

I Would Have Had More Success If . . . : **The Reflections and Tribulations of a First-Time Online Instructor**

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Abstract

This paper is to explore “I-would-have-had-more-success-if...,” the reflections of a beginning online teacher and her students in an undergraduate Web-based course. The data used in the paper was gathered using the instructor’s journals, student feedback, and an analysis of online discussions. The instructor maintained journals reflecting upon students’ experiences as she developed and delivered the online course. The students’ feedback was gathered through student journals, e-mails sent to the instructor, and an end-of-course evaluation survey. This paper can provide insights for online educators in their efforts to be effective in developing strategies that can promote learning. The instructor attempted to share her experience that could help online instructors understand areas of improvement identified by students when taking online technology-based courses.

For the past decade, Web technology has taken center stage of emerging technology and innovation in society. The trend of Web technology development has driven educators to create online courses or Web-based course supplements. The development of Web-based courses has challenged the educational learning environment and forced some educators to use technology for teaching and learning effectiveness. Web-based instruction provides teachers with a means of meeting the social needs of nontraditional students with differing abilities, interests, cultures, and backgrounds. Through Web-based instruction, these students can expand their knowledge base and improve their ability to access, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and communicate information.

However, Web-based course design is different from traditional courses. Traditional instructional design models can be successfully applied for the development of classroom instruction but could be limited in the development of Web-based teaching. Koszalka and Bianco (2001) indicated that supporting the learning process can be achieved by providing multiple means of presenting instruction, infor-

mation, and activities. Interaction through discussion and collaboration has become an essential component of any Web-based course (Wulff, Hanor, & Bulik, 2000). Research literature affirms that the level of interaction among students and between students and their teachers has a major impact on the quality of Web-based instruction. Perrin and Mayhew (2000) indicated that distance education courses might not be able to create the level of interaction achieved in face-to-face courses. However, Miller and Webster (1997) found that faculty teaching distance education courses could provide their online students with levels of interaction similar to their on-campus students. The literature also reveals that designing collaborative online learning environments is an obvious strategy for promoting interactivity (Northrup, 2001). Through online collaboration and communication, Web-based courses may include conversation in a chat room, discussion groups, bulletin boards, e-mails, listservs, and inquiries. These communication tools can play a major role in successful Web-based instruction and learning by encouraging and nurturing a collaborative sense of community and developing components of social and academic interaction.

Most efforts to create educational applications that support learning have focused on students (Loveless, 1996). Zhao (1998) argues that without providing support to teachers to adopt and appropriately use these applications, these efforts will not result in any widespread impact on education. The purpose of this article is to explore and compare the reflections of a beginning online teacher and that of her students in an undergraduate, technology-based, online course. As the instructor developed the technology-based course for a Web-based environment, she continually went through the process of ongoing changes and adjustments. The data used in this article was gathered using the instructor’s journals, student feedback, and an analysis of online discussions. The instructor maintained her journals reflecting upon students’ experiences as she developed and delivered the online course. The students’ feedback was gathered through student

journals, e-mails sent to the instructor, and an end-of-course evaluation survey. After examining students' feedback and comments in response to questions with the stem "I would have had more success if..." the instructor compared how she reflected on the same questions as she delivered the Web-based course. The categories that emerged from this process focused on the following areas:

- Online interactions and communications
- Students' learning and performance
- Online collaboration
- Hardware and software issues
- Administrative support

This study will be important since the experiences of first-time instructors need to be researched and disseminated, so that informed decisions about professional development and support can be devised to assist future and current instructors teaching online technology-based courses. In addition, this paper can provide insights for online educators in their efforts to effectively develop strategies that can promote learning and help them understand areas of improvement identified by students for online technology-based courses.

Course Background

The course that the instructor taught online was offered to undergraduate students as a computer literacy course at a southeastern university.

Different from most conceptual or theory-based courses, the content of this technology-based course focused mainly on computer applications proficiency, such as word processing, spreadsheet analysis, presentation graphics, database management, and related technology competencies. In addition to the online session, this technology-based course was also offered through traditional face-to-face sessions. The instructor taught two sessions of the traditional face-to-face class before teaching the online session.

Although without any face-to-face interactions between instructors and students, the instructor emphasized students' hands-on experience and practice as she did in the traditional face-to-face courses. The WebCT course management system was used for the course. Although the instructor was familiar with the software applications and had used WebCT to supplement traditional courses before, she had never used WebCT to develop a totally online technology-based applications course.

Students' Prior Online Experience

There were 29 students enrolled in the online course. For evaluation purposes, the instructor and the graduate assistant designed an evaluation survey (Appendix A) with open-ended questions so that students could comment on the online course and their online learning experience. The survey was administered at the end of the semester through WebCT's survey tool. Thirteen students replied to the survey. The overall return rate was 44.83%. Table 1 shows students' online learning experience, including this online course.

Table 1. Students' Online Course Experience

Number of Online Courses Taken	Number of Students	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
1	3	23.08%	23.08%
2	3	23.08%	46.16%
3	1	7.69%	53.85%
5	3	23.08%	76.93%
8	1	7.69%	84.62%
9	2	15.38%	100.00%

The mean number of online courses that students had taken was over 4 courses (mean = 4.08).

Discussion

Based on the instructor's journals and the feedback from students in response to the class evaluation, the following section will focus on the instructor's personal Web-teaching experience in the areas of online interactions and communications, students' learning and performance, online collaboration, hardware and software issues, and administrative support.

Online Interactions & Communications

I would have had more success if I had maintained a better balance of online interaction and communication with my students.

Brooks et al. (2001) pointed out that the most effective online teaching materials require active learning. The key word for active learning is interaction—the more interaction, the better (Northrup, 2001). Needless to say, interaction has become an essential component of any Web-based course (Wulff, Hanor & Bulik, 2000).

One of the greatest challenges for the instructor was to maintain a balance between the amount of time the students needed from the instructor online and the amount of time the instructor required for class management and other daily tasks both online and office. The instructor used every channel she could to interact or communicate with her students (e.g., e-mail, discussion, phone, online chatting). In order for students to receive timely feedback, the instructor spent daily office hours online so that she was able to communicate with students quickly. Although all of the students indicated in the class survey that they agreed or strongly agreed that they received timely feedback from the instructor (mean = 4.67), in general, the instructor spent about double the amount of time to facilitate the online course as compared to a traditional face-to-face course. Time management was one of the biggest challenges for the instructor in Web-teaching. Without eye contact, body language or voice inflection, online communication and interaction between the instructor and students became one of the most time-consuming tasks for the instructor.

As she delivered the course, the instructor found that students asked many of the same questions. She and a graduate assistant created

weekly *mini-syllabi* during the class to provide students with more specific details on the assignments or projects to make them as clear as possible. From the class survey, the students indicated that the *mini-syllabi* gave them sufficient information to complete their weekly assignments. The instructor found the *mini-syllabi* to be beneficial to students' online learning.

I would have had more success if I had met the class once before the course started.

The first activity of the class was to have the students create their own bios. Therefore, the instructor had the opportunity to learn about the students; through the online postings, the students had the chance to get to know each other too. The information posted by the students was valuable for class management because their bios were not just about what was written, but also presented the students' use of language and attitude toward the class and online learning. However, the instructor felt there was a need for the instructor and students to have a pre-class session in which the class could meet informally in a hands-on environment using the delivery technology and learn about other classmates, course expectations, rules, and responsibilities of technical support staff. Providing the opportunity to meet in a face-to-face environment would also help the instructor and students to establish a more personal relationship. Therefore, students could feel more comfortable asking for help and wouldn't feel as "isolated" while learning online. On the class survey, one student also suggested "... at least one in-class meeting to see where everyone is in the class." The instructor believes the meeting could not only help students clarify expectations that may have been new for them, but also narrow the distance between the instructor and students and the distance among the students too.

Students' Learning and Performance

I would have had more success if I had better managed deadlines for students' assignments.

Although online courses provide learning opportunities for those who may have difficulty accessing traditional classrooms, some traditional courses and content may not be a good fit for the Web-based learning environment. As the instructor delivered the computer applications course, because of the intense work associated with this course, she found some students had some difficulty completing the assignments and meeting the deadlines. Without face-to-face

communications and instant demonstrations, sometimes it was especially difficult for the instructor and students to “show” what exactly went wrong in a Web-based environment. Therefore, the instructor was forced to be more flexible in terms of deadlines in order for students to fully understand and resolve the questions they had raised. As a result, allowing flexibility of deadlines caused additional work for the instructor (e.g., follow-up with students’ assignments and course delay). Responding to the flexibility of deadlines, the students’ reactions were diverse. For example, some indicated, “I had no difficulty meeting deadlines,” and “there was ample time to complete the assignments.” Others reported, “I could only work on the assignments after I completed my full-time job” and

My computer sometimes had problems. Other times an assignment was so detailed that if you missed one little thing the whole assignment was wrong and it was hard to backtrack and find out what happened. It was even harder for our teacher to try and figure out what went wrong to help us. Occasionally, I thought there were too many assignments and too much reading given in too short of a time to complete.

Overall, the majority of the class (92.31%) indicated the flexibility of deadlines contributed to their success in the course. From this online teaching experience, the instructor learned she has to delineate expectations and ground rules of assignments more clearly next time.

I would have had more success if I had surveyed my students’ learning styles before starting.

On the survey, 38% of the students indicated they were visual learners, 31% indicated they were tactile learners, and another 31% indicated they were kinesthetic learners. Not surprisingly, people learn differently. Although most students indicated in the class survey that they felt comfortable working on the Internet, a general course design may not meet each student’s learning needs, especially without eye contact, body language, or voice inflection as with face-to-face courses. Awareness of the students’ various learning styles and needs can influence the choice of appropriate activities for the online environment. For example, some additional multimedia technology like a desktop recording program (e.g., Camtasia, CamStudio) could be inte-

grated with the PowerPoint class notes for visual learners, and other audio recording could be included with hands-on activities for auditory or kinesthetic learners.

Online Collaboration

I would have had more success if I had created more online collaboration among the students.

The instructor believes that teamwork is a critical skill for students, and group projects are required for students to develop teamwork skills. Having group projects in a face-to-face class was challenging, but it was even more challenging in an online learning environment.

Palloff & Pratte (1999) pointed out that students’ collaborations do not happen automatically. In order to incorporate collaborative activities into the online learning environment, the instructor must consider the characteristics of an effective engaged learning activity. During the class, the instructor assigned groups to complete their final group projects based on the guidelines provided. The students interacted with their group members through e-mail, discussion board, or chat room. While reviewing the group interaction responses in the survey, the instructor found the students’ reactions were once again diverse. Some indicated, “Excellent, especially in my small group project. We became very close.” However, some commented, “The students did well. I believe at one point or time everyone became frustrated,” and “Ok, but not well enough to complete a group project.”

The perception of interpersonal connections was an important factor in online learning. For better group interactions and project outcomes, the instructor felt the timing of online collaborative activities was important—not only when the group collaboration should occur during the course, but also the timeframe in which students would interact when conducting the online collaborative activity. Therefore, the instructor learned to group the students at the beginning of the course so that they can “talk” to each other and have enough time to develop interpersonal connections with others.

Hardware and Software Issues

I would have had more success if I had used various multimedia technologies in the online environment.

Different educators use technology differently. Using the Web in teaching requires some-

thing imaginative, new, and a good fit for the technology (Hopper, 2001). Therefore, the instructor thought that using multimedia (video, audio, etc.) could be a good idea to help the students, especially to complete more complex and difficult exercises. However, results from the class survey showed differences between the students' and the instructor's perceptions. For example, 69% of the students indicated that video examples of the more complex and difficult exercises were not an important factor in having more success in the course; conversely, 31% of the students supported the use of video examples in the class.

Instead of multimedia presentation of the content, most students seemed to care more about their home computers or necessary software at their end. Over 60% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they would have had more success in the online course if their home computer had been newer or if they had access to a computer lab with newer equipment. Over 69% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they would have had more success in the online course if they had understood before they registered that the Microsoft Office XP software suite was required to take this course. Although the required minimum software was indicated on the course syllabus, the students seemed very concerned about their equipment in order to perform well in the class.

Administrative Support

I would have had more success if I had asked for more administrative support and help.

McAlister et al. (2001) indicated that without administrative support "a Web-based curriculum may not get the opportunity to mature into a successful venture" (Administrative Support, p. 11). Because most of the university's online courses are offered through the Division of Continuing Education, the students had to go through Continuing Education to register for the course and receive the course information, etc.

On the class survey, almost two thirds of the students indicated that the Division of Continuing Education personnel did not provide accurate information about the course. Some of the students indicated they would have had more success in the course if they had understood prior to registration what text was required. Moreover, 53% of the students indicated that they would like to receive the text, lectures, and

homework exercise files on a CD prior to the class beginning. One student suggested, "... some type of presentation be made for new online students explaining how an online course works..." The instructor learned to communicate with the Continuing Education administrative unit in order to provide better service to students for future online courses. Providing up-to-date course information (e.g., course syllabus, required software, text, lecture topics, homework, and assignments) and a checklist for students before registration would help prepare students for the class.

Conclusions

The growing pressure to use Web technology in teaching seems to force most institutions of higher education to provide converted online sections of their traditional courses to meet increasing demands. However, offering online courses can result in new challenges and issues for the administration, faculty, staff, and students. Despite the advantages and promises of distance education, a number of studies (McAlister, Rivera, & Hallam, 2001; Valentine, 2002) also revealed problems or challenges associated with distance education.

The purpose of this article was to explore some of the challenges and problems that a first-time online instructor faced while implementing an online class. In order to maintain and nurture a quality online learning environment, the instructor employed different methods and strategies to deliver instruction at a distance and continually went through a process of ongoing changes and adjustments. This article attempted to reflect the instructor's personal Web-teaching experience in the areas of online interactions and communications, students' learning and performance, online collaboration, hardware and software issues, and administrative support. Along with students' perceptions and comments indicated in the class survey, this article attempted to share information with other online educators in their efforts to be effective in developing strategies that can promote learning and help online instructors understand areas of improvement identified by students when taking online technology-based courses.

Web technology can affect how instructors teach and students learn. Teaching this Web-based course provided the instructor with a unique opportunity to teach students in a different way, and in the process experience personal

growth as well. The Web is no longer merely a piece of technology; it has become one of the many educational aids teachers and students can use to make learning more effective. Despite the challenges of online courses, Web technology has become an integral part of teaching and learning within society. Although many issues challenge instructors in the Web-based teaching environment, educators who are willing to update their teaching skills can utilize a variety of options offered by Web technology to effectively promote quality teaching and learning.

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Question 1

The Division of Continuing Education provided timely registration.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 2

I would have had more success in this online course if my home computer had been newer or if I had access to a computer laboratory with newer equipment near my home.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 3

I would have had more success in this online course if the following information had been posted about the course prior to my registration:

Answer

Question 4

The course syllabus gave me sufficient information to understand what would be expected of my performance in this online course.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 5

The weekly mini-syllabi gave me sufficient information to complete the weekly assignments.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 6

I would have been able to learn the section exercises more easily if I had been in a traditional classroom setting rather than in an online course

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 7

The flexibility of deadlines contributed to my success in this course.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 8

I would have had more success in this course if there had been video examples of the more complex and difficult exercises.

1. Strongly Disagree 2. Disagree 3. Undecided 4. Agree 5. Strongly Agree

Question 9

The flexibility of deadlines was confusing and interfered with my success in this course.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 10

I had difficulty meeting the assignment deadlines because:

Answer:

Question 11

The Division of Continuing Education personnel provided accurate information about this course.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 12

I received timely feedback from the instructor in this online course.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 13

I wanted more support from the instructor, such as:

Answer

Question 14

The quiz exercises were a better test of my skills than answering multiple choice questions.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 15

How many online courses have you participated in? Including this one:

Answer

Question 16

In comparison to other online courses I have taken, this course ranks:

1. Better than other online courses I've taken, 2. I can't compare, this is the only online course I have taken, 3. No difference, equal to the other online courses, 4. Poorer than other online courses I've taken

Question 17

I would recommend my friends take this online course.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 18

I would take another online course with these instructors.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 19

I would describe myself as:

1. Self-motivated, having no problem working alone, 2. Needing more guidance to perform to my potential, 3. Learning to be more motivated but not as disciplined as I would like to be, 4. Uneasy about "performing" without immediate classroom feedback.

Question 20

I am comfortable working on the internet in an online course.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 21

My attitude about online courses would best be described as:

Answer

Question 22

I would have had a better understanding of the expectations of this online course if I had been able to see the Syllabus PRIOR to registration.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 23

My learning style is:

1. Visual – I try to “see” the information, 2. Auditory – I sound out information, 3. Tactile – I often use the terms feel, touch and hold, 4. Kinesthetic – I prefer to jump right in and try things without instructions

Question 24

The best thing about this online course was:

Answer

Question 25

The worst thing about this online course was:

Answer

Question 26

What information about this course would you have preferred be posted on the website which would have helped you make a better decision about taking this course online or taking it in a traditional classroom?

Answer

Question 27

What information or actions would have made your experience in this online course better?

Answer

Question 28

My expectations about this online course before taking this course were different from what actually occurred in the following ways:

Answer

Question 29

How would you describe the interaction between the students in this online course?

Answer

Question 30

How would you describe the interaction between the students and the instructor in this online course?

Answer

Question 31

What influenced you to take this course online rather than in a traditional classroom?

Answer

Question 32

I would have had more success in this course if I had understood that Microsoft Office XP Professional version software was REQUIRED to take this course before I registered.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 33

I would have had more success in this course if I had understood what text was required PRIOR to registration.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 34

I would have more success in this course if I had understood how much lead time was required to purchase and receive the text and software BEFORE class began.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 35

I would have had more success in this course if the course began the first day or, at latest, by the 3rd day of classes.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 36

I would have had more success in this online course if I had understood how much time was required to perform "A" level work in an online course.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 37

I would have had more success in this course if I had received the text prior to the first day of class and the PowerPoint lectures and homework exercise files had been sent to me on CD prior to the class beginning.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree

Question 38

I was able to meet most of the assignment deadlines.

1. Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Undecided, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree