Online Learning: No Worries at Community Colleges

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Abstract

There has been an increase in online course enrollment through the years. More students are enrolled in these courses as a result of budget benefits and student interest. Typically, students take some time to become oriented to these courses and ask questions, especially about the navigation. This paper describes the design, content, and implementation of the training folder "Before Your Course Begins" that teachers can use to engage students before the start of an online course.

In the last decade, there has been an increase in online course enrollment in community colleges (Saltarelli & Roster, 2014). More students are enrolled in these institutions because of student interest in the classes offered, as well as lower tuition. Typically, students take some time to become oriented to the courses and ask numerous questions, and this is especially true of those new to online courses. This paper describes the design, contents, and implementation of the online folder "Before Your Course Begins" that was created to engage students before the start of the course. This study is based on my work at Hostos Community. The strategies outlined here can be used to keep students engaged.

Online course enrollment in community colleges has increased at an average rate of 18.5%

during the ten years before 2011 (Allen & Seaman, 2011), which clearly exceeds the 2.1% rate

of the total U.S. higher education enrollment during the same time frame of the past decade

(Allen & Seaman, 2011). Moreover, over 6 million students had enrolled in at least one online

course as of 2010 (Saltarelli & Roster, 2014). These increases demonstrate the importance of

analyzing the way online technologies relate to instruction and course content (Mishra &

Koehler, 2006).

Jones and Hansen (2013) in "Data Provided by the American Association of Community

Colleges,", (p. 89), describe the role of Community colleges as the most active entry into higher

education, registering nearly 50% of all undergraduate students. In addition, community colleges

are the gateway to education for the nontraditional and underprepared student population (Allen

& Seaman, 2011). As Ashburn (2006) outlined, students' inadequate academic preparation and

their lack of success in their previous educational institutions are the most difficult obstacles

facing community colleges nationwide. The means of resolving this problem may be a

combination of conventional and new technology methodologies.

Although the discussion among academics in community *and* four-year collegesabout the use of

lectures versus lectures replaced by, or accompanied by, more active forms of learning has

become contentious, (Nitecki, 2011), lectures continue to be an important element of the

traditional classroom. In both community and four-year colleges, video-recorded lectures are

often used to accompany in-person classroom lectures (Gorrisen, Van Brugge, & Jochems, 2012)

and are a part of many online learning platforms (Breslow, Pritchard, DeBoer, Stump, Ho, &

Seaton, 2013). The hybrid (blended) model of instruction consists of face-to-face instruction,

plus time for students to work independently while using instructional technology. An overall

goal of blended learning is to combine the best practices of the face-to-face classroom practice

with the online resources of a virtual classroom (Rausch & Crawford, 2012).

According to research done by Means, there is important evidence that online learning is just as effective as classroom learning, and a hybrid is more effective than either one independently (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). However, some students are entering hybrid courses unaware of how to navigate the course. Many students believe the class only meets one day a week and aren't aware that there is work to complete online. For others, the opposite is true, and they are absent in the face-to-face session. Overall, students are anxious initially about the format, course, and the expectations of the instructor. Because of this anxiety, students need to see the syllabus ahead of time (LaMonica, 2001), so they will know what to expect in the course and can get a jump start on assignments. Furthermore, to allay their fears, many students ask schoolmates who have taken the courses before about professors or search http://www.ratemyprofessor.com to get an idea of the expectations of the teacher. The instructor may also advise the students to write down important dates, i.e. tests, due dates for papers, presentations, etc., or ask them to put reminders in their phones. All of these preparations reduce their anxiety and help them to get excited about what they are about to engage in for the coming semester.

Attention to diversity is also essential when assisting students with online learning courses (Seybert & Rossol, 2010). An increasing number of students have immigrated to the United States. The City University profiles of community colleges demonstrate that nearly half of students come from different countries and speak a host of native languages ("student profiles", 2014). For example in 2014, 10,000 out of the 20,000 students enrolled in LaGuardia Community College were migrants. In total, they were natives of 157 different countries and

spoke 111 different languages. Many of the students who emigrated lack adequate fluency and literacy in English, as evidenced by the large number of students enrolled in remedial courses ("student profiles," 2014). In another community college, Hostos, the majority of first-year students are enrolled in such courses ("student profiles," 2016). Culture and language barriers can interfere with the learning process, making teaching more challenging, and impacting the success of the student (Park & Choi, 2009).

In institutions serving non-traditional students, faculty need to develop an additional repertoire of teaching strategies that consider remedial education needs, cultural and diverse backgrounds and meaningful class content integration (Wichadee, 2013). In December 2009, The City University of New York (CUNY) Office of Academic Affairs requested proposals for the expansion of hybrid instruction, in response to a call from the Chancellor. The request called for an increase in hybrid courses by the fall of 2010, with institutes facilitating the sharing, use and development of the best practices.During the academic years from 2010 through 2012, CUNY faculty received grant funding to develop hybrid courses and disseminate the results and best practices. The results were presented on discussion boards and blogs on the CUNY Academic Commons.(http://www2.cuny.edu)."

Hostos has developed an effective non-conventional strategy. Located in one of the poorest districts in the United States, the South Bronx, Hostos Community Collegeis part of The City University of New York and serves nearly 7,000 students ("Student Profiles," 2014) with a population that is 60% Hispanic, 22% African American, 3% Asian, as well as 66% female ("Student Profiles," 2014). On average, 60% of the college's student population are first-generation college students. Overall, 86% of these students require remediation in mathematics, writing, or reading. Despite these challenges, the students have shown a desire to grow socially

and academically through higher education. Many of these students are parents who are at or below poverty level. The hybrid format offers an opportunity for them to attend class while reducing the costs of transportation or child care. The online courses of Hostos Community College offer a great deal of flexibility. Following is a brief first day overview that I have implemented in a traditional classroom when welcoming students to the course.

Day One in Person:
- Ice breakers
- Provide and explain syllabus
- Overview of course
- Answer all questions and indicate that questions are welcome
- Dismiss early and allow students to purchase course materials

The same information can be provided online, in greater detail, and accessed at the convenience of the students. Following is an overview of how I orient students to online courses that I have found particularly helpful.

Course Availability and Instructor Involvement

I open the online course (make it available) between two to four weeks in advance. Another benefit of making lecture materials available to students online is that it allows students to study those materials on their own time and at their own pace (Bjork, Dunlosky, & Kornell, 2013). Once the course starts, instructors should be available to answer questions. Also important, instructors can influence their students through their "teaching presence" online. Teaching presence is indicated by the extent to which learners experience the instructor's influence in the class (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006). Teaching presence is also reflected in designing, facilitating, delivering, and evaluating students' performance. In research done by Baker, engaged teaching presence in the online environment has been shown to result in

increased student participation and motivation (Baker, 2010).

Understandably, teaching presence online requires more personal communication between faculty members and individual students (Baker, 2010). This coincides with the findings of Shea, Li, & Pickett (2006), who assert that frequent student-faculty interaction was the "most important factor in student motivation" (p.1). Faculty members mentioned in Shea, et. al's findings stressed the importance of having multiple contact points (phone, e-mail, texting, etc.) to ensure communication and quick responses. Another important element in the design of an online course is the interaction between students (Kumari, 2001). This helps the learners have a sense of community. There is trust and interdependence (Davies & Graff, 2005). Instructors should introduce themselves on the first day of orientation and the first day of class in a designated spot on the discussion board.

Get Everyone Acquainted Via Discussion Board and Designated Area

Providing an ice breaker activity helps students to feel comfortable with participating in the course, and acquaints them with their classmates and with the discussion board. Discussion boards encourage students to think more deeply or creatively, which benefits everyone in the exchange (Kumari, 2001). The instructor can also lead a discussion that allays the students' fears about online learning, or college in general. Basically, introducing themselves and being social are things that students are familiar with. When they begin with something they know, they get comfortable and can ease into the unknown. The importance of community is explained by Rausch & Crawford (2012). They further mention that projects should be designed for collaboration, even though students are not familiar with each other. Churches (2011) stresses collaboration by highlighting the motivation factor for students when working with

peers. Hybrid courses provide increased interaction between student and instructor and collaboration between students that would not be possible in a traditional face-to-face course. This is due to the opportunity for a live connection and the additional online correspondence with flexibility (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Both the virtual and the actual classroom environments can either advance or obstruct a student's potential to learn and feel safe and content as a member of the class. Educational research supports creating an atmosphere of mutual respect, where students feel relaxed in asking questions and in expressing their thoughts and feelings, (Koljatic, 2001). Some areas to consider when creating an atmosphere of mutual respect are classroom design, classroom procedures, and classroom strategies. Implementing a few strategies that address these areas can help develop a strong sense of community and encourage positive interactions and cooperative learning for students. A welcoming classroom environment can lead to increased academic achievement and a sense of pride and belonging in the school.

Orientation is essentially an experience that aids students in learning what they need to know before courses begin. Students who participate in orientation have a clearer understanding of what the course entails and greater rates of persistence in classwork and course attendance than their non-participant peers. Achieving a goal becomes easier when the goal is precise and the track to obtaining it is clear (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010). Students who register late may also experience problems in online courses. Ford, Stahl, Walker, & Ford (2008) support the evidence that there is a decrease in the chance for success for late registrants to courses. Furthermore, late registration correlates with lower grades and lower re-enrollment the following term (Freer-Weiss, 2004).

With these possibilities in mind, it is important to establish structure during the first two weeks

of class. The instructor's expectations should be clear (Breslow et. al, 2013). For example, in my classes, I jump start my online instruction with the "Before Your Course Begins" folder mentioned above. The folder contains material that students are assigned to download or print for the first day of class (syllabus, reading list, etc). I provide written and visual instructions on how to navigate the course. The written form is short and simple with bullets points to focus the students' attention and to not overwhelm them. I also include pictures and clip art where I can to appeal to the different learning styles. Additionally, I include a picture of myself in the designated place where I introduce myself. A picture of the textbook is also included, along with the price and where they can purchase the book. The pictures and graphics that I use in the folder add visual appeal to the contents. I boldface important information. Equally important, I provide a list of study tips that will get students into an early routine in which they will feel connected to the course. In my visual aids, I use design elements, white space, and indentation to draw students' attention to the material they should focus on. Still, many students have said it is too much information to take in, and I am not physically there to explain it to them. Utilizing their feedback, I considered solutions. Although I would be online explaining the online course, I decided to imagine I was in physically in a classroom with the students.

Provide an Orientation Folder and Recorded Orientation Lecture

Educational research has demonstrated that students are not necessarily well equipped to monitor their own learning (Bjork et al., 2013), and such limitations may be especially likely to manifest themselves in the absence of face-to-face interactions that support monitoring processes in traditional classroom settings (e.g. asking instructors to clarify or elaborate upon points of confusions; Bjork et al., 2013). Studies by Choi and Johnson have shown that students subjectively assess video-recorded materials as easier to learn and more memorable than text

materials (Choi & Johnson, 2005).

To introduce preservice educators to the hybrid environment, I created an orientation lecture in the format of a YouTube video that I taped one year ago as a pilot study, with the help of the technology department. EDU 104 (Teaching Language Arts to Young Students) is one of the primary courses needed for our education program. It is one of many of our program's hybrid courses and sets the foundation for navigation in future teacher education classes that follow. This is a course that I teach in the summer, and it is an accelerated version of the traditional EDU 104 that is taught during the fall and spring semesters. Due to the intensity, students had difficulty navigating the course in such a short time. Hence, the need for such a video.

In the video, I dressed up as I would in the physical classroom. I moved about the virtual space as if I were in a "reality" classroom. Once on camera, I explain how to navigate the course. Because I opened the course at least 4 weeks in advance, I found that students inundated me with questions about the course and expressed how anxious they were about doing well. The video allowed students to ask me questions, get to know me and get a feel for my teaching style. This was a useful tool because online students who are not able to attend the in-person orientation can attend the one online at their convenience. Equally important, after my "online" introduction, students expressed less anxiety about working in a virtual environment.

Ensure the Students are Accountable and Get Their Feedback

Giving a quiz on the first day about the orientation and course set up is a very effective means of assessing the students' understanding of the information presented. A quiz can also be used as an accountability measure. Students can complete an anonymous survey, so the professor can get feedback about the students' navigation of the course. Instructors can ask students to send them an email or post to the discussion board to assess how students are navigating. All of this can be

used to determine success and implement changes, if needed.

Conclusion

Student course engagement "typically refers to the amount, type, and intensity of investment students make in their educational experiences" (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001, p.361). Faculty should monitor student engagement as a formative strategy to examine the impact of their teaching and assessment activities. As highlighted by Ahlfeldt & Sellnow (2005), "the concept of student engagement is receiving increased attention globally as it is viewed as an important element in assessing and improving the quality of higher education" (p.16). According to (Wichadee, 2013), the online environment can best serve students with variable learning styles and those who do not approach learning in a systematic way. Consequently, online educators should plan activities that address different approaches to learning for the benefit of varied learning-style preferences. In this way, the learning needs of most students can be accurately addressed (Ryman, Hardham, Richardson, & Ross, 2009).

Some advantages of the hybrid and online instruction include varied ways of creating active and interesting learning using technology, self-directed learning opportunities, greater student/instructor interaction, and flexibility (Rausch & Crawford, 2012). Faculty who made an effort to actively engage students have found some success in reducing student attrition (Herman & Banister 2007). Finally, online learning will remain a mainstay in higher education. It is an important tool that instructors can use to facilitate greater retention, especially for students who are challenged with inadequate preparation or poor education from previous institutions. Finally, instructors can acclimate students to this methodology in a way that is comfortable and exciting.

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Resources

Hostos Student Profiles

http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/oaa/oir/PublicDocuments/StudentProfile.pdf

The City University of New York

http://www2.cuny.edu/