Facilitation of Web–Based Courses Designed for Adult Learners

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INTRODUCTION

Web-based courses have currently surpassed all other forms of distance education in the higher education field. One of the main reasons in growth is the demand from adult and professional students looking for a convenient yet quality education (Kearsley, 2000). College and university faculty members are a key component in the development and delivery of online courses. Many studies have been conducted on effective course design, and student achievement and outcomes (Kearsley, 2000, p. 46), but less research is available on the instructional techniques necessary to facilitate an online course.

New Web-based education programs are being developed at a staggering rate. In the 2000-2001 school year, 43% of two-year-degree granting institutions offered distance education via the Internet. Of those, 88% planned to increase the number of Internet courses (Waits & Lewis, 2003). Course management programs such as WebCT and Blackboard are being utilized in several of the colleges and universities in the United States and around the world. Web-based instruction offers a variety of benefits. It is fairly inexpensive in comparison to other distance education methods such as satellite. It offers easy access via the Internet and can be used at various levels, supplemental to the traditional course, mixed method, and completely online.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) conducted a series of case studies to determine best practice techniques for Web-based instruction. Twenty-four benchmarks were established for institutions delivering online instruction. Four of those benchmarks applied specifically to course implementation. They include: student/teacher interaction, timely feedback, instruction of proper research methods, and assessment of resources. The implementation of these benchmarks, along with the commitment to high standards applied to Web-based instruction, have proven essential for successful learner experience.

Adult Learners

One demographic area in which Web-based instruction is being utilized is adult learners. Adult and professional degree programs are on the rise, and Web-based instruction seems to be a natural fit in adult education. Generally, adults seek convenience, but are highly motivated. Adults are self-directed and prefer practical educational experiences that are relevant to their life (Zemke & Zemke, 1984).

Facilitator

The historical role of a higher education instructor was that of content transmitter. This entails identifying content to be covered, organizing content in units, sequencing the units, and determining the best transmission method to be most successful in delivering the content of each unit (Knowles, 1975). The facilitator takes on a much different role. According to Knowles, the facilitator must do the following: set the climate for learning, plan, diagnose needs, set goals, design a learning plan, engage learning activities, and evaluate learning outcomes (p. 34). The task of the facilitator is then to get the students on board with this “different” way of learning and teaching.

The term “facilitator” is a purposeful departure from the typical terminology used to describe an instructor. Facilitators generally practice a democratic, student-centered approach to instruction (Brookfield, 1986). Facilitators avoid lecture and assist students in the process of self-actualization. Facilitators recognize the following about learning: learning is personally meaningful, positive and non-threatening, self-initiated, self-evaluated, and feeling centered (Wittmer & Myrick, 1989). A classroom facilitator generally has specific personality traits that lend themselves to the facilitation process. Those include being attentive, genuine, understanding, respectful, knowledgeable, and communicative.