Chapter 13

Effective Online Courses in Business Administration: Expanding Course Design to Activate Diverse Learning Styles

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ABSTRACT

Technologies used to enhance, augment, or replace traditional course content have been widely examined. With few exceptions, study of these technologies focuses on the effects of the technologies in isolation. Only a few discussions have attempted to evaluate multi-technologies and their contribution to effective learning for online students. This chapter looks at the traditional learning styles and creates a model for robust, multi-technology, student learning-centered approach to optimize student learning in online classes in a business school. It finds that a well-designed, multi-technology approach results in better student performance, more satisfied students, and greater cost-benefit for the business school. The results have been adapted into course design to create a new kind of resource for online course deployment.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is in a crisis. Between 1995 and 2005, enrollments have increased by twenty-three percent (US Dept. of Education, 2008). President Obama is on record encouraging every American to add college education to his or her résumé (Obama, 2007). These facts suggest that college and university capacities are to be under serious assault. Current student enrollments serve a minority of the American population (US Dept of Education, 2008). Increased demand by Americans...
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will tax higher education capacities well beyond the breaking point.

Access for students and retention of students are primary concepts to meet the enrollment challenge. Optional methods to traditional brick-and-mortar facilities must be created to deliver course content ensuring that access to the population is available and that contents and implementation are such that students are more likely to complete courses and, eventually, degree requirements.

To be successful in creating educational content to meet these challenges, learning styles of students must be studied to ensure that the optimum learning experience is made available to students to attract them and to ensure that activities in the course contribute to course completion and, eventually, degree completion.

LEARNING STYLES

Work done by Grasha and Riechmann on learning styles is different from much of the learning styles research in that it focuses on students’ responses to activities in the classroom (Montgomery and Groat, 1998). Table 1 shows the six learning styles that were identified along with their characteristics and classroom preferences. (Grasha, 1996)

Further, Grasha suggested teaching methods that were appropriate to clusters of these learning styles. Table 2 shows the Primary Teaching Styles that were found most successful with specific combinations of learning styles (Grasha, 1996).

According to Montgomery and Groat, Grasha does not advocate trying to include all learning styles preferences at all times (Montgomery and Groat, 1998). Such an attempt could result in a mishmash and complicated course content structure that overburdens all students. Instead, they suggest that Grasha’s components can be used in a cafeteria-style menu to select from to enhance course content to attract and engage students with different learning types. (Montgomery and Groat, 1998)

Making an assumption that students in our business school are not significantly different from the students in Grasha and Riechmann studies, then the implication for online course design is that the content of courses should be designed to incorporate the most advantageous learning components to ensure student attraction and retention to the courses.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

One realization that occurs to many trying to understand what is happening in the current state of adoption of technologies in the delivery of educational courses is a confusing application of terms exists. A general label, “Distance Education,” is applied to the use of technology to supplement or enhance educational opportunities. But, the activities and concepts encountered in the world of “distance learning” are diverse and, in some instances, contradict the connotation of the label.

Table 1. Characteristics of Grasha-Reichmann learning styles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Classroom Preferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Compete with other students</td>
<td>Teacher-centered, class activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Share ideas with others</td>
<td>Student-led small groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>Uninterested, non-participant</td>
<td>Anonymous environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Eager to participate</td>
<td>Lectures with discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Seek authority figure</td>
<td>Clear instructions, little ambiguity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Think for themselves</td>
<td>Independent study and projects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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