
Expert Reflections on Effective Online Instruction: Importance of Course Content

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Abstract

This study seeks to identify common factors that leaders in online instruction consider most critical to successful teaching and learning at a distance. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the teaching philosophy narratives of the nominees for the *University System of Georgia Regents' Teaching Excellence Award for Online Teaching* was conducted. The total number of times a concept was mentioned and the percentage of nominees who cited each concept were computed. The results indicate the relative importance of each concept to these leading practitioners in the field. Rapport, design, engagement, feedback, research, and course improvement emerged as some of the most commonly cited themes, and these correspond with the literature review of best practices for online instruction. However, these instructors also emphasized course content as a significant element, even though this concept is less prevalent in the literature. The emphasis on content by these nominees underscores the importance of this theme and suggests that content is a factor that should be carefully considered in online instruction.

Introduction

There has been a significant increase in enrollment in online courses over the past two decades. From 2002 to 2011, the number of U.S. postsecondary students enrolled in at least one online course increased more than 400%, from 1.6 to 6.7 million, while total postsecondary student enrollment increased 26.4% (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Likewise, online course offerings have expanded within the University System of Georgia (USG). From 2009 to 2014, the number of online courses offered by USG institutions increased more than 200%, from 1,571 to 4,737 classes (University System of Georgia [USG], 2014a). There is a wide range of reasons for this significant growth, including initiatives for colleges and universities to better serve students who work, have family or personal responsibilities, contend with disabilities, or are involved with extracurricular activities (Jaggars, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). The recent economic downturn has also increased the demand for online courses because students need to work more while taking classes or retraining themselves for new careers. Given the significant increases in online offerings and enrollment, the practice of online teaching becomes more and more significant from a pedagogical perspective.

The University System of Georgia recognizes the value of quality online instruction. Since the fiscal year 2014 (2013-2014) it has offered the Regents' Teaching Excellence Award for Online Teaching, accepting one nomination annually from each institution within the USG. The award recognizes the finest among the University System of Georgia's instructional faculty for their demonstrated educational excellence in online teaching. Award recipients have a record of exceptional teaching and a strong commitment to impacting student learning, ultimately fostering the academic success of students (USG, 2014b).

To be eligible for the award, faculty must be employed on a full-time basis with a minimum of 12 credit hours over three consecutive semesters, teaching courses that are delivered at least 95% online. Nominees submit an extensive portfolio that includes a nomination letter from the institution's chief academic officer; letters of support from colleagues; a curriculum vitae; letters of support from recent and/or past students; student, peer and supervisor evaluations; samples of and links to course content; and, most significant to this paper, a reflective statement on online teaching philosophy. The award committee looks for persuasive evidence that nominees (i) are strongly committed to quality online teaching and learning, as evidenced by teaching and scholarly activities designed to advance the quality of online teaching and learning; (ii) use effective and innovative online teaching practices that result in student engagement, student satisfaction, and effectiveness in achieving desired learning outcomes; and (iii) demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to fostering the academic success of online students through the development of rapport with individual learners in and beyond the virtual classroom (USG, 2014b).

This paper compares and contrasts previous studies on effective online instruction with the emphasis USG award nominees

place on critical concepts related to online teaching and learning. It reports quantitative results on common themes and best practices that emerge in the teaching philosophy statements. It then follows up specifically on the importance of content, a factor stressed by the award nominees in their narratives.

Literature Review

This paper seeks to explain successful online experiences from practitioners in various disciplines, and the literature review looked at best practices in online education across multiple fields. Regardless of discipline, a number of common practices and elements arose as keys for quality, successful online courses.

Unsurprisingly, course design emerged as important, and numerous articles describe best practices in course design (Fajardo, 2014; Lavoie & Rosman, 2007; D'Agustino, 2012; Thiede, 2012). D'Agustino (2012) highlights elements of course design which include context analysis, learning outcomes, and chunking of information, which is a modular approach to course design that connects learning to real-world concerns. Fajardo (2014) further frames these course elements through the lenses of andragogy, self-regulated learning, and engagement theory, specifying that courses must be designed around meaningful tasks that enable learning. Thiede (2012) and Bryant & Bates (2015) outline different tools that course designers can use, as well as assessment of the use of these tools through rubrics, focusing on tools that facilitate communication. Within the course design itself, assignments that promote critical thinking (D'Agustino, 2012; Smith, 2012) and are linked to real-world experiences resulting in active learning (Fajardo, 2014; D'Agustino, 2012; Potvin, 2012; Boling, et al., 2012) are considered to be the most helpful and desired for online students. Another key element of course design is the use of specific, targeted learning experiences with the goal of improving the perceived value in the eyes of students (Freeman, 2015). Regular efforts to improve courses through evaluation, reflection, and re-design are considered an important part of course design as well (Aggarwal & Lynn, 2012).

While course design is a critical element, the more human side of online teaching suggests that best practices in online education are strongly related to intentionality. Active presence of the instructor (Smith, 2012; Britto & Rush, 2013), as represented through timely feedback (D'Agustino, 2012; Britto & Rush, 2013; Swan, 2001), engagement with students (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014), prompt communication (Plante & Asselin, 2014), and supportive interactions (Pittaway & Moss, 2014) were found to be important elements in quality online experiences for students. Additionally, this intentionality translates to how well the instructor scaffolds for students in both the course design and the interactions, building on learner strengths and moving increasingly into the background of the course as learning evolves (D'Agustino, 2012; Smith, 2012; Pittaway & Moss, 2014).

Interactions are further developed as a best practice through intentional community building, whether in course design or assignments (D'Agustino, 2012; Smith, 2012; Potvin, 2012; Boling, et al., 2014; Bryant & Bates, 2015; Barber, Taylor, & Buchanan, 2014). Scaffolding emerges again as important in community building, as Pittaway & Moss (2014) further highlight that the teaching and assessment activities are integral parts of the community building process, resulting in both instructor and students "establishing and maintaining an intellectual, academic, social, personal, and professional presence in the online environment" (p. 153). These community building efforts lead to meaningful connections among instructor, students, and content (Dixson, 2010) and lead to greater student engagement (Asarta & Schmidt, 2013).

Graduate student satisfaction with learning experiences mirrored much of what is considered best practice, with critical thinking assignments; thoughtful use of instructional technology in the course design; faculty engagement to include both timely and thoughtful feedback to guide improvement; and personal responsibility, which leads to improved performance (Holzweiss, et al., 2014). Further, on the graduate level, the focus must be on learning outcomes, taking into consideration the idea of "cognitive apprenticeship" and allowing learning needs of graduate students to guide meaningful construction of knowledge. Zhu (2012) reminds us, however, that "there are significant cultural differences in student satisfaction, academic performance, and knowledge construction in an online collaborative learning environment" (p. 134), so culturally responsive pedagogy should also be a factor in the intentionality provided by instructors.

Methodology

The pool of nominees for the fiscal years 2014 and 2015 USG Regents' Teaching Excellence Award for Online Teaching represents a rich resource for learning about perspectives and best practices in online instruction. These individuals represented 14 USG institutions and were recommended by their respective administrations, distance education departments, and technology award committees as exemplary online instructors. Each nominee was required to submit a reflective statement of online teaching and learning philosophy to the USG as documentation for his/her portfolio. Of the 16 total nominees for the fiscal years 2014 and 2015, 15 were willing to share their statements for the purpose of studying critical concepts common to expert online instructors in the USG. The majority offered their support for the type of analysis of best practices in online teaching.

The quantitative approach involved combining the reflective statements into a single long document that contained a total of 912 sentences and 18,340 words. A detailed search was then conducted to discover the unique words included in this combined document. A count was performed on the number of times each word appeared, and those results were ordered both alphabetically and by frequency. Words related to online teaching practices were isolated, key themes were discovered, and associated concepts were grouped by their respective themes.

Finally, these themes and related concepts were then analyzed further using QDA Miner, a linguistic inquiry program. First, the sentences that included each concept or any term related to that concept were computed as a percentage of the total number of sentences. Table 1 shows these results. In this process, each sentence was checked for three specific factors: (i) synonyms or antonyms; (ii) relevant use of the term; and (iii) terms with duplicate implications.

Table 1	Percentage of	Percentage of
	Sentences with	Statements with
	Concept	Concept
Rapport	5.04%	93.33%
Materials/Course Content	4.17%	80.00%
Design	3.73%	60.00%
Engagement	3.62%	73.33%
Feedback to Students	3.40%	46.67%
Research	3.40%	46.67%
Course Improvement	2.85%	53.33%
Scaffolding	1.75%	46.67%
Diverse Learning	1.43%	46.67%
Non-traditional	1.21%	46.67%
Retention	0.88%	13.33%
Community	0.66%	40.00%

With regard to the use of synonymous or related terms, the word usage within the combined teaching statement document was checked for terms or phrases with similar meanings or with opposite meanings. For example, the concept of “nontraditional students,” was cross-checked with the terms “adult” and “traditional” since either of these terms could be used in the context of a discussion related to how to best benefit nontraditional students in online courses. If a word or phrase was used in reference to a larger concept, it was counted as an occurrence. Table 2 provides a full listing of the larger concepts or themes as well as the related terms.

Table 2

	% of Sent.	Total for Term	Sentence Numbers; "n" preceding a number indicates that usage was not related to larger concept in that sentence; "d" preceding a number indicates that usage was previous counted																																																
Rapport	5.04%	46																																																	
Needs	1.32%	12	188	212	215	254	287	n289	291	n292	n294	422	431	435	555	694	749																																		
Rapport	1.21%	11	6	16	23	122	123	124	130	132	464	695	701																																						
Personal	0.88%	8	n109	140	189	n239	n268	n277	380	420	423	425	n438	n467	n472	641	n838	840	n889																																
Respect	0.77%	7	9	231	495	497	499	702	32																																										
Care	0.55%	5	58	100	143	178	n732	834																																											
Connection	0.11%	1	62	d420	d423	n905																																													
Empathy	0.11%	1	327																																																
Caring	0.11%	1	n140	459																																															
Materials	4.17%	38																																																	
Content	2.19%	20	28	165	n193	n194	197	n221	270	n303	346	n367	385	n429	n536	557	583	n591	612	n623	630	683	693	n701	n755	772	777	779	780	n783	n785	800	801	n815	863	889															
Material	1.21%	11	82	83	90	93	95	133	134	n135	522	630	n665	d772	d779	803	d863	887	n893																																
Materials	0.77%	7	34	n158	186	389	390	n396	n474	513	590	781																																							
Design	3.73%	34																																																	
Design	2.96%	27	6	25	47	132	135	136	146	159	218	222	224	243	249	286	289	301	306	313	319	447	n503	n580	660	672	678	683	686	706	762																				
Designer	0.33%	3	368	689	690																																														
Designs	0.22%	2	302	318																																															
Designing	0.11%	1	d368	n527	583																																														
Structure	0.11%	1	631																																																
Engagement	3.62%	33																																																	
Engagement	0.99%	9	288	570	571	576	595	633	637	764	801																																								
Engage	0.88%	8	27	d143	323	338	353	585	591	594	814																																								
Engaged	0.55%	5	n4	143	167	n213	n214	583	600	712																																									
Participate	0.44%	4	n11	44	82	389	n782	819																																											
Participation	0.44%	4	330	351	362	497	n586	n589	n711																																										
Active learning	0.33%	3	n180	n393	d571	n652	660	666	690	d712																																									
Feedb. to Stud.	3.40%	31																																																	
Feedback	2.08%	19	n49	n94	249	254	n255	n258	260	268	269	272	273	427	434	435	445	502	503	504	536	588	705	n706	n707	n809	837	890																							
Comment	0.44%	4	n158	n450	503	622	698	855																																											
Response	0.22%	2	n588	n594	603	606	n607	n630	n639																																										
Responses	0.22%	2	n468	n473	604	n605	700																																												
Advice	0.22%	2	29	746																																															
Rubrics	0.11%	1	555																																																
Input	0.11%	1	n404	837																																															
Research	3.40%	31																																																	
Research	2.08%	19	120	121	122	131	138	146	n176	n186	n192	n200	n201	n202	n203	220	222	291	n294	n364	386	397	540	545	546	547	766	822	873	874	n901	n909																			
Conference	0.44%	4	n20	n203	n398	500	570	580	883																																										
Literature	0.22%	2	n115	124	n133	n147	d291	n345	n346	561	n580	n583	n584	n630	n640	n648	n898	n900	n905																																
Study	0.22%	2	n283	n289	n387	455	457	n472	d546	n611	n630	n650	n785																																						
Conferences	0.22%	2	n16	n18	n21	n49	240	395	d570	n782																																									
Scholarship	0.22%	2	110	393	d457	d766	d873	d883																																											
Course Imp.	2.85%	26																																																	
Feedback	0.66%	6	49	n94	n249	n254	255	258	n260	n268	n269	n272	n273	n427	n434	n435	n445	n502	n503	n504	n536	n588	n705	706	707	809	n837	n890																							
Reflection	0.55%	5	n181	223	224	n225	251	257	566	n889																																									
Change	0.44%	4	146	293	294	n320	n337	487																																											
Revisions	0.44%	4	33	256	288	887																																													
Improvement	0.22%	2	n74	239	n302	n588	708																																												
Reflect	0.11%	1	n188	n221	n346	461																																													
Revision	0.11%	1	n204	224																																															
Design never done	0.11%	1	47																																																
Survey	0.11%	1	257	n577	n580	n583																																													
Surveys	0.11%	1	48																																																
Scaffolding	1.75%	16																																																	
Encourage	0.66%	6	59	87	94	225	n329	606	n637	889																																									
Support	0.55%	5	87	n110	n157	n172	n181	n183	n189	n192	n196	n200	n240	423	426	834	858	n889																																	
Scaffolded	0.22%	2	219	220																																															
Gap	0.11%	1	815																																																
Frustration	0.11%	1	776																																																
Encouragement	0.11%	1	548																																																
Diversity	1.43%	13																																																	
Different	0.66%	6	143	254	526	664	665	708																																											
Individual	0.33%	3	n16	n18	n49	n58	n268	272	n303	n304	435	n504	d664	n675	n679	n702	749																																		
Unique	0.22%	2	n39	107	n416	431	d664																																												
Individuals	0.11%	1	d664	n667	856																																														
Diverse	0.11%	1	n134	n168	n173	777																																													
Nontraditional	1.21%	11																																																	
Traditional	0.66%	6	5	17	n39	n45	109	n122	n123	n147	n150	n152	n153	n339	n348	352	416	432	n450	n586	n644	n691	n758	n795	n892																										
Adult	0.44%	4	516	517	523	892																																													
Jobs	0.11%	1	644																																																
Retention	0.88%	8																																																	
Retention	0.33%	3	121	n138	150	159	n189	n402	n732	n733																																									
Attrition	0.22%	2	148	585																																															
Dropped	0.11%	1	128																																																
Withdraw	0.11%	1	120																																																
Withdrew	0.11%	1	147																																																
Community	0.66%	6																																																	
Community	0.66%	6	n254	362	380	382	384	425	591	n883																																									
Social	0.33%	3	n187	n190	n193	n194	n196	n197	n200	n204	221	352	n358	666																																					
Sharing	0.11%	1	n10	381																																															

Concerning the relevant of usage terms, each instance in which a term was used was examined to determine if that wording was intended to address a larger concept that was being analyzed in the study. For example, under the larger concept of “rapport,” the term “personal” as used in sentence 8 (see Table 2) was counted since its usage related to building a personal relationship between instructor and student in an online course. In contrast, usage of the term “personal” as used in sentence 889 (see Table 2) was not counted because its context related to students’ personal experience prior to the course as opposed to personal experiences within the course that would help develop rapport between instructor and student. In Table 2, relevant usage is indicated by the sentence number listed without a letter preceding it, and irrelevant usage is indicated by the sentence listed with the letter “n” preceding the number.

The final area of concern with regard to quantitative data was terms that duplicated the same general thought or larger concept within the same sentence. If a single sentence used multiple terms that had been grouped under the heading for one larger concept, it would be 'double-counted' if each occurrence were included. For example, the term "engagement" and the phrase "active learning" were both used in sentence 571 (see Table 2). As a result, "active learning" was not counted in sentence 571 because it was the second term associated the larger concept of engagement in this same sentence. In Table 2, a duplicate term or phrase within the same sentence is indicated by the letter "d" preceding the sentence number.

The second phase of quantitative analysis was to determine the percentage of reflective statements from the nominees that included, at least, some reference to each of the larger concepts. In order to do this, the ranges of sentences from the consolidated document in each of the reflective statements of the online practitioners were identified. QDA Miner was used to determine if the concept or a related term appeared at least once somewhere within that individual's sentence range. As with the quantitative analysis discussed previously, any terms that were not used in a relevant manner were not counted, and no terms were double counted for any one larger concept. Effectively, the result was a binary analysis indicating a 'yes' if the larger concept appeared anywhere within a nominee's statement or a 'no' if that concept did not.

Results

The analysis of the terminology used in the reflective statements of the nominees for the *Teaching Excellence Award for Online Teaching* revealed common themes among them both in terms of the percentage of sentences that included these concepts and the percentage of statements from nominees that included these concepts, as shown in Table 1.

The most common concept that appeared throughout these statements was rapport, which appeared in 5.04% of the sentences and in 93.3% of the statements. The frequent use of terms related to this concept by award nominees is not surprising given the emphasis placed on the practice of building rapport in the recent literature. The nominees used this concept primarily to refer to the relationship built between the instructor and the students in an online class. Several nominees stated that individual conferences with online students were a tool utilized to improve rapport. In describing individual meetings with students, one nominee discussed the result of video conferencing:

Many students report feeling a bit awkward at first because they have not had a lot of one-on-one interaction with their professors before, but most are chatting easily by the end of the conference. After conferences, I see an increase in emails, text messages, and office hours' attendance."

Another nominee noted that personal research into how to help build rapport and enthusiasm in the online environment led to an exploration into print advertising and technical writing. As a result, this nominee "now pay[s] careful attention to details in document creation and design choices since it turns out that font, color, and visual rhetoric matter a great deal when building rapport and interest online." Other tactics for building rapport mentioned by nominees include "meet and greet" discussion boards that pose questions about personal experiences.

The second most common theme among the nominees was the importance of course content to online instruction, which was mentioned in 4.17% of sentences and 80% of the statements. The numerous references to this concept were a bit more surprising as the existing literature tends to highlight themes other than content. The USG online practitioners emphasized the importance of substantive content as means of providing rigor within their courses. Content discussions such as "chunking" of content into modules, "mini-lectures," "advanced presentation software," and finding visual ways to illustrate the content are spread throughout the nominees' statements. The use of short videos, as well as finding ways to relay content in a relatable manner, permeate the narratives.

Within the statements, the focus on content focus is often coupled with course design and higher order thinking skills. As one nominee states

Bloom's Taxonomy informs my course design, with an intentional move away from strict knowledge and comprehension tasks, focusing on activities that involve application, synthesis, evaluation, and analysis; research analysis assignments, students creating and implementing differentiated units of instruction and analyzing the results, and even something as simple as the use of Twitter as a search engine demonstrate a commitment to higher order thinking skills.

In fact, the majority of award nominees emphasized the importance of course design with terms related to this concept present in 3.73% of the total sentences. While two other concepts were mentioned more frequently, the significance of course design cannot be overstated. The USG nominees further differentiated between course design and course delivery. While all online instructors put forth effort in the process of course delivery, in some cases – more likely with those new to online instruction – there is a lack of effort devoted to course design which ultimately makes course delivery less effective. Several nominees pointed to the importance of backward design, with one stating that "Effective courses are designed backward and delivered forward. In a sense, we cannot ask 'how do we get there?' until we know 'where we are going.'"

Another significant concept among the nominees was the importance of engagement. There was a discussion of this concept in 3.62% of sentences and 73.3% of the reflective statements. This is another concept that should be expected in the comments of superior online instructors based on the literature. While engagement is essential in both traditional and online courses, it is most critical in distance instruction given the potential disconnect of online students. One nominee expressed

his/her views on this theme:

First, the separation of time and space in asynchronous courses is a natural impediment to student engagement and interaction. Second, the lack of professor immediacy and direct interaction reduces the instructor's access to instruct, direct and motivate the students. My quest to overcome these obstacles and create a high-quality online learning environment drove my research and scholarship.

Feedback to students was also a theme heavily emphasized within the sample and was included in 3.4% of sentences with at least some mention in 46.7% of the statements. Given the typical format of online classes and the type of instructors who volunteer for or are selected for online instruction within the USG, the notion of timely and specific feedback is not surprising. More dedicated instructors, as represented by this group of award nominees, recognize that student success is tied directly to constructive feedback and is a best practice in the online environment.

The award nominees also focused on the importance of current research in the field of online instruction, which was mentioned in 3.4% of sentences and at least to some extent in 46.7% of the statements. These practitioners are well aware of the fact that online instruction is a developing field with best practices something of a work in progress. As such, it is incumbent for online instructors to remain current on developments in their fields. As one nominee stated rather eloquently:

The primary focus of my professional development, ongoing research and scholarship is web-based pedagogy to optimize the virtual learning experience. Through my research and experiences, my goal is to continuously improve. If I teach the same course more than once, it should be better each time. If I teach a new course, the principles learned from my previous experience should be incorporated into it. Distance education is a dynamic and changing learning environment where I am constantly learning and discovering ways to improve.

On a related note, instructors within this sample also highlighted the significance of course improvement or redesign. Improvement, redesign, or a similar term appeared in 2.85% of sentences and 53.3% of statements in the combined document. Course improvement from the instructor's perspective is important for both traditional and online courses. However, as with other concepts, the practice of thoughtful redesign is even more important in an online setting as students can quickly become disconnected if the material or methods of delivery seem stale or out of date. One of the nominees indicated that, "the most important element of quality online instruction is accepting that course design is never done." Regular polls or evaluations are mentioned by several nominees as a means to continuously solicit ways for improvement in process and design.

There were five other concepts that appeared relatively frequently in terms of sentence count and the percentage of nominee statements. These topics include scaffolding as it relates to the progressive process of moving students toward greater understanding and greater independence; diverse learning needs of different students; the specific needs of non-traditional students; student retention within online classes; and community building in terms of the relationship between student to student. While these terms were not as frequently emphasized as those discussed previously, the concepts are significant to the award nominees and should not be discounted or ignored. It should also be noted that the USG award committee imposed a page limit on the nominees' reflective statements, so candidates may not have been able to include comments on as many concepts as they would have preferred.

Discussion of Results

The discussion thus far indicates that there is a general similarity between the themes that emerged from the literature review on best practices and the analysis of the narratives of the USG award nominees. However, it is also significant to note that course content was emphasized more heavily in the reflective teaching philosophy statements than was evidenced within the literature. Such a difference might be expected since the nominees for this award are being recognized for their ability to connect theory to practice, and their practice is tied specifically to content-driven courses. The relatively limited emphasis on content within the literature versus its pervasiveness within the teaching statements of the USG award nominees suggests a need for expanded discussion of course content in online courses that is relevant, accessible, and rigorous.

The award nominees did focus on course content more than the literature might suggest in terms of best practices and tools for success in online instruction. While an in-depth discussion of course content is beyond the scope of this study, a few practical examples are presented as ideas for consideration.

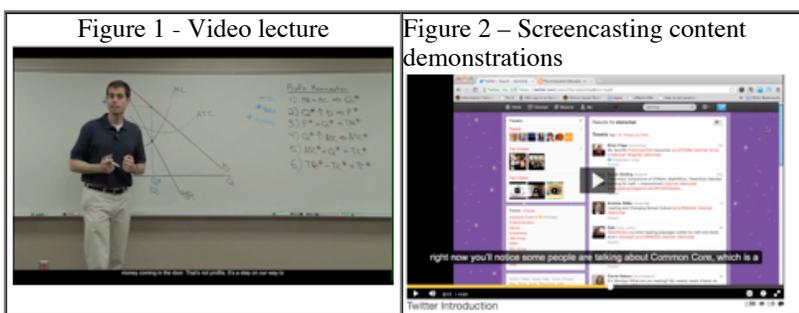


Figure 3 - Dynamic content generator

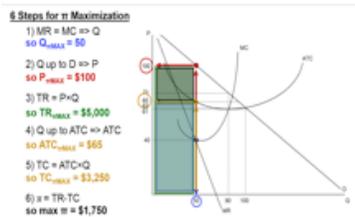


Figure 4 – Interactive instructor course notes

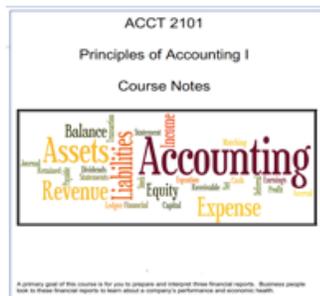


Figure 5 – Guided assignments and exams

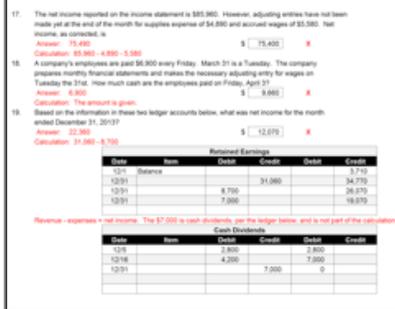


Figure 6 – Graphic organizer for students to use in conjunction with content



Multimedia and interactive applications are quite appropriate for online delivery, and each of the six examples incorporates some form of technology that is aimed at connecting with students at a distance. One well-received type of content is video lectures in which instructors themselves present or narrate in their own unique styles (Figure 1). These lectures bring the instructor into the virtual classroom and allow learners to replay the talks as needed. Screencasts, where content manipulation is demonstrated, provide similar benefit with the ability to play and replay videos for comprehension (Figure 2). Interactive presentation tools that visually change output based on different inputs are other considerations for content delivery (Figure 3). Students can immediately see the impact of various iterations of data on the graphical results. The combination of written, oral, and visual content provides a rich collection of resources that appeals to a variety of learning styles.

Interactive course notes (Figure 4) designed by the instructor offer students opportunities to manipulate data within the text examples to see the impact of changes on the data and answers generated. In addition, narrated animations and screen capture videos are embedded in the notes to supplement the resource collection. These provide targeted, interactive learning experiences and just-in-time resources as students attempt to complete coursework. Finally, assignments are designed in conjunction with the course notes for student interaction and engagement. Some assignments offer immediate feedback, explanations for incorrect input, and responsive grading that adjusts the overall score upward with each correct answer (Figure 5). Others represent graphic organizers used in conjunction with content to better help students organize information (Figure 6). These formative assignments guide students as they work to reinforce correct responses and provide hints and prompts for incorrect answers.

These few brief examples are by no means exhaustive. They are, however, meant to contribute to the discussion of content within the literature since this theme was found to be significant by the USG award nominees. Additional work in the area of online course content is certainly warranted.

Conclusion

This study stems from the interest and involvement of several instructors from different disciplines in teaching online courses and their common goal to provide meaningful, effective learning experiences to students in the online environment. The ongoing proliferation of tools and strategies to accommodate learning via technology and the increasing amount of research dedicated to online instruction make online instruction an ever-changing landscape.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the teaching statements of the educators who were nominated for the USG's Teaching Excellence Award for Online Teaching adds substance to recognized best practices in online education. These statements and this analysis cross many disciplines. While the narratives from these nominees paralleled the best practices listed within the literature to an extent, there were some concepts that were more heavily emphasized by the nominees, particularly the theme of course content. Further analysis of best practices, as well as specific examples of differences between the most common best practices and the habits and techniques used by leaders within the field of online education, would benefit not only those instructors who are new to online teaching, but also the more experienced online instructors who

seek to better understand how quality online teaching and learning can be realized.

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[Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents](#)