
Teaching Multiple Online Sections/Courses: Tactics and Techniques

Rodger Bates

rodgerbates@clayton.edu

Clayton State University

Bryan LaBrecque

bryanlabrecque@clayton.edu

Clayton State University

Emily Fortner

Jackson State Community College

efortner@jscc.edu

Abstract

The challenge of teaching online increases as the number of sections or courses increase in a semester. The tactics and techniques which enrich online instruction in the tradition of quality matters can be modified and adapted to the demands of multiple instructional needs during a semester. This paper addresses time management and instructional design strategies as well as prior planning requirements. It also reviews the integration and management of multiple online courses and discusses recommendations.

Introduction

Since the emergence of online instruction, researchers and practitioners have developed numerous tools and techniques to provide quality learning experiences. The topics of how to develop, teach, assess and administer online instruction are frequently featured in journals and at conferences. Boettcher (2011) and Freeman (2015) discuss the best practices for developing online courses and the time requirements associated with instruction. However, analysis of the *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration* indicates that since the inception of the journal in the spring of 1998, no article addresses the issues associated with developing and teaching multiple online courses during a single semester. Obviously, the tactics of developing, teaching, assessing and administering online courses are prerequisites for those who teach multiple courses. However, the transition from doing a single course in a semester to multiple courses poses more complex issues for those who teach and administer mostly or completely online.

With the growth of online learning in the past twenty years and the need for quality assurance, faculty are developing and teaching courses in various online formats. As professors and instructional designers, faculty can take advantage of a number of strategies to maintain academic integrity, enhance instructional efficiency and improve the delivery of multiple online courses. In addition, online administrators now address issues of the management and training of faculty teaching multiple online courses.

Teaching multiple online courses can mean a number of things. It may mean teaching two or more sections of the same course. It also may mean teaching some courses in a 100% online format, others in a hybrid or blended format and some possibly in an on-demand format (Southard, Meddaugh, and France-Harris, 2015). In addition, teaching lower-division, upper-division or

graduate classes in any of the three formats may involve different pedagogical strategies. The faculty member teaching predominantly online may be using a variety of different formats in a given semester. This mix influences strategies and techniques that a faculty member may use (McPhaul, 2013). The impact on instructors teaching multiple online courses varies depending on several key issues but focuses on four areas of emphasis: preparation, delivery, assessment and administration. Each of these areas is impacted by a number of components like the number of online courses taught simultaneously, the diversity of each course, the method in which courses are delivered, institutional type and the level of each course. These four areas of emphasis and their associated components are discussed below, with particular attention paid to the tactics and techniques to maintain course integrity, while improving planning efficiency and content delivery.

Preparation

Preparation time and effort needed to teach multiple online courses involve several important issues: the type of learning management system used, syllabi, textbook selection and time constraints. In addition, faculty training on new technologies by professional development workshops or seminars must be incorporated in course preparation time (Southard and Bates, 2011).

LMS (Learning Management Systems)

Because of the increased complexity associated with teaching multiple online courses, a quality learning management system (LMS) is a significant asset. Obviously, whether an institution is using Blackboard, Desire2Learn (D2L) or similar systems, learning management systems provide critical infrastructure. In teaching multiple sections of the same course, instructors can integrate multiple sections into a single course format, with the exception of final grades, so that course communication, feedback, quizzes and examinations can be handled in a simplified manner.

A common course template or shell provides consistency in the design and presentation of multiple courses or sections. In most circumstances, a learning management system acts as a primary shell for the course. There are many available, either commercially or via open source services. Examples of several popular systems include Blackboard™ with over 50% market share, Moodle™ with 19% market share, and Desire2Learn™ with 11% market share (Hill, 2014). The guidelines provided by a number of best practices, such as Boettcher's (2011) "11 Strategies for Online Instruction" or the Quality Matters™ (2009) rubrics developed by the University of Maryland, are useful tools for populating the templates.

Whether the instructor is teaching multiple online courses with different methods or the same method in a given semester, the use of templates simplifies the process and provides a consistent layout for the students. In other words, the same template/layout can and should be used across all three online delivery methods. This is true regardless of the level of each course and provides a consistent view and lowers the amount of planning effort expended. With a consistent learning management system format, the development of course infrastructure is minimized, leaving the instructor with course content as the major focus of course development (Riddell, 2013). This is true in either single or multiple course environments.

In some institutions, and community colleges in particular, specific course content and structure are developed and monitored by a single coordinator or instructor. Since multiple sections are taught each semester by various instructors, course preparation is facilitated and consistency and integrity are maintained through the use of these signature courses. Though efficient, however, this approach has not been widely adopted by most senior and graduate level institutions because of the ongoing evolution of more advanced materials and the professional preferences and autonomy of many professors.

Syllabi

Depending upon how robust a teacher is in syllabus development for face-to-face courses, the syllabus for a single online class can vary along a wide spectrum of effort and detail. Since the faculty-student interaction differs from a face-to-face class, best practices dictate that the online syllabus be clear and concise but include very detailed instructions and schedules. This generally results in more time and effort when developing a single online syllabus.

With the advent of learning management systems, most universities and colleges require that all courses, seated and online, have course syllabi and basic course information available online (Bates, 2013). As a fundamental component of institutional resiliency and disaster preparedness, the availability of basic course information across an institution facilitates the development of online syllabi for multiple courses.

The impact of teaching multiple online courses in a semester, however, becomes arithmetically larger and results in longer planning time depending on the number of online classes taught. The complexity of delivery diversity and the level of each course add time and effort in developing course syllabi.

Textbooks

When teaching multiple sections of the same course, the same information source should be used. Course development is greatly simplified if the text comes with available online support materials such as power points, chapter summaries, an instructor manual and a test bank. These tools provide consistency as well as significant time savings in preparation.

A number of textbook companies, like Pearson (MyLab) and McGraw Hill (Connect), have developed enhanced online learning components for their textbooks. These proprietary course specific learning management systems provide extensive support materials for both online and seated classroom experiences and facilitate the preparation and delivery of multiple online classes. The growth and development of these constructionist learning environments have enhanced online learning, especially for multiple courses. Ranging from minimalist to richer learning environments (Wilson, 1996), today's textbook companies have developed systems which provide experience with the knowledge construction process, appreciation for multiple learning perspectives, and have embedded learning in realistic and relevant contexts (Horebein, 1996). In addition, these enhanced textbook systems encourage student ownership in the learning process. based in social experience and promote multiple modes of representation and self-awareness in the knowledge construction process (Horebein, 1996).

Time issues

Freeman's (2015) "Instructor Time Requirements to Develop and Teach Online Courses" indicates that most instructors prepare online courses almost a full semester (16 weeks) prior to the offering of a course. This pre-semester preparation is essential in developing on-demand courses, and most fully online courses also require substantial prior preparation. Hybrid courses may allow for in-semester preparation. However, teaching multiple online courses requires that teachers be fully prepared prior to the start of a semester to allow sufficient time to keep up with the daily demands for adequate student engagement, feedback and assessment. Therefore, preparing multiple courses will usually require a number of semesters of prior preparation.

Teaching multiple courses becomes slightly more efficient the second or third time the courses are offered. However, the advantages of prior preparation are limited only to the development of course content and support materials. The actual instruction remains relatively time consuming since the amount of student interaction, grading and responses are unique to each course during the semester (Freeman, 2015).

Delivery

With the demands of multiple courses during a semester, the faculty member must develop a structured plan for time and course management (Outlaw and Rice, 2015). A weekly schedule of planned class-list emails, in addition to daily monitoring and responding to individual student questions and concerns, should be established. In a lower-division introductory course in which weekly quizzes are used, they should all be scheduled for the same time period in the week. This will allow the instructor to send generic reminders for all classes on the same schedule to be ready for the quizzes, to provide reminders for assigned readings, videos, discussion posts and other weekly activities. These reminders supplement the calendar schedules in the learning management system and the syllabus.

On a specific day the instructor can respond, comment or assess discussion posts in all courses. Also, time should be regularly allocated to work on course materials for the next semester. If weekly quizzes are objective in nature, as is routinely found in lower-division courses, the automatic grading of these regular items will free the instructor to devote more time to grade essay questions in upper-division courses and for other graded activities, like term papers. A regular schedule of activities simplifies managing the demands of multiple courses.

Student Management/Engagement

Managing students is an issue regardless of the form in which the class is taught. Online courses present a higher challenge due primarily to their asynchronous delivery. Unlike seated classes, where students have specific hours to query their instructors, online students assume that since they are participating in an asynchronous course, the instructor is as well. One strategy to address this issue is to post online office hours. This provides some structure for access and may provide opportunities to interact in a synchronous manner via email or other options, such as Skype.

Typically, students in online classes miss a higher percentage of course material like assignments and assessments because of the lack of consistent communication and various computer and technology issues, often outside the control of the instructor. This prompts students to request make-ups and late submission opportunities which, if allowed, can overwhelm the instructor. Each change to the course layout (LMS) requires the instructor to review the current standing, assess the reasonability of the request, determine logistics associated with the software and then make adjustments to the shell to account for late or re-submitted work. If not handled carefully, teaching multiple online classes can result in unmanageable activity levels. Hybrid deliveries can reduce a portion of this since there is some level of student-instructor interaction on a scheduled basis (McPhaul,2013). Students can often wait until the lecture period to ask a question.

To reduce the impact of managing students on a daily basis, several techniques can be applied. The first technique is to set expectations early in the semester. Using the communication forum in the LMS or the syllabus, an instructor can establish available hours similar to face-to-face courses. Doing so will reduce some of this activity, but desperate students are not inclined to wait. Since many, if not most, online instructors recognize the negative impact on student outcomes by ignoring posts or email queries, some requests will continue to appear off-schedule.

A second technique to reduce the impact of student issues is via the LMS itself (Riddell,2013). Often, the LMS will provide start dates, stop dates and end dates for activities. By utilizing the end date, students can be allowed to submit an assignment beyond the due date and incur a preset penalty without requiring any additional activity by the instructor. This option is available at any time but is most effective at the start of term with an appropriate message dictating expectations.

A third technique for reducing student questions is the LMS Discussion or Chat function. Instructors can establish discussion forums for students to assist each other with computer or technology issues. The instructor can present Frequently Asked Questions developed in earlier semesters or during the current semester. By periodically updating the FAQs at a regular time interval, students can refer to that forum prior to asking the instructor for assistance. This technique is used widely in the

commercial world to reduce workload on customer service (Richardson, N.D.).

Finally, the development of a thorough generic course introduction for all online sections can address many of the frequently asked questions. This introduction, often in the form of a video, provides personal reinforcement of the materials and can be used in each of the multiple online courses. In addition, syllabus quizzes that address many of the frequently asked questions can reinforce the structure of courses and the protocols for instructor interactions.

Course Content

The most significant issue in teaching multiple online courses involves the course content itself. Online teaching guidelines and best practices have been studied and assessed and will continue to be adjusted as more faculty and universities adopt online presentations. (Horebein,1996). While these guidelines represent powerful strategies for creating distance learning equivalent to traditional classrooms, the impact of simultaneous courses with separate and distinct deliveries represents another evolutionary step. The instructor who teaches three sections of the same course, one in a 100% asynchronous format, one in a hybrid format and one in an on-demand format, must have consistent outcomes in each class. Aside from convenience, students in any of these three courses should not be advantaged or disadvantaged over those in the other classes.

Hybrid classes represent a clear advantage for instructors because of the balanced nature of delivery (McPhaul, 2013). While asynchronous courses can be challenging in this regard, pre-recorded audio or video lectures can offset the disadvantage. There is clearly a heavier workload to produce lectures, but once done they can be readily revised and updated with new material. One technique for providing pre-recorded lectures is to use the record function available in presentation software such as Camtasia. The instructor can record the hybrid lecture during a class period, including any questions asked by students, and upload it immediately to the other formats. This allows asynchronous students the benefit of real-time lectures and Q & A on specific topics, without the extra work associated with studio recordings.

Another technique to ensure equitable learning between delivery formats is to use collaborative learning software such as Blackboard Collaborate or WebEx (Riddell, 2013). These systems provide virtual classrooms where students and instructors can interact during a scheduled online meeting with the added advantage of recording capability for those unable to attend. In addition, Lightboards are a recent addition to the tools for online learning and facilitate the preparation of multiple online course presentations.

Assessment

The assessment challenges in online classes increase when multiple sections and courses are offered. McPhaul (2013) discussed many of the issues and strategies associated with successful online testing. Generally, it is assumed that all tests will be open book in 100% online and on-demand courses. This influences the level of specificity required for some of the objective measures. In multiple sections of the same course, different examinations and the randomization of objective questions and essays are useful strategies. In hybrid courses, obviously, monitored in-class examinations are an option. Technical course monitoring software is now available through some special online service agencies or through an institution's academic support services. This may include the verification of student identity through secure pass codes, web cams and key stroke analysis (Eisenberg, 2013).

Watson and Sottile (2010) note that students are more likely to cheat in seated rather than in online classes. They suggest that social interaction and relationships developed in seated classes play a part in this process. They state, however, that in online classes, students may cheat through the use of either related online sources or outside assistance. For this reason, proctored exams, web cam or the careful construction of testing instruments are important options in online courses. These threats to academic integrity are multiplied when an instructor is teaching a number of online sections in a

given semester. Therefore, effective and efficient assessment requires significant prior planning in the development of the testing instruments as well as the process of assessment.

Administration

The administration of online programs has been discussed by many in the field of distance learning. Megluka, Shi and Bonk (2005) noted ten critical online design and administrative issues that were common concerns. However, they did not address dealing with faculty teaching multiple online courses. This topic, however, was indirectly noted by Tipple (2010) in addressing effective leadership of online adjunct faculty. Building on Gappa and Leslie's earlier study (1993) of migrant or gypsy scholars, Tipple found that the digital domain is increasingly being populated by online adjuncts. This trend creates significant concerns for online administrators.

Previously, finding faculty willing to teach in an online environment was difficult. Southard and Bates (2010) discussed the process of motivating and training traditional faculty to effectively transition into online instructors. Training by online experts and monetary incentives for training, course development and initial course instruction were documented in one university setting. These practices have been employed by numerous institutions to attract and prepare faculty for online teaching.

With expanded online course offerings, the number of full-time faculty who have transitioned to online instruction has not kept pace with the growing demand for instructors. In some instances, as noted in this paper, some faculty increasingly teach multiple online sections or courses. A brief review of job listings in higher education indicates that more colleges and universities expect or require online teaching experience or willingness to be trained in this area. In some instances, adjuncts are hired to teach multiple online courses or, as in some institutions, they are hired to teach traditional service courses while more experienced full-time faculty with online experience teach multiple online upper-level courses. In either case, these options have created significant issues for online administrators.

Most institutions prefer that experienced full-time faculty teach at least some of the introductory courses in order to increase the number of student majors. However, recruiting qualified adjunct instructors to teach upper-division courses is difficult, and finding qualified adjuncts with experience as trained online instructors is also problematic. This administrative conundrum may be further complicated by external competition for qualified online instructors from other institutions. For example, the University System of Georgia operates a system-wide program (eCore) of online learning for core curriculum courses within the system. ECore faculty are recruited from both within and outside the system. Potential faculty must participate in an annual eCore training workshop sponsored by the University of West Georgia and meet basic accreditation standards. If they are from within the system, they must also receive institutional approval. ECore courses are attractive financial supplements for full-time faculty who may not be permitted to teach institutional overloads. In addition, the eCore salary stipend is generally more than many of the system institutions pay adjuncts or full-time faculty teaching overloads. This financial competition is another issue that online administrators or department chairs must address in staffing their online course offerings.

Some institutions now require, as part of initial or continuing contracts, that faculty be willing to teach online as part of their regular course offerings. Most institutions do not specify how many courses, but some cap the number of online courses a faculty member can teach in a semester or year. These specifications help establish faculty expectations and provide guidelines for both traditional and online program administration.

Conclusions

Teaching online courses often results in increased workload. This workload expansion involves preparation, delivery, assessment and administration. Also, workload can be impacted when

teaching more than one online course or multiple sections during a semester. The format and level of instruction add to the complexity. Several techniques, while not a panacea, can significantly reduce the added workload and create a strong learning environment while maintaining course integrity. With the growth of online learning and with more faculty teaching multiple sections/courses, online administrators must be prepared to establish policies, monitor course quality and increasingly balance the demand for online courses with faculty training and support.

The teaching and administration of multiple online learning activities are relatively new environments. Although we have introduced some of the issues, tactics and techniques associated with this emerging learning environment, additional research and strategies are needed.

References

Bates, R. (2013) "Institutional Continuity and Distance Learning: A Symbiotic Relationship." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Vol. 16:4.

Eisenberg, A. (2013) "New Technologies Aim to Foil Online Course Cheating." *New York Times*. Retrieved from:
http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/technology/new-technologies-aim-to-foil-online-course-cheating.html?_r=0

Gappa, J. and P. Leslie *The Invisible Faculty*. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco, CA.

Hill, P. (2014) State of US Higher Education LMS Market: 2014 Edition. Retrieved from:
<http://mfeldstein.com/state-us-higher-education-lms-market-2014-edition/> Oct. 22.

Heberling, M. (2002) "Maintaining Academic Integrity in Online Education." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Vol. 5:1.

Horebein, P. (1996) "7 Goals for the Design of Constructionist Learning Environments: Case Studies in Instructional Design." Educational Technology Publication. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Lyons, R and H. Burnstad (2007) "Best Practices for Supporting Adjunct Faculty." Chair Academy Conference.
http://chairacademy.com/conference/2007/papers/best_practices_for_supporting_adjunct_faculty.pdf

McPhaul, K. (2013) "Best Practices for Testing in Online and Hybrid Courses." Durham Technical Community College Concerns with Online Testing. Retrieved from:
https://courses.durhamtech.edu/wiki/images/0/0a/Best_Practices_Online_Testing.pdf

Megluka, R., M. Shi and C. Bonk (2005) "Critical Design and Administrative issues in Online Education." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Vol. 8: 4.

Outlaw, V. and M. Rice (2015) "Best Practices: Implementing an Online Course Development and Delivery Model." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Vol. 18:3.

Quality Matters™ (2009) *Quality Matters Rubric Standards 2008-2010 Edition with Assigned Point Values*. Maryland Online/Quality Matters, Annapolis, MD.

Richardson, J. (N.D.) "Tips on Customer Self-Service: The Essential FAQs." *School Subscription*. Retrieved from: <http://subscriptionschool.com/guide/tips-customer-self-service->

[essential-faqs/](#)

Riddell, R. (2013) “12 Learning Management System Providers and What They Bring to Classrooms.” <http://www.educationdive.com/news/12-learning-management-system-providers-and-what-they-bring-to-classrooms/97613/>

Southard, S, and R. Bates (2011) “The Evolution of Traditional Faculty through Distance Education Training.” Distance Learning Administration Conference Proceedings. Savannah, Georgia.

Southard, S. J. Meddaugh and A. France-Harris (2015) “Can SPOC (Self-Paced Online Course) Live Long and Prosper.” *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Vol 18:2.

Tipple, R. (2010) “Effective Leadership of Online Adjunct Faculty.” *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Vol. 3: 1.

Watson, G. and J. Sottile (2010) “Cheating in the Digital Age: Do students Cheat More in Online Courses?” *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. Vol. 13:1.

Wilson, B. (1996) *Constructionist Learning Environments: Case Studies in Instructional Design*. Educational Technology Publication. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Volume XIX, Number 3, Fall 2016
University of West Georgia, Distance Education Center
[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)