Key Elements of an Online Program

Many innovative instructors at institutions world-wide are discovering the potential of the online environment to deliver instruction of the highest quality to people who would otherwise have limited access to higher education. This is an exciting and challenging time in education. Online education is bringing collaborative learning to the forefront and is affecting the way traditional courses are taught as well. Simply defined, online education refers to courses offered via the Internet. The minimum requirement for students to participate in an online course is access to a computer, the Internet, and motivation to succeed in a non-traditional classroom. Online courses provide an excellent method of course delivery unbound by time or location allowing for accessibility to instruction at anytime from anywhere. Adult learners in particular, find the online environment a convenient way to fit education into their busy lives. The ability to access a course from a home computer via the Internet, 24 hours a day, seven days a week is a tremendous incentive for this group to reach their academic and career goals.

Let's take a closer look at each of the key elements of a successful online program:

(1) The Curriculum

It is important for online courses to remain part of the academic curriculum of an institution, with faculty determining the appropriateness and the validity of the subject matter and the delivery methods. It is imperative the integrity of online courses be ensured in order to maintain their transferability and certificate standing. Development of new online courses should have to meet the same standards and go through a similar approval process as their onground counterparts.

The curriculum of an online program must be designed especially for the short-term, collaborative nature of online learning. Onground curriculum can be used if it is substantially converted to fit the online environment. Course content should be organized in modules with clear deadlines for the assigned work in each part. Instructors should give simple and clear assignments, and not assign over-complicated tasks. Lectures should be reduced and compensated with open-ended remarks that elicit comments and a display of varying viewpoints. Online curriculum should focus on application of knowledge to the real world and foster critical thinking skills with opportunities for an interchange of ideas among students and with the facilitator.

Online curriculum has two important factors, process and outcomes. The process must integrate life, work, and educational experiences, generate continuous dialog, draw a connection between the learned concepts and work experience, include ample time for the completion of the assigned work, utilize a minimal amount of memorization, maintain a balance between the technology, facilitator, and the students, and incorporate group and team activities. The learning outcomes must be achievable and offer the opportunity for students to use them in practical, everyday situations.

Online curriculum should have clear achievable objectives using appropriate technologies, and the choice of technologies (facilitative tools) should be driven by the curriculum. The learning objectives need to be relevant to the learning needs of the students. The curriculum should be designed to promote maximum dialog among the participants. The synergy generated through online dialog is the most important learning tool in the online environment and has an impact on defining the learning outcomes. In order for this to happen, the climate in the Virtual Classroom must be open, honest, sincere, and conducive to learning. Ultimately, the facilitator is responsible for creating this welcome environment in the Virtual Classroom.

(2) The Facilitator

A trained facilitator is an important component of an online program. Often, the facilitator is also the designer and monitor of the online course, and thus has a powerful influence on the success or failure of the program. The facilitator's training, personality, and attitude all impact the online environment. A successful facilitator must know how to integrate life experience, communication, professionalism, and content into the learning environment. The personality of the facilitator is an important component as well, and sets the tone of the Virtual Classroom™. If the facilitator is encouraging and positive, students will quickly develop a level of comfort in the online environment.

Facilitators have two responsibilities to their Virtual Students: appropriate curriculum design and facilitation. Online instruction is not "onground gone digital, audio or video." Interaction among students, between facilitator and students, and between the students and the learning materials, (including the larger community on the WWW) as managed by the instructor makes or breaks the class. When a facilitator makes the transition from onground to online, he/she does not retain the role of "distributor of information" in a teacher-centered classroom. Rather an instructor's energy should be channeled to become the medium whereby the discovery of learning is facilitated in a student-centered environment. No longer a "sage on the stage, " the online instructor becomes a "guide on the side," helping others to discover and synthesize the learning material. To this end, the facilitator must believe in the effectiveness of the on the online paradigm and the value of critical thinking. Hence, traditional teaching methods simply do not succeed given the changes in the learning environment. This brings new pressures on instructors, both to deal with a different way of teaching, interacting and managing a 24-hour-a-day classroom populated by adults who demand relevance and may require extra support due to their already busy lives.

Some of the responsibilities of an online facilitator include:

Course planning and organization.

Ability to create an atmosphere of collaborative teamwork. Students will depend on one another for a large portion of their learning. The facilitator needs to know how to work as part of this team as well as help the students work with each other.

Construct questions that will have a variety of intellectual levels, varied in their instructional purpose and be open-ended.

Set the agenda and provide leadership and direction without controlling the class. Find a balance between leading the group and creating an environment where students themselves meet the learning objectives. The leadership model becomes one of dynamic facilitation, which is a shift away from an authoritarian style toward a more democratic style.

Develop methods for learner feedback and reinforcement.

Sequence the presentation of content and pace the material so as to avoid content overload.

Personalize instruction to be relevant to the needs of individual participants.

(3) The Students

Online programs especially benefit students who (a) are home-bound, (b) live long distances from the on-site campus, and/or (c) have busy lives often juggling family, professional, and other responsibilities. Online courses can also benefit traditional students, especially those who want or need to engage in accelerated learning or who may need to take an online class because alternative on-campus courses conflict with their work/family schedule.

An online student must assume an active role in the Virtual Classroom™ and understand the important characteristics necessary to succeed. In a collaborative learning environment highly dependent on written dialog and high synergy, students are able to shape the learning objectives by contributing information related to the course content that is directly applicable to their own academic and/or professional goals.

Attitude, skills and commitment determine whether the student will be a good candidate for the online experience. The student must be mature, open-minded, self-motivated, accepting of critical thinking, willing to work collaboratively, and trusting of the online experience. Good written communication skills and a minimum level of technological experience is necessary. Finally, the student must commit the time necessary (four to six hours per week) to stay current, and he/she must have access to the necessary equipment.

Students who usually sit in the back of the classroom and avoid speaking in class blossom in the online environment. Participants are more willing to risk written participation than spoken, perhaps partly because they can rethink and edit email before sending it. In the online environment, the visual barriers that hinder some individuals in expressing themselves are largely eliminated.

(4) The Technology

Technology is the final component of a successful online program. Selection of appropriate technologies becomes especially challenging due to the fast changing pace and growth of new Internet-based tools that can be used in online courses. Packages of tools offer chat rooms, e-mail, electronic forums that organized discussion responses in varied ways (by subject, time of day and person responding), and quick access to the Internet for research all in one program. The technology should be selected based on the needs and objectives of the online programs, and it must be user friendly, reliable, accessible and affordable. Enthusiastic instructors may be tempted to utilize the most high tech technology due to its impressive features; however, large graphics, video, and audio have high download times and complicated programs often hinder the learning process rather than facilitate it. The technology selected should be the one that best delivers the course content.

Successful use of technology is determined by its ease of use, the degree to which it remains a tool rather than the focus of learning and mostly that the technology remains transparent. Technology is a means to deliver the education, and for successful learning to occur, the technology must be as seamless as possible. Ways to ensure this is that the facilitators must first be comfortable using a particular technology before implementing it in their courses and that students are required to participate in an orientation program before the course begins in order to familiarize themselves with the tools that will be used in their course.

Another technological issue that must be addressed is that the technology used to deliver instruction must accommodate the lowest common denominator in the class. Minimum requirements are necessary to participate in online courses (i.e. access to a computer and modem), however, not everyone has the latest computer model or free Internet access. Equity of access to technology should be taken into consideration when designing distance learning courses.

Finally, technical support is vital to the success of an online course. The facilitator can be well trained, the curriculum in place, and the student willing, but when the system malfunctions, both the student and instructor need to know where to turn for help. Technical issues should not interfere with the learning process.