Chapter III

Using Web-Based Technologies for Transformative Hybrid Distance Education

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Abstract

This chapter shares the experiences and lessons learned from an experimental graduate class using Web-based technologies that resulted in the development of a statewide entrepreneurship knowledge portal. Research suggests that real-world relevant projects greatly enhance online learning experiences. Our class experience supports that model, demonstrating the power of a shared vision and perceived need for the entrepreneurship portal. This chapter also explores emerging Web-based technologies, issues and challenges associated with teaching a complex course using Web-based technologies, and trends in online education.

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Introduction

Online education is assuming greater importance throughout higher education. As more non-traditional learners enter academics, especially at the graduate level, distance education becomes an important resource to enable them to achieve their academic goals given the demands of work and family. However, the challenge of creating a rich, contextual learning environment is often inhibited by technologies that impede collaboration, communication, and a true understanding of the material. This chapter explores these issues in the context of an experimental systems analysis and Web development graduate class to develop a Web-based entrepreneurship portal.

Using Web-Based Technologies in a Virtual Class

Online education is often defined as involving the Internet and Web-based technologies to deliver distance education. It can be delivered asynchronously, where the students and instructor do not communicate in real time, using Web-based technologies such as asynchronous discussion forums, repositories, and e-mail. It can also be synchronous, where the students and instructor communicate in real time using Web-based technologies such as chat rooms or teleconferencing over the Internet (Martinez, 2004).

Despite the technologies, motivating and engaging the students in a Web-based virtual environment remains a major challenge. Brower (2003) suggests that one solution lies in creating virtual learning communities where the instructor takes the role of learning facilitator and students become engaged in the virtual discussion forums without the pressure of personality differences. This allows students and instructors to freely express their opinions and ideas. Chou (2003) also suggests that interactivity with technologies enhances the learning experience. For example, on-demand whiteboards between online participants facilitate the exploration of concepts. A user-friendly interface to Web-based tools that engage students in collaboration, problem-solving activities, and exploration can support virtual communities and is one effective solution for distance learning (Hedberg, 2003).

An interesting, emerging model, called WisCom (Gunawardena et al., 2006), which stands for “wisdom communities,” suggests that educators should focus on developing engaged communities of practice with existing technologies. They emphasize the human elements of mentoring, and developing trust, support, collaboration, and communication as the keys to successful virtual communities in online environments.

Another model, called “adventure learning” by Doering (2006), contends that online learning can be enhanced via a hybrid model. Specifically, by combining real-world projects with collaborative online learning with peers, teachers, and subject
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