Chapter 13

Powerpoint vs. Recorded Lectures: An African American Perspective on Online Education

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ABSTRACT

The number of students enrolling in online degree programs and courses has increased in recent years. To improve the learning process, emphasis has been laid on designing more effective learning environments, increasing instructor’s presence online and student retention. The role of technology in designing personalized and interactive online classrooms has also been accepted. A large component of the online student population comprises of adult, non-traditional, older age-group, students, who prefer online education because of its flexibility and convenience. Online education offers these mature learners an opportunity to study, work and fulfill their family obligations, all at the same time. However, these students have different learning styles, physical traits and lifestyles from the mainstream students, which influences their perception of online education and the various virtual pedagogical tools. This chapter focuses on African American adult learners, and the factors they consider to be important in making online classes more personal, interactive and informative.

INTRODUCTION

A web log post on Stanford University’s website “Tomorrow’s Professor Postings”, confirms that the number of distance learning and online classes has grown dramatically in the last decade (Stanford University, 2013). The blog cites Anita Cawley’s book, Supporting Online Students: A Guide to Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating Services, which reports on a Sloan Consortium survey conducted from 2003 through to 2010 across the United States, demonstrating the fact that web-based education is growing exponentially. In line with those findings, Draves (2002) estimated that by 2050, 50 percent of
college courses offered will be online. Adult students, in particular, and particularly adult students returning to studies, prefer colleges offering online degrees and certificates (Jaggars, 2011, as cited, Stanford University, 2013). Adult students prefer online courses because they are able to work and complete their education simultaneously (Green, 2010). For adult learners, the challenge of going back to studies does not primarily involve separation from family, or becoming independent. Rather, undertaking studies can further complicate their lives, already burdened with family, work and financial responsibilities. Going back to college can challenge their intellectual abilities, and they may need to reinvent themselves to accommodate to a new environment. These individuals tend to have a fragile sense of confidence and outlook. They may experience conflicting roles and barriers, such as issues with family, coworkers and friends who may not entirely be supportive, and who resist this new intrusion into their time zones (Kasworm, 2006, 2008). Barriers to pursuing higher education may take the form of lack of adequate child care services, elder care responsibilities, geographic constraints, financial limitations and a general fear of returning to school. In this tangled state of affairs, adult learners may find it more difficult to complete their degree. To retain these students, it is highly necessary to understand their needs, issues and barriers to an effective learning process.

Online programs are considered to be reliable, flexible, web-enhanced, blended with advanced instructional design tools (Green, 2010). However, in spite of the numerous advantages associated with online education, there are a number of formidable obstacles. The lack of direct face-to-face interaction with the instructor frequently appears to be a downside of online education. The question arises as to how to make online classes more personalized, especially with regards to teacher presence and interaction between the instructors and students. The challenge to humanize online and distance education programs has become central in the attempt to address the difficulties, and personalize the experience, especially for mature students who are negotiating a new learning environment.

Technological tools, however, do have some capacity to personalize distance and online education. For instance, there are a variety of instructional design strategies like discussions, written assignments, e-mails, research projects, interactive tutorials and tests, games and simulations which could be incorporated into an online class. In recent years, online programs have tried to place all subjective content online to reduce dependence on the instructor, and to make the student learning process self-regulated and independent. Podcasts, videos, virtual classrooms, power points, journal papers and recorded lectures all aim to make online learning for the students as simple and efficient as possible.

In order to improve the learning process for the students, and to overcome the handicap of lack of live lectures, recording lectures and uploading them into online classes has become a popular practice, and the advantages of recorded lectures have been presented and discussed at educational conferences, and published in a considerable number of research papers. Initially, detailed PowerPoint slides along with written lectures notes were provided to online students. More recently, however, the importance of video podcasts of lectures as a useful tool to reinforce student learning has unanimously been accepted. In the process, PowerPoints highlighting important details of the chapter content have become sidelined. This raises the questions as to whether recorded lectures are more popular than PowerPoint slides amongst online students, and whether an educator really needs to invest time and effort in recording his/her lectures for students in online courses. It is reasonable to ask whether online students appreciate this practice, and feel the need for it in reality, and whether technology is the answer to personalizing online learning environments, and increasing teacher and social presence within online learning environments.

This chapter discusses the empirical data collected from survey responses of over forty five African American adult students enrolled in three MBA classes over summer 2014. The student feedback gener-