are also discussed in an effort to match them with specific needs and features of a course.

INTRODUCTION

“...business school faculty will have to see themselves as more than custodians or even generators of knowledge. They will have to see themselves as designers of better knowledge delivery systems.” (Collopy, p 45) One delivery system that is gaining attention among students, instructors and administrators is online education. (Mosca et al, 2010 and Rydzewski, et al, 2010) While in the literature it is called by many names (distance learning, hybrid classes, web courses, e-learning, etc.), online education classes seem to be discussed in only two forms, fully online or blended online (online with face-to-face sessions) . (Tyler, 2010 and Ahmed, 2010) The purpose of this paper is to suggest that fully online courses come in many flavors. The key to a successful delivery system is to match each type of online class to the needs of specific courses, students and instructors and to the appropriate technology and available IT support.

BACKGROUND

Over the last several years I have developed three types of online formats. Each of these is made specifically for a particular type of course and student. My first foray into online classes was to develop a class using the chat function of Blackboard. The course is for MBA students and is taught in a six-week summer term. The title of the course is “Business Bestsellers” and requires students to read six business books. I select the books based on currency, interest and transferability to many disciplines and industries. This course is unique in that I have no required content and can allow students to discuss whatever parts of the books interest them. This format would not work for courses with prescribed content which are prerequisites for other classes. Chats are then held, synchronously, for one hour twice a week. I originally scheduled one and one-half hour segments but found that the intensity of reading and typing for that long was exhausting. The format is simple; I ask a question and wait for the responses. The students

then answer each other to develop discussions in whatever direction they desire (I do make sure that these are business-related and of value). Often I ask only one or two leading questions and the students take over. Many times they ask better questions than I have planned and they drive the direction of the learning onto topics I had not thought about. In a sense the class becomes customized to their needs/interests. I find that I learn as much and often more than they do. I soon realized that perhaps the most amazing result of this experiment was the change in student dynamics. Students who were very shy in previous classes seemed to come alive in the online environment. I think the level of participation increased for everyone and especially for the quieter students. I don't know if the more anonymous nature of the interaction is the cause, but the result is wonderful to see. Another feature of this format is the ability to save the chat and make it available to anyone missing the class. As a make-up, I allow them to write a paper responding to the questions and comments contained in the missed chat. The downside of this delivery system is the class size constraint. If everyone is "chatting" at the same time, having more than ten students becomes unmanageable. The screen just rolls with typing and you don't have a chance to read the comments, let alone think about them. I cap the class at twenty and run two sessions, twice a week. This format is not inexpensive. In terms of technology, I only need Blackboard to run the chats and no tech support is necessary.

I developed my second online format to address a problem we have in MBA program. Our normal semesters are seven weeks long, giving more flexibility for non-traditional graduate students. However, many times these students cannot attend class due to travel, sickness, meetings, road conditions (this is NW Indiana) and assorted problems. It is not unusual for our students to miss two out of the seven sessions, giving them a real disadvantage in the classroom. I decided to experiment with an online-optional course using Adobe Connect teleconferencing software. Courses are taught in the classroom while simultaneously being streamed offsite and recorded. Students have the choice of attending in the classroom with the other students, participating (synchronously) at their site using the Internet or watching the recorded session at a later time (asynchronously). Anyone offsite in real time can participate using a camera and microphone or using the chat function. Offsite students participate in discussions and are even able to give presentations using their Power Point slides. Usually about half the class prefers to attend offsite. The beneficiaries of this format include nontraditional students who are parents who need to stay at home with a sick child, students who have to stay at work late and/or can't make it to class on time or those who simply enjoy being home and still "attending" classes. I have found that the biggest payoff is for students who miss the class and watch the recorded session. There are no excuses now for not knowing the material. Watching the recording eliminates their ability to participate, but is far better than missing the entire class. Another benefit is that I can accommodate more than a normal class size as so many opt to take the class off-site. The downside is that tech support is necessary to be able to run the camera, monitor the chats, etc.

My third exploration into online learning trickled down to the undergraduate level. I teach an introductory business statistics class to about 30 students. This is not their favorite class nor does it even appear on their top ten list. I have tried over the years to make the class exciting and applicable to 20 year olds, all with little success. Last year we experienced a faculty shortage and I decided to teach this class asynchronously as recorded lectures, again using Adobe Connect. I now can teach 55 students in the same amount of time it took to teach 30. I could

probably enroll many more if I didn't have a requirement that they turn their homework into my office to encourage interaction with them. However, the true benefit of this format became clear in talking with the students. When in the classroom, there are so many distractions for our students. If they miss something that I say, it is impossible to recapture the message. Now they can watch me in their residence halls with no distractions. They can pause or replay the recording as many times as necessary (I noticed that one persistent student watched one recording six times!) After watching the lecture they must take a short quiz to motivate them and reinforce the material. They can take the quiz as many times as they want to ensure a perfect score. They also have homework to complete and be returned to my office. I felt that the personal touch was necessary and I think this is a real plus for me. Seeing each student in my office really helps to personalize the course and encourages them to ask for help if needed. I have run some statistics on grades on exams and find no significant difference between the performance of the online and onsite classes. Another benefit of this method is that I don't need tech support as I record in my office using a camera attached to my computer. This could become a much less expensive delivery system if I did not meet with all of the students in my office. As my university is a small private school, for some parents and students the idea of an online course is not consistent with our mission. This is a discussion I am sure everyone has had and there are no absolute answers. From my own experience, students love the convenience and ability to review the recordings. We do offer one in-class session for those who are adamantly against the online concept. My sense is that it is mostly parents who object, identifying private school education with personal attention. Interestingly, I find that I am getting to know the students more by talking with them one-on-one in my office than I ever did seeing them in the class as a group. I predict that within ten years online offerings will exceed those that are held in class. Time will tell.

RESULTS

All three formats work very well, but only for the classes for which they were designed. The online chat course takes advantage of the fact that I have no specific course content to teach and have the ability to be flexible in what students learn and the direction of the course. If I had actual content to deliver, the "typing" format would be too confining. The online-optional course works well with heavy-content courses. In MBA statistics classes, I have the opportunity to deliver the material in an organized way and allow the students to participate in discussions. If my class required many team projects and outside meetings, this format might be cumbersome. For the recorded (online-only) classes, obviously there can be no student participation. Any questions they have can only be answered via phone, email or in person in my office. For a less mature student, this could be problematic. The negative perception of an online-only course is also a barrier for some.

The following table is an effort to summarize the characteristics of each of the three types of online formats and match them to the appropriate requirements of the courses.

Table 1

Online Format	Time	Max Class Size	Interactive Student Participation	Content Heavy	Quantitative	Required Technology	Tech Support Required
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Chat	synchronous	≤ 20	Yes	No	No	Blackboard	Unnecessarily
Online-Optional	synchronous	< 40	Yes	Yes	Yes	Adobe	Necessary
Recorded	asynchronous	No max*	No	Yes	Yes	Adobe	Unnecessarily

* When not requiring an office visit, this format has no class size restriction

CONCLUSIONS

My experience with online education has been both positive and rewarding. I believe that I have been able to offer my students more opportunities by incorporating different delivery systems into the curriculum. By pairing the delivery system with the specific needs of the each class, we take advantage of the strengths and weaknesses of online education to optimize the learning experience.

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