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# Enhancing Student/Faculty Communications in Online Courses

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## **Abstract**

Redesigning a course for online delivery, to accommodate students' varying preferences and to enable a 24/7 learning community to flourish, can be very challenging, time-consuming, and labor-intensive activities for faculty to undertake. This article describes how a large graduate class was redesigned from interactive television to online delivery and managed successfully by incorporating simple software solutions readily available on any professor's desktop.

## **Review of the Literature**

Since communication, interaction, and learning can take place anytime, an online course offers possibilities that a traditional, face-to-face course and more traditional distance learning technologies (e.g., interactive television) cannot match (Kearns, Shoaf & Sumney, 2004). If effectively managed, online education can be superior to the traditional delivery methods (Kelly, 2004, Singh & Pan, 2004). For students, the practical advantage of an online class is the ability to master course content at a time and place of their choosing (Valentine, 2002). In a recent study, the most important factors in determining student satisfaction in online courses were instructor variables, technology, and interactivity (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004). The timeliness of the feedback and the amount of interaction with the instructor are important criteria for students deciding whether to stick with a distance learning program (Dahl, 2004). For faculty, personal interaction with students is one of teaching's most gratifying aspects (Bower, 2001). To deliver a quality course online, today's instructor needs effective interpersonal communication and facilitation skills in addition to subject-area expertise (Australian National Training Authority, 2003, White & Weight, 2000). The role of the instructor in an online class differs from that in the traditional classroom (Hutchins, 2003). Online instructors spend more time designing and planning, facilitating, and mentoring than they do leading and lecturing (Gillespie, 1998, Young, 2002).

## **Background**

The transition from traditional distance learning to web-based delivery forced an unexpected revolution in our course management methods and procedures. The University of South Carolina School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) began offering courses leading to the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree away from its home campus in 1976. In those early days, "distance education" meant faculty driving to remote sites to teach in a traditional classroom. In 1982 SLIS began televising courses so students did not need to travel to the campus in Columbia to complete the entire degree. Televised delivery saved faculty the time, effort, and expense of driving to distant locations and saved the students from driving significant distances to participate in class since viewing sites are located throughout the state. Televised classes, which continue to this day, take place one evening per week (at either 4 p.m. or 6 p.m.) and last for one hour and fifty minutes. Students come together physically for an "on-site"

typically two times per semester. Since 1992 the full MLIS program has been offered via television to students in South Carolina . At the same time that the full televised program became available across South Carolina , out-of-state programs began in Georgia and West Virginia . Any out-of-state course offerings always include in-state South Carolina students. In contrast to many other MLIS distance learning programs, out-of-state students in our program enter and finish as a group – a cohort. A Maine cohort began in 1994. Second cohorts have been offered to both West Virginia and Maine and a third cohort to each state begins this fall. When a cohort to Virginia began in 2002, the faculty agreed to transition from television to online delivery due to the prohibitive cost of satellite time. Online delivery would enable keeping the costs down for students.

### **Redesign for Online Delivery**

The course described in this redesign is the School's required core course in management and was the first to be offered in a fully-online (web-based) format. The course was first offered online during summer session 2001 with an enrollment of 60. Minor revisions were made for a second summer offering in 2002 that received similar enrollment. The course was scheduled for delivery to Virginia students in the fall of 2003. Expected enrollment was 150 but actual enrollment neared 200.

The intent of the course – regardless of delivery format - is to give each student a better understanding of both the theory and the practice of management. The course is taught solely by full-time program faculty based upon learning objectives agreed to by the whole faculty. Although the implementation of the objectives through specific learning activities differs from one instructor to another, these activities are designed to promote critical thinking, student-student interaction, and both individual and group problem-solving.

On-campus offerings of this course feature lecture and discussion, in-class small group discussions of management case studies, a group project to develop a grant proposal, and several student assignments and individual presentations. Televised offerings operated similarly with on-site time used for small group discussions and grant project presentations. The goals of the redesign for online, web-based delivery were to preserve the highly interactive nature of the course while providing 24/7 opportunities for students to receive the basic content and to contribute to discussions.

Moving this course online forced changes in the school's distance education operations that had been honed over many, many years. While these changes were often unanticipated, they have resulted in improvements to both course management and student learning. Fortunately there are simple yet creative software solutions that make the course operate much better for students while keeping the faculty's time and energy commitment in line with expectations from other courses. Among the changes were modifications to delivering lecture materials, facilitating student participation in online discussion sections, and re-working the assignment submission procedures and feedback mechanisms.

Freeing students from “attending class” at a particular day, time, and location means providing course materials that students can access anytime. While providing these materials over the Internet sounds like an easy option, this only works well for students with ready access to broadband connections. While the number of students with broadband access increases daily, many whom we are reaching with our degree program live in small or rural communities where broadband access is limited at best.

To overcome this limitation, course topic lectures are provided on a CD distributed at the beginning of the semester. The student can play the CD in his or her computer and doesn't need a high-speed, full-time Internet connection for viewing. The course CD was created using [Microsoft Producer](#), the only product available of its type in 2001. (Similar functionality and easier operability, requiring Internet access, is provided today by [Macromedia Breeze](#).) Microsoft Producer is a free add-on to current versions of Microsoft PowerPoint that enable the faculty member or course designer to add voiceovers and video to lecture slide presentations. Students can start/stop, forward, reverse, and repeat the presentations as often as necessary to absorb the lecture content. Accompanying lecture handouts provide students with PDF copies of the PowerPoint slides in order to follow along easily and take notes as the lecture plays. Most students report a high level of satisfaction with the multimedia format of the CD lectures. Occasional students lament for increased “production value” or bemoan having to sit in front of their computers for a lecture-length presentation.

Additional course documents are provided on the CD with updates and new additions provided through [Blackboard](#), the university's course management system. Students receive a [weekly agenda](#) that details the textbook chapter(s), the lecture to absorb, and any individual or group activities to complete. The individual activities are designed to ensure the students are progressing through the material and absorbing the content. Grading of these activities is pass/fail. Submission of [individual comprehension activities](#) is through a web page form that enters the data into a database. Simple scanning of the response columns is enough to determine if the student has responded and is on the right track or if a more careful, thorough review is warranted.

There are multiple technologies that make it easy and affordable to establish this interactivity between a web page and a computer. Active Server Pages (ASP) is a Microsoft technology built in for free to each Microsoft operating system. Macromedia's ColdFusion and the open source solution, PHP/MySQL are other options. With each of these technologies, you establish a connection between the database and the web page. (Detailed instructions on how to set up these forms is available by contacting the author.)

Having students participate in small group discussions is a critical aspect of this course that needed to be preserved in any distance learning format. In the early days when the distance delivery was limited to television, students would participate in discussion groups at the on-sites. Group project work was carried out by email, by telephone, and by getting together physically between scheduled on-site sessions.

As the online communications technologies evolved, online forums and chat sessions became a part of the mix. Blackboard's “groups” and “communications” functions facilitate these communications. When the course became web-based and students could participate 24/7, real-time communications would mean that students would need to be available at a particular time. Many faculty get around this limitation by promoting asynchronous communications (discussion forums). Students in this course are given that option but overwhelmingly prefer the real-time option.

One way to limit the inconvenience while preserving the benefits is to offer students choices as to when the real-time sessions will take place. An [online personal information](#) form is used to capture each student's basic contact information and meeting time preferences. Students indicate their top five preferred meeting time(s) throughout the week (24/7) and the times they are absolutely unavailable. Students are then placed in real-time discussion groups based on their time preferences. While this placement might sound like a lot of work, simple database software

makes it easy and straightforward. Each possible group discussion time slot is a field in the data base. [Sorting on each time slot field](#), one at a time, indicates easily those students who have it selected as one of their preferred times or as one that absolutely won't work for them. Other data elements captured on this form (e.g., name and email address) are useful throughout the course when sending [individualized feedback email messages](#).

For instance, we learned immediately that faculty teaching online would require more assistance grading and mentoring than they ever needed in a classroom-based course or in televised distance education. Until we went online, we only needed a few course assistants each semester and these could be found among our graduates who remained in the vicinity of the university. As our need for course assistants increased, the need to venture further geographically happened too.

As a consequence of the geographic dispersion of our course assistants, we needed to distribute student materials to them electronically – meaning the students needed to submit electronically. Prior to this time, students had the option to submit assignments by whatever method suited them. In the “early days” of distance education, postal mail and hand delivery were the only options. But as newer technologies (such as fax and email attachments) became available, students could take advantage of these as well. Postal mail remained the preferred method for a significant number of students even though postal mail delays often meant up to a two-week time lag before all students' assignments were received. If postal mail were used to distribute students submissions to and from the course assistants, several weeks' delay would result just moving the mail around. Instead, faculty are able to provide far more timely feedback than was ever possible before.

Overall student satisfaction with the course CD, the online discussion sections, and the timely, individual feedback has been quite high. For many students, this was their first online course so they didn't know what to expect going in but were pleasantly surprised by the results. The component receiving the most criticism has remained the submission of the individual comprehension exercises. Many students consider this “busy work” since they don't get a “real grade” for the work. Future offerings of this online course may replace these activities with a comprehension quiz or review session with the faculty or course assistants.

In summary, redesigning this management course for online delivery encompassed several web design activities and readily-available software applications to facilitate faculty/student communications. These activities included:

- Creating a web page to gather student information
- Creating a web-accessible survey to collect student participation availability information
- Using database management software to divide students into chat/work groups according to their preferred participation times
- Creating a web page to collect student responses regarding course comprehension
- Using software to coordinate/collect/manage the work of geographically-dispersed course assistants
- Using database management and word processing/ mail merge software to automate the delivery of individual student feedback

- Turning your PC into a data server (e.g., web server software, establishing the correct data connections, etc.)

With a little creativity and a modest amount of effort, communications among and between students and faculty can be greatly enhanced. The result is a more satisfying teaching and learning experience for everyone involved.

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