Online Resource Page: Using Technology to Enhance the Teaching and Learning Process

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Pre-discussion paper

Introduction

Today’s computer-mediated or online administrators and instructors are investigating ways to foster a dynamic learning environment. Currently, “Internet technology empowers the joint exploration of the delivery mechanisms of previous generations, adding stronger collaborative learning elements (Passerini & Granger, 2000, p. 3).” Contemporary Internet technologies are helping remove the idea of distance from online education. The online teaching and learning process could produce more relevant and consistent interaction than what is produced in the traditional undergraduate classrooms. A large traditional classroom does create communication barriers that make it more difficult for all students to participate in class discussions. It is interesting that university students are using emails more often to share with their classmates and teachers. The Internet is providing a practical way to remove learning barriers and encourage greater access to intellectual resources. The idea of distance education has fostered the pursuit of new educational paradigms that encourage online education to be more personal and student centered.

A major concern among academic officials has often focused on the quality of educational experiences within an online class. Carnevale (2000) relates that research studies indicate that the essential features of a good course include “interaction between instructors and students, a student-centered approach and built-in opportunities for students to learn on their own (p. A46).” Creating and sustaining a quality online degree program is a challenging venture. There are a variety of factors that can have either a positive or negative impact on the online educational setting:

- the level of expertise of the online faculty (technical & online experience),
- the degree of administrative financial support,
- the technological infrastructure the of school,
- student support system to handle academic and computer related issues
- the depth and quality of faculty training and professional development programs (Cooper, 2000).

Resource Overview

A challenging problem for distance education systems is how to provide a large number of students, across diverse geographical areas, with consistent materials and resources that will ultimately allow them to achieve their personal and professional goals. This will require a change in the way technology is used in schools (Grabe, 1998). In order to address this problem, one university has eliminated the need for all “hard-copy materials” by
developing an online “resource page” for students and faculty. Instead of buying a textbook at the beginning of a course, students will pay a resource access fee that will make available their learning resources for their entire academic program.

In recognition of the fact that all students have unique learning styles, the University of Phoenix Online will soon begin the implementation of iSource, an exciting new product and the new standard for delivery of student and faculty materials. This product is a set of learning tools that are designed and presented in a variety of modalities in order to meet the needs of all learners. These materials will be delivered via the Student and Faculty Web on a course-by-course basis. To facilitate this strategic initiative, the university is partnering with a variety of publishers to provide content and other ancillary services. UOP currently has partnership arrangements with Thomson Learning, Pearson Publishing, McGraw Hill, Course Technology, and John Wiley. Today, the University of Phoenix Online has 26,000 students enrolled in their classes and 2100 faculty members.

The resource page is not only an “e-Book” – it is a collection of electronically delivered learning resources, (one element of which is an “e-text”) which are closely aligned to the course objectives. These collections can be differentiated as visual databases, multimedia libraries and more (Barron, 1994). For example, instead of a textbook with perhaps, 20 chapters from which reading assignments would be chosen for assigned reading, the instructor can assign the specific portions of the e-text of their resource page to correspond with the number of class meetings or workshops and the material will relate specifically to the learning objectives. PowerPoint presentations that correspond to the course objectives, as well as self-assessments, multimedia activities and current articles from the digital library will be available. This allows each faculty member to maintain more distinct focus on course or workshop objectives. Additionally, students will have access to their entire “reference library” of university materials from their desktop or laptop and will be able to access their library (with automatic updates) as alumni.

Resource Page: Detailed Descriptions

University of Phoenix Courses will contain the following materials as part of this new initiative. Please note a snapshot of resource page on page 6.

UniModule

The UniModule is the recommended curriculum for a given course; it is developed in a format that provides course guidance for instructional training, whether conducted in the classroom, online, or in a directed study format. This document contains course topics, objectives and assignments, as well as a content outline for instructors. Faculty members have the flexibility to make modification to the curriculum, as long as they adequately address specific course objectives as outlined in the UniModule. In doing so, the University ensures that course content is consistently delivered to students across all campuses.

E-Text

The e-text is the selected “text book” for each course. In some cases, this material is simply an electronic copy of an existing textbook; in other cases, the e-text is a compilation of material from multiple sources, including chapters from several textbooks, associated selected readings and other printed materials. Students view this material using Microsoft® Reader or by printing all or part of the text from their personal computers.

Supplemental Materials

Information contained in this link will vary from course to course. It may contain course-specific Power Point presentations, assessment tools, case studies, unique learning activities, topic-specific tutorials, video clips and more.
Articles

Each course comes with a set of selected readings, which are a compilation of journal articles and other scholarly literature from the University’s Online Collection. These articles have been specially selected by course developers to supplement the readings in the Etext and to further ensure students are prepared to meet the course objectives.

Web Links

Each course will also have 2-5 associated web links. These links direct students to areas on the web that will further enhance their professional development. Typically, students will explore the sites of professional associations, other related organizations and sites that encourage professional collaboration and/or community involvement.

Multimedia

The University has partnered with several companies to allow students to develop ancillary skills that will further facilitate their learning. In this section, students are provided with a variety of tutorials, from novice to advanced levels, designed to enhance their technological and professional skills. Examples of online tutorials available to students are: Windows, Word, Power Point, Access, Excel, and more.

Services

University Library

The Online Collection, the most popular part of the Library Web Site contains databases with millions of full text articles, documents, reference sources, directories, and financial data. Students may use the Online Collection to obtain direct access to subscription resources not normally found through Internet search engines. In addition to the subscription databases in the Online Collection, there are also many helpful Web sites for research available at no cost on the World Wide Web.

Writing Lab

The University’s Virtual Writing Lab is a free service, offered to all students. The ”lab” is actually an email address where students can send their written materials (papers, projects, etc.) to be reviewed by qualified University of Phoenix faculty members and receive feedback. The lab is not an editing service. Faculty will not revise student papers. Rather, they will review work and give detailed feedback on how to improve specific papers, and on writing style in general. Feedback will focus on format, grammar, organization, punctuation, and usage, but not course content. Currently, the writing lab is receiving over 4,000 papers a month from students seeking assistance.

Proficiency Assessments

- The Skills Enhancement Center contains math, critical thinking and English tutorials. Each tutorial contains instructional material, learning questions, quizzes, and practice exams. This material will assist students in preparing for their proficiency exams.
- The Testing Center contains the official math, critical thinking and English proficiency exams. Students are required to take one or more of these assessments, depending on specific program requirements. Tests are available online and students receive immediate feedback upon completion of the exams.
Program Specific

Program Handbook

Program handbooks contain program specific information for students, including program sequence, course descriptions, gradation requirements, etc. This “virtual” document replaces the traditional hard-copy books previously supplied to students upon enrollment.

Downloads

This section provides students with free downloads for the following resources:

- Microsoft® Reader
- Adobe® Acrobat® Reader®
- Internet Explorer

Electronic Portfolio (Education Programs)

This is a link to the students’ individual electronic portfolios. This dynamic site represents a teacher’s continuous progress and development throughout his/her program and career. Elements of the portfolio are designed to ensure that students meet state, national, and program standards and are evaluated using formative and summative methods. This tool is introduced during the first course and reinforced by faculty in each course.

Teachers also post their Teacher Work Sample Project in this portfolio. This product is a 4 week, standards-based unit that include the following elements:

- Unit learning goals
- Contextual information
- Content
- Assessment plan
- Pre-assessment analysis
- Design for instruction
- Description of two featured students
- The instructional process of the two, featured students
- Analysis of learning results
- Reflection on teaching and learning

Teacher Preparation Accountability

The resource page seeks to address teacher preparation accountability issues involving computer-mediated instruction. Therefore, the resource page will house performance assessment pieces of their teacher preparation program: electronic portfolios and teacher work samples. The University’s teacher work sampling model is based on work done by the Renaissance Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality (adapted from Pokay, P., Langer, G., Boody, R., Petch-Hogan, B. and Rainey, J., Renaissance Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality and Western Oregon’s Teacher Work Sample, 2001). The teacher work sampling is infused in applicable University programs that focus on Pre K-12 classrooms.

This model suggests that successful teachers:

- Support students’ acquisition of substantive learning by designing units of instruction that employ a range of strategies that build on each students’ strengths, needs and prior experiences.
- Align learning goals with state and district content standards.
- Adjust the classroom environment and instruction to address important contextual characteristics of the classroom.
- Employ a variety of instructional resources to help students attain learning goals and to offer them new opportunities to explore important ideas or to learn new skills that have relevance to their lives.
- Use multiple assessment methods that appropriately measure learning gains towards the selected goals.
- Explore students’ understanding and thinking processes while evaluating the effectiveness of their teaching.
- Analyze student learning by examining individual, small group, and whole class achievement.
Use their analysis of student assessment to guide instruction, to provide feedback to students, and to plan for professional development.


This area of the resource page will allow students to document how and when they meet the program standards. Additionally, it will offer data for faculty, administration and accrediting organizations with an opportunity to regularly evaluate student performance and examine program effectiveness (D’Ignazio, 1996). Instructors can monitor student achievement to insure that the course materials are closely aligned with the course objectives. Ultimately, a variety of resources will promote individualized instruction for a diversity of student learning styles and encourage optimal learning experiences.

Conclusion

The creation of the electronic resource page is intended to foster a dynamic learning climate. It ensures that students will have access to diverse and a larger number of information resources. Online instructors can insure that students have access to the same materials that are tailored to specific course objectives. Yet, teachers can use their subject knowledge to creatively add materials such as PowerPoint presentations or video streams. The resource page has real potential to individualize online instruction and promote rich educational experiences that are relevant for today’s students. Our discussion of the online resource page will involve discussing a variety of educational issues:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of e-books?
2. How does the resource influence the classroom learning environment?
3. How can today’s instructors use the resource to enhance online interaction?

References


Post-discussion Summary

The discussion of the online resource page occurred on the IFETS discussion list from August 27, 2001 to September 7, 2001. The dialog began by focusing on three basic questions:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of e-books?
2. How does the Resource influence the classroom learning environment?
3. How can today’s instructors use the Resource to enhance online interaction?

Discussion participants explored the potential advantages and disadvantages of the new resource page that has been developed by the University of Phoenix. Ultimately, the goal of the new initiative was to enhance the online teaching and learning process. It is designed to be a place that will provide instructional resources for a variety of educational needs. For instance, the resource page has foundational articles that are tied to the course objectives. Yet, instructors have the freedom to use their subject expertise to add articles and other instructional resources for their students. Perhaps, it is better to view the resource page as a fluid document that has foundational materials but it is much more than just a set of e-books.

What are some of the concerns and observations about the resource page?

1. Debate over the educational effectiveness of using e-books (ex. Access issues).
2. Whether the resource page design will help stimulate relevant interaction with the course material and with other learners.
3. Instructional design issues involving the costs involved in creating an educational setting to effectively use the resource page.
4. The importance of having qualified online instructors.
5. The need for more research and the willingness of innovators to listen and learn from constructive criticism of their work to encourage academic collaboration and improve online instructional resources.

The discussion highlighted the importance of having trained teachers who are effective at facilitating online classes. It is vital that today’s online instructors possess expertise in academic content areas and have the interpersonal skills that enable them to work effectively with a diversity of students. An effective facilitator will be able to create a friendly and intellectually challenging class that has lively dialog and relevant assignments that reflect high academic standards. The discussion moderator described the performance indicators that are often found in good online facilitators.

Performance Indicators

- The facilitator interacts on a regular basis with their online class.
- Provides a detailed syllabus and weekly instructional updates on class work.
- Messages are clearly written formatted properly and reflect appropriate spelling & grammar.
- Uses personal & professional examples to stimulate discussion.
- Writes with good online tone (friendly, polite & professional).
- Interacts effectively with a diversity of students and works with lurkers.
- Responds to student questions in a timely (within 24 hours) and consistent manner.
- Demonstrates excitement/enthusiasm about the teaching and learning process.
- Monitors student learning groups and encourages collaboration.
Builds upon student comments in a constructive way and uses creative prompts when necessary (ex. posts additional questions to help sustain and energize their dialog).

Keeps the class focused on discussion questions & assignments.

Provides timely and consistent feedback by carefully explaining grades and offering specific, detailed and constructive comments on papers.

The resource page provides teachers with instructional resources that can help them promote deeper learning experiences. Instructors can offer supplementary materials that will enable them to meet the needs of students who possess different learning styles. Ultimately, online educators still hold the keys to making the online experience enjoyable for students. Spitzer (2001) relates that "the missing link in Rosset's DL experience was not the technology, but the lack of a human mediator who could provide the things that technology could not: relevance, personalization, responsiveness, and flexibility (pp. 51-52)." Research studies into interactivity in graduate education schools reveal that students want timely and consistent feedback. Students want personal attention from their instructors. It takes dedicated and effective facilitators that are frequently online to meet student needs. Traditional teachers sometimes have difficulty making the transition to working in the online environment. Being a good facilitator is a very challenging job and it is often far more demanding than traditional teaching (Muirhead, 2001).

The resource page offers students a variety of learning options that can individualize their educational experiences and make them more relevant. The student-centered model of learning encourages teachers to view their students as academic partners who work together to produce relevant and meaningful learning experiences. It requires educators who are willing to change their standard teaching methods. Boud (1995) related "they will need to become researchers of student perceptions, designers of multifaceted assessment strategies, managers of assessment processes and consultants assisting students in the interpretation of rich information about their learning" (p. 42).

The student-centered learning model challenges teachers to carefully use descriptive language in their written and verbal comments (phone conversations) to students. Teachers must develop dialogues with their students that foster personal and professional growth. Unfortunately, some professors, through attitude and verbal and written comments, treat their students as subordinates (Hawley, 1993). Obviously, the instructor's language must be caring and honest while providing constructive feedback that helps the student to have a clear picture of their academic work.

Conclusion

The discussion of the resource page reveals the need for distance education schools to carefully select and train instructors for their online classes. The resource page has the potential to enhance the learning process. Yet, it requires having qualified instructors to effectively use it. Also, the University of Phoenix realizes that it is a creative initiative that requires time to experiment with teachers and students. The university is using conferences and Internet discussions as vital opportunities to obtain feedback to improve the resource page. For instance, students might want to have the option to use both textbooks and e-books in their classes. The discussion participants provided excellent insights that will be useful in the on-going evaluation of the resource page. In the future, the school hopes to share a prototype for those interested in using the resource page for their organizations.

References


