

**A Case Study in Developing a Fully Asynchronous Online  
Introduction to Business Course: Ten Big Surprises**

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**Abstract:** This article reports on the experience of two members of the Business Department who developed a successful asynchronous version of the department's Introduction to Business survey course. The article highlights what we learned and how we overcame the obstacles we faced. We discuss how our course evolved during the last six semesters we taught it. We also discuss how our College community reflected on the experience of developing the courses under this program and how our reflections contributed to major revisions of our College's eLearning efforts.

In the summer of 2008, our former provost of Queensborough Community College issued a Call for Proposals for instructors to convert currently taught brick-and-mortar courses into fully asynchronous online courses. The College offered a \$2,000 grant to instructors to develop such a course and teach it for two consecutive semesters. The plan called for the development of ten courses. These courses had to have multiple sections offered each semester.

The importance of offering more online courses became evident after responses to student evaluations, and the College's self-study for reaccreditation revealed the increasing need

to provide working students more access to the College's course offerings. At that time, the College had been running fully asynchronous and blended courses for years, but online education was never a high priority. The College's ability to support faculty and students in online classes was minimal, as its highly dedicated support staff was saddled with many other pressing responsibilities.

This article reports on the experience of two members of the Business Department who developed a successful asynchronous version of the department's Introduction to Business survey course. We will highlight what we learned and how we overcame the obstacles we faced. And, we will show how our course evolved during the last six semesters we taught it. We will also discuss how our College community reflected on the experience of developing the courses under this program and how our reflections contributed to major revisions of our College's eLearning efforts. This can be boiled down to ten big surprises, some pleasant and some not.

Despite reservations about the provost's plan, we chose to prepare an asynchronous version of the department's introductory survey course, which typically has 20 to 22 sections a semester. Our reservations stemmed from our concern that the course offering would attract students who would perform poorly in a fully online course. It forced each of us to reevaluate the role we had assumed in the department as instructors. (Hawkins & Oblinger, 2006). Our individual perceptions and support of the traditional classroom format weighed on our decision to transform our teaching modality. (Wiesenberg & Stacey, 2008). Traditionally, fully online courses offered by the department suffered from substantial attrition. Senior faculty within the department had previously participated in online teaching initiatives that had not been successful. However, our concerns about the plan did not deter us from accepting the challenge. Therefore, we decided to develop this course as a team. This would allow us to draw on our different

teaching experiences. At that time, Dr. Volchok had been teaching as an adjunct a highly regarded fully asynchronous Marketing Management course in an graduate program offered by Stevens Institute of Technology. In addition, he was serving as the chair of the College's Committee on eLearning. Prof. Mooney had been teaching courses using ePortfolio for several semesters. The college selected the ePortfolio Learning Management System in our capstone, milestone and cornerstone courses. These terms are used to describe courses at three points in a student's academic career. Capstone courses are identified as a major course at the conclusion of a student's academic career that allows them to showcase their academic abilities. The cornerstone course is an initial course taken by a student where they are introduced to the ePortfolio technology. The expectation is that the student will complete an additional fifteen credits before enrolling in a milestone course. The milestone course is a mid-point course that allows the student to build upon previously learned materials. Our main objective was to examine the ability of community college students to excel using this modality.

### **Our Course Design**

The course materials we designed would enable any member of the Business Department to teach this survey course. Nearly every instructor uses the same textbook. It is impossible to cover the entire textbook in a 15-week semester; therefore, we developed six modules:

- 1) The Dynamic Business Environment
- 2) Business Ownership and Entrepreneurship
- 3) Managing Organizations
- 4) Technology and Information
- 5) Marketing Management
- 6) Finance

We intended that only four modules ever be used in a single semester. Instructors would use the first three modules and select any one of the last three. Prof. Mooney, for example, teaches the Finance Module while Dr. Volchok teaches the Marketing Management Module.

We used varying methods for student assignments. We assigned one high-stakes writing assignment, named the “Two Minute Pitch.” We saw this as a perfect assignment for students taking an introductory business course. The assignment asks students to read two articles on how to brand themselves in the job market and then write a script for their sales pitch to potential employers. In one of the courses the assignment was submitted through the Digital Drop Box in Blackboard. The other course utilized the ePortfolio system for the submission of the assignments. There was disagreement amongst the two instructors on the appropriate course management site that should be utilized for the course. Therefore, one course used Blackboard and the other instructor used ePortfolio for the submission of the assignments.

The quality of students’ submissions varied. Dr. Volchok, who has used this assignment in his graduate level Marketing Management course, was delighted to discover that some pitches were as good as or even better than those prepared by his graduate students. And, several of Prof. Mooney’s students landed new jobs using the scripts they developed in class.

### **Course Logistics**

Students at Community College are able to register for fully online courses through the student registration system. They are not required to obtain instructor permission. The course sections are indicated as FNET on the course listing. The system instructs students to contact the instructor after completing the registration process. The challenges of this logistical schematic are further discussed in our ten big surprises. Needless to say, by the start of our course’s first semester, we knew that we had embarked on a rocky road.

The most significant things we learned in developing and teaching this course are summarized in ten big surprises.

### **Surprise 1: The Publisher's Blackboard Cartridge was a Big Headache**

The textbook publisher's representative promised great faculty and student support. The publisher offered access to its Blackboard cartridge, which accompanies the course textbook. This course material was only compatible with the Blackboard 8 learning system. The publisher had not developed software that could be used with an ePortfolio learning system. The course cartridge included:

- Rich-media lectures
- Videos
- Chapter examinations
- Assignments
- Discussion Board Questions
- Rich-media lectures
- Flash Cards, Crossword puzzles and other games

Unfortunately the publisher's course cartridge caused us big headaches and wasted our time. For example, the publisher's videos served from its website loaded extremely slowly even with fast broadband connections. Because we were unable to view these videos reliably, we could hardly expect our students to have better success. We decided not to use these videos. This surprise, however, led to more innovative solutions; for example, we linked content we found on YouTube, Merlot, and elsewhere. Dr. Volchok now has students seek rich media content and recommend their favorite discoveries for inclusion into the course for the following semester. Students receive extra credit for these recommendations. In addition to learning how to write

cogent business recommendations, they get to build course content. As a consequence, students become active learners who feel they have a stake in building this course. Prof. Mooney relies on websites like CNBC and government sites to supplement the course materials.

Instead of relying on the publisher's boilerplate Blackboard cartridge, we developed a collection of assignments based on essay questions we give students in our face-to-face classes. We dropped the publisher-suggested Discussion Board questions. And, we focused the discussion forums on issues that linked to our assignments. We also encouraged students to open their own forums.

We did use the publisher's bank of test questions. But, this required extra effort on our part. First, the publisher delivered its quizzes through the servers, which were slower than the university's servers. And, more importantly the publisher's quizzes were developed on a chapter-by-chapter basis. We wanted tests that would match our six modules, so we edited the publisher's test questions, which it provides to faculty on an optical disc. We were also surprised that the publisher's answers to several questions were wrong.

After we edited the tests to match our course organization, we imported these files into Respondus to prepare test pools for deployment in Blackboard. Respondus is a powerful program, but it has a steep learning curve. As a result, developing our test pools was one of the most laborious chores in preparing our course. On a positive note, we developed our own manual for using Respondus, which we now share with our colleagues.

The publisher's Flash Card and Crossword puzzles are useful because, like many introductory courses, our course emphasizes new vocabulary. We use them, but they are merely a subordinate part of the course.

**THE BIG HEADACHE:** We discovered during the first week into the course that buying the textbook was not sufficient to satisfy the publisher. The course materials we had chosen to use from the publisher required an access code that cost an additional thirty dollars per student. The publisher never advised us of this. After a great deal of time and phone calls we secured free access codes for our students. However, this proved to be a useful lesson when we began to develop other eLearning courses. Using publisher content can create more problems that it solves for instructors while incurring extra costs for students.

**Surprise 2: Many students did not realize that they were registering for a fully online course.**

In spring 2009, our College's enrollment was surging as a consequence of the recession. We were only going to offer one online section of our course. But, after all the other traditional sections of this course filled up, the online section soon followed and the department opened a second fully asynchronous section. Many students, desperate to find an open section, registered for the online sections without reading the notice that these were not traditional classes, even though the College catalog clearly stated this. In addition, some academic advisors were not aware of the College's effort to offer more online classes and may have failed to tell students that taking these sections required access to a computer with an Internet connection.

Our initial efforts to contact students were varied and frustrating. We tried to contact them by email a week before the semester. We sent them the course syllabus, a link to their course's Blackboard website, and a letter explaining what a fully asynchronous course is and their responsibilities as students in such a course. The College registration system also told students to email their instructor after they had completed registration. Many students did not open our email and only a handful followed the registrar's instructions. Many students had never

taken an online course before and therefore were unable to navigate the Blackboard system.

Other students, who failed to realize that this was not a traditional course, took two weeks to contact us.

A key lesson our College drew from this experience is that students and their advisors must be better informed about the College's eLearning program. The College's Academic Advisors are now fully aware of what students need to succeed in an eLearning class. And, we now have an on-going effort to improve student awareness and preparedness. The College has provided an online program for students, which allows them to evaluate their readiness for an online course and learn how eLearning classes work.

[file://localhost/\(http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/qccOnline:eLearningInstitute:eLearning\\_Readiness:index.html\)](http://localhost/(http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/qccOnline:eLearningInstitute:eLearning_Readiness:index.html))

**Surprise 3: Students Neither Read their eMail Nor Respond to Phone Messages, Nor Answer Snail Mail. They will come to a Free Lunch.**

The popular press tells us that today's students are "digital natives" who are far more adept at new media technologies than their "digital immigrant" instructors. Yet, many students had difficulty with our College's two learning management systems: Blackboard and Epsilen. And, just getting students to use their College email accounts was difficult. Many never or rarely read our emails. Several had personal email accounts in the Blackboard system, but even they often failed to read our emails. As we tried to make initial contact with our students, we were forced to do the unthinkable: We sent letters out through the U.S. Postal Service. This is an unattractive solution. It is slow, time-consuming, and expensive. And, in far too many cases we still got no response. We also tried another labor-intensive way of contacting students: The



telephone. Some students had provided phone numbers in the registration system, however, many of the telephone numbers were no longer in service or the voice mailbox was full.

Out of desperation, we asked the Office of Student Affairs for help. This office agreed to organize and pay for a lunch for each class. This, obviously, is not a sustainable solution. In each section, approximately half of the students came for sandwiches. And, we learned just how confused they were. Several students, clearly unaware that they registered for an online class, complained that they could not find this course's classroom on campus. A couple of others said they had no access to the Internet. These students were walked over to the College's newly instituted Freshman Academy where advisors, aided by the Business Department's chair, enrolled these students into traditional sections of this course.

**Surprise 4: While our courses shared the same DNA, like Darwin's finches, our two sections quickly developed their own unique plumage.**

We are both charged with the same set of learning outcomes. Yet, as became evident within the first few weeks of the semester, we used our different skillsets and teaching styles to modify our courses. In doing so, our two sections evolved into new distinct configurations.

Prof. Mooney has been actively involved with the ePortfolio system since its introduction at our College. Given the fact that there were several issues with the Blackboard server throughout CUNY, she introduced ePortfolios in her online class, and it became the platform for the submission of assignments and weekly chats. The portfolios were developed and maintained through Epsilon. Prof. Mooney introduced optional weekly online chats, which were typically held at night between 7 and 10 pm. Approximately half of her students used these weekly chats for general questions and exam review. The biggest challenge in offering these chats was student complaints that they were unable to clear their busy calendars for these sessions. Prof. Mooney

addressed this by having the chats logged so that a student could review the transcripts later in the semester. Prof. Mooney has continued to use the online chats as an additional communication tool to give students the opportunity to dialogue about the course and its requirements. Another important tool she used is a weekly announcement sent to the course enrollment with an outline of the weekly assignment. Many students have remarked that this is a helpful tool to keep them on track.

Dr. Volchok, on the other hand, thought Blackboard more robust than ePortfolio, and chose to keep all instruction on Blackboard. And, based on his unhappy experiences with synchronous online technologies, chose not to use synchronous chats.

During the second semester, Dr. Volchok recast his course as a blended course. Students now meet weekly in an on-campus classroom for one hour. To fulfill our contractual obligations under the provost's program, Professor Mooney continued to teach her course in a fully asynchronous mode, which was now defined by our College as any course with at least 80 percent of instruction carried out online. In addition, Dr. Volchok reduced the number of assignments.

### **Surprise 5: Students who took our classes were unprepared to use Discussion Boards, Blogs, and Wikis**

Even though we posted a detailed course orientation, complete with Blackboard tutorials, Web 2.0 tools flummoxed many students. As a result, we now ask them to use these tools during our course orientation. Dr. Volchok, for example, awards extra credit for students who take a short practice quiz, post a message on a discussion forum, and respond to another student's message. The course orientation starts one week before the semester and finishes at the end of the first week of the semester.

The College has added curricula to its Introduction to College Life course that deals with Web 2.0 tools, so now more students come to online classes with some knowledge of how to use discussion boards, blogs, and wikis. This course also provides dual instruction for incoming students on the usage of Blackboard and the ePortfolio systems. Poor student preparedness also lead Dr. Volchok's Committee on eLearning to recommend, and the College to approve, a Web-based Student eLearning Readiness Program. Its goal is to help students understand what an eLearning course requires and how to use the eLearning tools before they register. This program has been running for three semesters. It is still a work in progress. A key objective is to increase student retention in eLearning courses. The College is developing plans to determine if this program is meeting its objective.

**Surprise 6: Retention rates were very low**

Instructors experienced with online education in community colleges know that within the first two weeks of the semester they will lose far more students than in a traditional class. By the second module exam, we both lost nearly 20 percent of our students. Informal discussions with students suggest that many perceive the collaborative online classroom as too much work. Dr. Volchok's committee investigated this problem and found that both fully asynchronous and partly online classes are plagued with significantly lower retention rates than traditional face-to-face courses. The College is pursuing a two-pronged approach to remedy this: 1) Better student preparation and support for the rigors of the collaborative online classroom, which we have discussed; and 2) Better training support for faculty developing eLearning courses, which we will discuss shortly.

**Surprise 7: Those students who completed the semester did amazingly well.**

As part of the Business Department's ongoing learning outcomes assessment, every full-time instructor teaching the Introduction to Business course assessed whether students met the curricular objectives set for this course. Faculty developed a 25-question quiz covering the curriculum. We used the same quiz for traditional and online classes, and students had the same amount of time to complete this quiz. Students who completed the online course performed significantly better than those in traditional on-campus classrooms. This is an important finding. Instructors teaching traditional sections of this course must experiment with ways to get students to understand the curriculum better. And, instructors of online sections of this course must find ways of increasing student retention.

**Surprise 8: Nothing Succeeds Like Failure**

It is possible to develop an effective online course without technological and pedagogical support, but such support greatly enhances the probability of success. Instructors need coordinated support to develop quality online courses. While our provost's Call for Proposals did not say that faculty would be supported in development of their courses, we did have one senior professor serve as mentor. This colleague is very knowledgeable and highly experienced, but he was also teaching a full course load and actively engaged in College governance. This inadequate level of support was unfair to everyone in this program. Faculty need more support from peer mentors, Learning Management System technologists, and online course design specialists.

Only two of the ten courses in the program ever ran. This program must be judged a failure. But, we should not damn such failures. To paraphrase Robert Wood Johnson, the former Chair of Johnson & Johnson, if you are not making mistakes, you are not taking action and you

are not learning what works. This program's failure must be forgiven. In fact, it should be praised. Our College learned quickly from this mistake, and instituted a far superior initiative. The College now offers faculty the opportunity to enroll in a Faculty eLearning Institute, which offers two weeks of intensive instruction during the winter or summer breaks. Participating faculty work closely with a peer mentor, who coaches only two or three course developers. The instructor develops his or her course for a semester, and with his or her mentor evaluates the course using the Quality Matters rubric. And, the peer mentor consults with the instructor for the first two semesters the course is taught. After teaching an online class for two semesters, the developer is eligible to become a peer mentor.

To date, three cohorts of 10 to 14 instructors have completed this training program. As of this writing, a fourth cohort is completing their courses and a fifth cohort is planned.

### **Surprise 9: Learning is a Two-Way Street**

During the semester it became clear that future course offerings would require continual modification and improvement. The support of a colleague teaching the same course proved to be very useful. However, our students were the best sources of feedback. The research in the field of online learning emphasizes that the most influential learning occurs in the context of hands on participation that encourages student participation and feedback. Tinto (1994). We found this to be true and began to offer students a chance to provide on-going feedback on the course through the use of surveys and student blogs. When we use blogs, students' remarks are not shared with classmates. However, if students unknowingly reiterate another's criticisms, or if a comment strikes us as a good idea, we modify the course. Student feedback was extremely insightful. For example, students commented that the use of a real time chat function would be helpful in addressing questions and issues regarding the course materials. Additionally, students

remarked that a weekly calendar and email reminders helped to keep them on track for completing assignments and work in a timely manner.

### **Surprise 10: The Course is Still Running**

Some New York City Marathon runners say that it is an once-in-a-lifetime event. The process of training and preparing for the race is okay as long as they do it once. Well, in the case of our Introduction to Business course, we are still up and running. The course runs with two sections each semester at full capacity. The same issues exist with regard to communication and student awareness. However, the retention rate is rising and the courses have continued to evolve. We attribute the increase in retention to the deliberate one to one outreach of the instructors during the entire course period as a means of enhancing student retention. Noel, Levitz, & Saluri (1985).

### **Conclusion**

We believe that any instructor interested in engaging in online education can do so successfully if he or she has proper support. Our course is successful for several reasons: 1) It is well-designed so students can easily navigate through the course; 2) We take care in the preparation of all assignments so we are confident that we are covering our curricular objectives and that students can successfully complete these assignments; 3) Given our quick responses to students' questions, our rapid posting of grades, and our frequent posting of announcements, students feel our active presence throughout the semester; and, 4) Our course is flexible enough to allow an instructor to use techniques that match his or her teaching style, which ensures proper course delivery and makes the course fun to teach.

The primary design principles that have made the course successful are the implementation of a semester course calendar that clearly delineates reading and writing

assignments for the students. The design of the course into four separate modules allows for a segmentation of the course material, therefore, allowing the student to break down their approach to the course and its assignments.

We relied heavily on each other throughout the course development process and assessment of our results. It was a perfect match. In essence, we created our own mentoring program. The collaborative relationship has proven to be very useful, as we expanded our online course offerings. Additionally, the use of reflection is a key factor for improving a teacher's practice. Schön (1983). The use of reflection in online instruction is vital to its continued success in meeting student needs.

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