Chapter 11
Designing Interaction in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is an ever-growing opportunity for colleges and universities with 9 out of 10 deans identifying the need to increase online offerings over the next 10 years. Enrolling students into online programs is only half of a successful program as students must complete the program in order for it to be considered a success. Students report their successful completion is related to establishing community within the course and designing interactive activities is one way to address this need. This chapter builds a case for interaction within online courses and provides tools and strategies faculty may adopt to improve overall quality and successful completion of online courses.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has been present in higher education since the late 90’s. In fact, universities have utilized distance learning for decades beginning with correspondence and then moving to distance using videoconferencing in the late 80’s. As the Internet improved, so did the opportunity to move from point to point videoconference delivery of instruction to asynchronous online learning. Online learning has become a required element in university program offerings. In fact, a recent survey of college and university deans reported 90% of the respondents indicated their campus would be increasing online offerings over the next decade (Sellingo & Chow, 2017). In 2016, over 21 million people attended US college and one fourth of those people were taking an online course (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2017). The exponential growth in online learning could be attributed to the variety of online options students have today.

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Online learning has become a widespread method for providing learning at different levels of education, allowing for more access to educational opportunities and providing flexibility in how people learn new information. Learning in an online environment facilitated by the instructor allows for varying degrees and types of interaction, which has been shown to have an effect on student learning and course completion rates (Atchley, Wingenbach, & Akers, 2013).

The online learning consortium identifies six course level definitions and four program level definitions to provide clarity to the field for types of courses and programs that can be defined as online (Coswatte, 2014). Their course definitions are related to the amount of online content delivery and the programs definitions vary based on the amount of time students have to spend on campus. For the purpose of this chapter, the definitions of traditional course, web-enhanced course, hybrid course and online course will be referenced.

Traditional Courses may have some elements of technology supporting the course, such as lab software or online syllabus and assignment collection, but the main instruction and interaction for the course occurs during the face to face meeting period. Typically, the instructor leading the face to face sessions will develop the online supplemental content. The online components are not complete courses when supplementing a traditional on ground course but rather an organizational method for disseminating information and collecting assignments.

The next level of distance delivery would be the synchronous distributed course which is supported by web or video conferencing. This delivery method simply enables students not attending the face to face section to participate via watching through a camera so that they feel they are present in the classroom. These courses may be called distributed, video conference, or web conferencing courses and may have an online element to disseminate information and collect assignments but the majority of instruction occurs through synchronous video conferencing.

A web-enhanced course is a cross between traditional and hybrid. Students participating in a web-enhanced course would have content online as well as online activities to participate in but they will also be attending face to face sessions in person. Web-enhanced courses are often developed by the teaching faculty with some assistance from an instructional design team.

Hybrid courses typically refer to courses offered on ground but including an online component. The term blended is interchangeably used with hybrid although hybrid is the original term describing this format. Hybrid learning promotes learner-centered and highly active learning environments providing students with a variety of options for receiving and demonstrating mastery of content. Since hybrid courses are offered on ground, the full time faculty members are most often responsible for designing their course shells. Adjunct faculty are assigned to teach sections of courses that have already been developed either by an instructional designer with a full time faculty assist or by the instructional design department in collaboration with the department chair or sometimes dean. Offering hybrid courses at minimum provides students receiving instruction from full time or adjunct to have a more common experience since not only are the syllabi in common but also the master course shells used to replicate each course section.

Course design in hybrid courses is minimal compared to online courses. Hybrid courses will include syllabi, course discussion, assignments and grades as part of the course design. But interactive activities remain an in person experience in class.

Online courses are predominantly delivered in an asynchronous online environment; however, some universities may choose to add residencies are other face to face experiences to the overall program (Coswatte, 2014). Fully online programs are designed with the intent for students to have no face-to-
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