A Decade of Innovation and Success in Virtual Learning: A World-Wide Asynchronous Graduate Program in Educational Leadership and Higher Education

Sheldon L. Stick, Ph.D.
Professor
College of Education and Human Sciences
Department of Educational Administration
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
sstick1@unl.edu

Nataliya V. Ivankova, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Education
Department of Human Studies
University of Alabama at Birmingham
nivankov@uab.edu

Abstract

The manuscript explains the rationale, development, and success of a computer-mediated asynchronous learning (CMAL) program of graduate studies in Educational Leadership and Higher Education offered through the University of Nebraska – Lincoln . It details the evolution of the concept focusing on an integrated sequence of high-quality learning to: (1) enhance student learning experiences; (2) provide greater accessibility by removing barriers of time and space; (3) deliver learning opportunities to participants around the world on a conventional university semester schedule; (4) develop learning cohorts representing many cultures and nationalities; (5) foster active and substantial participation in the learning process; (6) provide multiple pathways to learning; and (7) facilitate the development of a world-wide community of learners. The Program allowed for asynchronous interactions, and enabled students to access to the contributions of all other participants. Additionally, there were opportunities for real-time technology-based collaboration between and among participants.

Introduction

Realization

During the early part of the 1990s the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL) did an environmental scan of its programmatic conditions because graduate enrollments had decreased to an alarming level. It was determined student needs either were not being addressed or the pool of students had declined to the point where the academic program would become an excessive expense to the university. The quandary was how to better meet the needs of available students while being positioned for future growth. Out-of-the-box thinking led to the belief a better “mousetrap” needed to be built.

To keep pace with the explosion of information and application of technology, institutions of

higher and postsecondary education need to think in terms of how to best provide value added to students who are markedly different from those of just two decades ago. Students of today come from throughout the world. Having faculty sit in an office waiting for students to arrive for advising, or meeting them in a classroom at a designated time and location, is not always feasible nor the norm at many institutions. Increasingly higher education is beset by requests for service learning, professional upgrading and training, credentialing, and providing learning opportunities for individuals with challenging situations. In many communities the notion of life-long learning has a bridgehead.

Change

To better accommodate existing and potential markets, it was decided at UNL to deliver educational opportunities to students at locations and times of their convenience, with a philosophy of cultivating responsibility for their own learning. The intent was to foster self-efficacy among learners so they would become better able to absorb, apply, and create new information for a society needing to move forward on multiple fronts, if not simultaneously than in synchrony. It was a movement necessitating marked changes among instructional faculty, who needed to re-visit personal beliefs about the purpose for education. Concomitantly it required equal, if not greater, changes among administrative units supporting such an academic adventure.

The new climate fostered student diversity on an unprecedented scale, as non-traditional learners of all ages and backgrounds met with so-called conventional students in virtual classrooms. Each participant brought special talents, different experiences, and personal needs. Responding to such variety and urging further development was challenging for instructors, who oftentimes were placed in uncomfortable situations: needing to learn a new methodology for working with students, understanding diversity, becoming technologically competent, realizing their 'office' was open to students all the time instead of during prescribed hours, and expanding their horizons beyond a field of professional expertise.

The Environment

Geography and Population

The State of Nebraska geographically is large (76,872 square miles). In fact, the entire six New England states could fit into the land mass of Nebraska with sufficient land left over for the state of Delaware (U.S. Census online Quickfacts, 2000). The Nebraska 2000 census figures reported a population of 1,711,263. In contrast, the six New England states and the State of Delaware reported a combined 2000 census population of 15,254,455 residents. Nebraska 's population had 22.3 persons living in each square mile. The range among the other seven states was from 41.3 in New Hampshire to 1,045.0 for Rhode Island ; an appreciably greater density. Clearly the pool from which to draw potential students was not encouraging if the market was limited to Nebraska .

Population growth in Nebraska generally was modest, especially during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. It was estimated to be around 6.5%, with no expectations for the growth rate to change appreciably. In the eastern part of the state were the two largest population centers with more than 780,000 of the state's people living in two counties (Douglas and Lancaster). The remaining 931,263 residents were spread over the remaining 47 counties, but in some there were 6,148 people living in 5,961 square miles, for a density ratio of one person per square mile. Notably, the largest public and private higher and postsecondary institutions were in the two eastern counties. It was anticipated the largest population gains would continue to be found in the

counties with the most residents (Business in Nebraska, 1997).

Baseline

During the early part of the 1990s, the UNL Department of Educational Administration had 22 doctoral-level students. The question facing the Department's faculty was how to sustain program viability knowing there would be fewer and fewer students willing to uproot themselves from homes and jobs for the purpose of continuing their education at the Lincoln campus. Importantly, the Department faculty had been among the campus leaders in using compressed audio/visual transmissions and e-mail to work with students residing throughout the State. It signified a willingness to help serve students using non-conventional approaches to instruction.

An early effort to increase the student population was to create a traveling cohort. Selected faculty agreed to meet with a group of willing students who accepted the fact they would need to do some traveling in order to acquire the required learning experiences. It was an effort focusing on the K-12 school administrators and enabled many school personnel to meet requisite criteria for professional development. The traveling team of faculty met with students at selected sites throughout the state. Notably, there was not a great deal of enthusiasm among faculty to participate in the traveling team, especially during the winter months, but it was an effective means for building the enrollment figures. Concomitantly, there were singular efforts by faculty to provide on-site graduate education to students in the rural areas on a once-a-week basis, but delivery of such courses often lacked the cohesiveness reflected by a program of studies.

The other major academic track within the Department emphasized Educational Leadership and Higher Education (ELHE). Its emphasis was on preparing professionals to assume leadership roles in educational administration, teaching, research, and student services. Attracting non-resident students was possible but not an enviable option since they would be required to pay out-of-state tuition (three times the resident tuition) in addition to the living expenses in Lincoln .

Meetings

Two events occurred within a relatively short period. The first was a meeting at a leadership conference attended by a member of the UNL Department's ELHE faculty and a group of professional educators who lived and worked on the Island of Guam . The latter raised the question if it would be possible to provide them with advanced graduate learning opportunities. They pointed out several institutions of higher education were sending selected faculty to Guam for short periods of time to conduct compressed courses, but there were reservations about both the nature of the courses and participants' ability to take part when the opportunities were presented.

Flying Instructors

Ensuing discussions led to the preparation of a federal grant to support doctoral level work for a selected number of qualified educational professionals from Guam . Simultaneously, explorations were underway as to the nature of a platform to consider for working with such students living and working in Guam . The flying instructors approach was not considered viable. Initial consideration was given to use of simultaneous audio and visual satellite transmission, because the University of Nebraska-Lincoln had advanced capability in the area. The number of up and down linkages required for a transmission resulted in a prohibitive cost of $16,000/hour. Alternate venues were sought.

Lotus Notes

The second fortuitous event was observing a demonstration of the Lotus Notes Groupware. The program was set up for business usage but could be modified so it would be appropriate for educational purposes. By 1994 a number of changes were made to the original Lotus Notes software to enable delivering a complete graduate course asynchronously. At about the same time the Guam effort to secure federal support for advanced higher education was approved. A number of professional educators applied for and gained admission into the UNL program of doctoral studies emphasizing Educational Leadership and Higher Education.

Program

Program versus Courses

The confluence of: (1) meeting with the professionals from Guam; (2) observing the Lotus Notes Groupware and recognizing it was amenable to important modifications; (3) realizing the long-term impact of a declining student pool within the state of Nebraska, and (4) an interest in meeting student needs with quality learning experiences, was reinforced by the nature of the UNL program in Educational Leadership and Higher Education. It was conceived as a Program of Studies instead of a series of courses. The intent was to provide students with meaningful and sequenced academic opportunities of an applied nature in a context not limited by time or place. When the decision was made to move forward with a computer-mediated asynchronous learning (CMAL) program of advanced graduate studies, the same philosophy influenced the sequence of course development.

During the formative years of the ELHE program the computer connections were beset by a number of logistical difficulties. The main server was housed within the offices of the Department. All technology and maintenance work was done by a part-time undergraduate Computer Science student hired with funds generated by returned tuition. Illustrative of some difficulties was that the connection to the Island of Guam had to be routed through a server located in Australia . Ironically, communication with Guam oftentimes was better than with some students living within Nebraska . The latter reported Internet service provider difficulties related to the nature of the wiring used or need for better compatibility between providers. All such difficulties were resolved.

Almost all of the course work was provided using technology, with Lotus Notes Groupware being the dominant delivery system. Other systems (i.e., Learning Space, e-College.com, Blackboard, etc.) also were used for some courses. The emphasis was upon facilitating dynamic collaborations among all participants using seven distinct but related avenues for learning: the virtual classrooms, a virtual cafeteria, a virtual faculty office, an electronic journal, a course literature bank, and a course library holding all of the required course readings beyond the assigned texts. The seventh venue was all students had 24-hours access to the University libraries and even were able to obtain assistance from professional Information Specialists regardless of their physical location. Articles were transmitted to students electronically or in some instances as hard copy. Books were sent only throughout the United States . Assistance on how to conduct selected searches for material also was provided online by professional Librarians.

There were perceived and real commonalities within the global education community for high quality learning experiences without restrictions as to time and location. During inception of the ELHE, a primary consideration was to avoid existing artificial barriers of requiring students to be at a given site during a prescribed period of time for the instruction. Instead, the objective was to create a vehicle allowing for an atmosphere of active, collegial, and collaborative learning in which participants would assume responsibility for what and how they learned, and assist peers

with their learning. It demanded a change from the paradigm of instructor-led instruction to facilitator-led learning.

Support

Limited University support was given to the venture during its inception. About $20,000 of hardware came from a one-time allocation by the Campus Chancellor. The University provided about $30,000 to cover start-up expenses, but with the stipulation those funds would need to be accounted for and possibly re-paid. A decade later limited University support still is given to the venture, but now it comes from the Division of Extended Education.

During the early years most of the money generated by student tuition was returned to the Program. It was used to pay for technical support (the part time undergraduate computer student), modest office support, software, most of the operating expenses associated with the program, professional development, and for a number of part-time faculty members who were retired or spousal hires with expertise in higher education. The situation is similar today.

Growth

The program grew. Ten years ago there were few courses online. Now there are more than 30 from the Department of Educational Administration, plus a number of supporting courses from other disciplines. The most notable addition has been the availability of courses in statistics and in research design. At last count there were 39 online graduate courses for distance students, and it is anticipated the number will swell as other campus units move their instructional opportunities to online delivery. Interestingly, a number of Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS) are in use by instructors, but there appears to be an emphasis toward supporting just a single platform (Blackboard) at UNL. Of special note is students are encouraged to take selected courses at other institutions when it is necessary and if those courses help in the completion of a student's Program of Studies.

Ten years ago there were 1.5 full-time-equivalent (FTE) faculty members working primarily in the ELHE program. Today there are 4.0 FTE, but most faculty members within the Department of Educational Administration are involved with online instruction, especially for the ELHE doctoral students. Ten years ago the ELHE asynchronous program was in a fledgling status. Today it is robust and the Department's K-12 program also is online. Ten years ago there were 22 doctoral students in the Department. Currently there are in excess of 340 in the ELHE program (November 2004 data). The K-12 program has grown to about 50 doctoral students, and anticipates a marked increase because now it is entirely online. A tangential benefit from the ELHE Program has been the heightened visibility of UNL as a leader in providing quality learning opportunities through the use of cutting-edge technology. Since 2000 there have been 52 students graduated, and some first set foot on the campus when they arrived for their Hooding and Commencement Ceremony.

Associated with the growth in student enrollments has been a pronounced change in the quality of students matriculating in the courses. Increasingly rigorous criteria have been applied to applicants but the number of well-qualified, and acceptable, students continues to expand. It has led to a curtailment of acceptances, despite outstanding credentials, in some instances because of the need to balance program resource availability with student demands. Unfortunately, at the present time, there exists a waiting list of more than 40 students who have met the requirements for acceptance but do not have an assigned Academic Advisor.

It is difficult to estimate the number of inquiries received about the online distance education program in ELHE, but at least four and sometimes as many as 12-15 requests for information have arrived each week for the past nine-plus years. Many are in the form of e-mails, some are telephone calls, and some are carefully crafted letters. The striking aspect is the only form of advertising has been word-of-mouth and distribution of brochures at selected professional meetings.

Scholarship

The notion of providing quality advanced graduate learning opportunities using a computer-mediated asynchronous platform initially was almost an anathema to the University Graduate Office. There was vigorous resistance, particularly from the Graduate Dean, who justifiably was concerned about students gaining access to requisite library holdings, having interactions within a community of learners, meeting with faculty and research advisors, and gaining a sense of being a scholar.

To mollify concerns about students obtaining an appropriate university experience, it was agreed they would be urged to attend classes on campus for two full ten-week summer sessions. At no time was it stated such attendance would be a requirement. The summer residency period was viewed as a time when students would be able to obtain collateral course work and specific guidance in research design and analysis. Furthermore, the Graduate Catalog never mandated a physical presence on campus for any graduate student.

During those initial discussions it was believed the residency requirement could be met by having students on campus during selected summer sessions and also by taking courses throughout the rest of a calendar year. Depending upon a student's employment situation, a Doctoral Supervisory Committee could request completion of 24-graduate hours within a period of 24-months or 27-hours within a period of 18-months in order to fulfill the residency requirement. Usually the former was approved for students employed in academic institutions.

The customary period of time for completion of a program of studies has been 42-months, plus or minus 6-months, depending upon the nature of a particular program and academic credit hours transferred. During that time frame students generally complete six courses in a calendar year (18 graduate credit-hours) and have guidance for working on what eventually will become their dissertation proposal. Students seeking the Doctor of Education Degree commonly are able to complete their Programs of Study in 36-42 months. Those working toward the Doctor of Philosophy Degree usually need more time, and there are many students who take considerably longer than 48-months to finish. The prevailing belief is extended longevity results in lack of persistence (Ivankova, 2004).

Venue

The argument advanced in support of the computer-mediated asynchronous learning was it formed a different venue for students to learn, just as the one-way audio-visual telecasts or

e-mail courses then being conducted by some faculty, the off-campus courses taught through the Extension Division, and the earlier correspondence courses. The difference was the ELHE Program was set up to provide sequenced and guided learning for advanced doctoral students but the same material was covered as in the on campus courses. It bears mentioning the online courses were vastly more demanding of students and the quality of work produced by the majority of students enrolled in them was far superior to what typically was done by students in

conventional courses. The proposal to move the courses to a computer-mediated mode was accepted, but with the admonition it would be monitored closely.

Program Philosophy

Overriding the issue of delivery was the philosophy undergirding what needed to be done to ensure students had value added to their learning experiences. The decision to formulate a cohesive sequence of learning experiences was critical because it meant certain courses needed to be made available during the incipient phase. Subsequent courses were built upon the earlier academic experiences and special care was taken with the advising process. Participants were guided through a learning sequence instead of being allowed to enroll in convenient courses. Each student accepted had a Program of Studies developed to best meet their personal interests and academic needs, and courses were identified according to estimated times when they would be available. Participants were not viewed as a cohort but as individuals.

Students were encouraged to work closely with their Academic Advisors, which was facilitated by technology, and to give consideration toward what area or topic they would be interested in pursuing for their dissertations. Students were encouraged to carefully reflect upon interests during the incipient stages of their Programs so viable research ideas could be cultivated and refined during the progression of courses. In so doing it was possible to make appropriate adjustments to a Program of Studies and built competencies and knowledge upon earlier work. The intent was to have students with a reasonable dissertation proposal by the time they completed all of their courses. Many Advisors sought to have advisees present proposals to their supervisory committee either immediately prior to or after a successful comprehensive examination experience. It was unusual for a student to wait a full semester before submitting a dissertation proposal, but on occasion it happened primarily because of personal events in a student's life (e.g., job changes, family issues).

The asynchronous nature of the program was important because it allowed participants to work collaboratively and cooperatively without regard for time or location. The only restriction was students needed to complete stated requirements within a window of time allowed for a course module. The emphasis was on student interactions; their responses to instructor presented questions or statements and commentary with others in their virtual classrooms. Time zones were irrelevant. The classroom actually was anyplace a person was able to use a computer to access the course, either via the web or using the program on their computer.

Databases

Nine databases formed the nexus of the program. Students had access to all of them, but had to use a designated password to gain entry, and it changed with each new academic term.

Virtual classroom. The primary learning forum was the “Virtual Classroom”. It was where students addressed an instructor's topics, interacted with others, and discussed the issues and/or points of view presented. Multiple threaded discussions occurred concurrently during the progression of a module, and there were buttons embedded within each virtual classroom to allow for moving into the designated module. An important point is when the courses were presented via other platforms, such as Blackboard, the configuration was modified to be compatible to what was used in Lotus Notes. Some instructors elected to develop virtual classrooms of 6-9 participants, believing it enhanced learning opportunities and encouraged community development. Others preferred to use larger virtual classrooms. Students voiced preference for the smaller ones. Participants generally had access to all virtual classrooms, so it

was possible to interact with students other than those in their assigned Classroom.

Introduction and program. The second icon was labeled “Course Introduction”. It explained the nature of the program, and gave basic facts and directions, including information on how to access the University library and how to secure technical assistance. The “Course Program” (third) icon was where the entire syllabus was housed. Generally it also contained the module questions/statements presented by an instructor. An important point was the need for instructors to move away from believing they had to drive the direction of a course. Instead, they had to adopt the posture of being facilitators. It meant presenting comprehensive topics for discussion and helping students integrate ideas from multiple sources.

It also required instructors to become sensitive on how to best encourage interactions without giving ‘facts' or making demeaning statements. Too often novice online instructors approached courses with a philosophy of maintaining control and tended to dominate. The reverse posture was needed; facilitation of student interactions, regardless of how they meandered from a stated objective, and continuously encouraging and exploring instead of stating definitive information.

Involvement among students allowed for further enhancing the development of their cognitive schemata. Also, it was imperative instructors recognized students entered courses with different, and oftentimes vastly different, backgrounds. Recalcitrant or derelict students generally were approached outside the boundaries of a course to prevent embarrassment. But, it was legitimate for instructors and students to make pointed comments about questionable contributions, with the expectation the person who made the posting would respond and engage in the virtual dialogue.

Released from constraints of time and memory lapses was liberating. Participants reported they were able to more fully reflect upon what they ‘said' and how it was said. Consequently they were able to research ideas or facts when appropriate and to monitor how they presented information. The former was helpful as students became familiar with the style expected for documentation and referencing. The latter was helpful as participants gained greater awareness of a “listeners” needs for information.

Participants and faculty office. A fourth database was termed “Participants”. It was where the students provided basic personal information and noted how they could be contacted by telephone and e-mail. Use of the personal information was restricted to members of a given course, but when used in conjunction with the cafeteria it allowed many students to cultivate personal relationships beyond the boundaries of a course or the Program. In fact, there were numerous instances of students visiting each other and even collaborating on professional activities. By way of illustration, one student and her family visited with another family while camping in the Black Hills of South Dakota

The fifth icon was the “Faculty Office”. It was where all students could place questions or make comments related to the course, or perhaps their programs of study, and obtain a response from an instructor. An advantage of such postings was it enabled all students to read both the questions and replies. Conventional instructor-student interactions oftentimes were one-on-one, and needed to be repeated to others. The “Faculty Office” ensured instructors were accessible on a 24/7 basis.

Cafeteria and library. The “Cafeteria” (sixth icon) was a database where students exchanged ideas on virtually anything they considered important. Some shared cooking recipes, ideas on how to plant and care for gardens, and made arrangements for visits. The cafeteria also was a site where students posted manuscripts for peer review prior to submission to an instructor. Such

activity benefited writers and those who provided commentary. Not to be overlooked was the benefit to an instructor who presumably had better manuscripts to read.

"Library" was the seventh icon. It was where most if not all of the readings for a course, excluding the requisite texts, were located. Oftentimes they were in full text. Other times there were brief descriptions of material and a link. Importantly, students were not restricted to course library holdings. As the program matured many of the required journal references were housed in a central repository accessed through the University Library. Instructors worked with librarians to ensure the system worked smoothly.

Literature bank and journals. The eighth database was labeled "Literature Bank". Most courses had a requirement for students to contribute relevant material and state why they believed it was appropriate for the course. The final (ninth) icon was for "Journals". It was where students were to reflect upon their work and try to relate it to their academic experiences. It was informal but useful because participants commented to each other about the entries. Also it was a site where students posted reports about the course requirements such as observations of selected higher education experiences, interviews, and comments on special course activities such as presentations by special guests, usually via a telephone bridge.

What We Learned

Cost-Effective

The adventure began when it dawned upon the ELHE faculty that it was time to change from conventional face-to-face graduate instruction to a fluid learning environment. Also it captured the necessity for instructors adopting the role of facilitator for learning instead of being the disseminator of information. It built upon efforts by the faculty of a single academic department (Educational Administration), but its evolution and success required the energy and creativity contributed by many people. The problem was how to find a cost-effective delivery system able to remove the barriers and constraints of time and location, while providing rich opportunities for dialoguing among students and faculty. The resolution was to modify an existing computer program and begin providing a high quality program of graduate education in Educational Leadership to citizens of Nebraska , other states, and throughout the world.

Facilitation

There were a number of distinguishing experiences during the journey. First, it became necessary for instructors to change their way of thinking about higher education. They had to move toward becoming a facilitator instead of a teacher. They had to understand the difference between passive and active learning, and work toward fostering the latter among the students. It was important for students to assume responsibility for their work and their learning. The concept of working toward a course grade, while still important, was relegated to a lesser role. Instead of always sitting in a judgmental position regarding course content, instructors had to think in terms of how to enhance student learning and what evidences of student learning were appropriate. Project-based learning and contextual learning related to student employment were deemed important indices of value added.

Distributed Learning

The idea of distinguishing between conventional distance learning and distributed learning (DL) was interesting, because, as Oblinger explained, "Distributed learning is founded on the belief that high-quality education should be available to everyone, at any place and at any time" (cited

in Morrison, 1998). The former conveyed impressions of people gathering at a site, usually at a prescribed time. The latter negated the logistical dilemmas of being time and location bound. Also, it increased participants' ability to more fully express maximum evidence of learning because it allowed them to carefully research and frame entries into their virtual classroom. The constraint of responding within a given time, such as a class meeting, was removed, and everyone had the chance to become involved. In fact, it was required for everyone to be involved, and nobody was able to hide “in the back row with a cap pulled over his or her eyes”.

Just as it was possible for students to participate in the graduate learning experiences, regardless of their locations, it was possible for instructors to exercise the same freedom. It meant instructors were able to remain in contact with their courses when traveling, or from home, and even allowed for an international faculty. Since the vehicle for communicating was the computer-mediated asynchronous course, instructors did not need to be located on the university campus. There were reported instances of instructors maintaining interactions with courses while traveling in Asia, Australia , Europe, and even while sailing around Cape Horn . Similarly, students were able to be “in class”.

Learning

Not all students thrive in a computer-mediated asynchronous environment. Some are unable to structure themselves to complete requisite work as stated. Others have difficulties prioritizing personal obligations. Still others encounter unexpected responsibilities and need to “stop-out” for a period of time. Too often students begin their studies by enrolling in two online courses during the same semester with an expectation the demands will be comparable to prior experiences in conventional classrooms, or possibly less rigorous. The danger with such attitudes rests in the fact it is necessary for students to become familiar with the system and also with the nature of the learning. Both require some “ramp time”, and it is better they begin with one course and have a successful semester. Students encountering trouble working in their initial courses tend to have a less optimistic prognosis for completion. The learning curves are important.

To assist students comprehend the rationale and process behind the distributed learning paradigm, several members of the faculty created a tutorial based upon Hirsch's (2001) idea, “broad and general knowledge is the best entrée' to deep knowledge” (p. 23). Subscribing to that premise led to an interactive tutorial for students to: (1) learn how to download/activate a course platform or traverse it via the web; (2) grasp the concept behind the formatting of a course; (3) become conversant with use of icons and databases; (4) gain comfort using the different platforms by which courses were presented. Each aspect of the tutorial contained a text-based and a narrative explanation to accompany an interactive experience over the material just absorbed.

Student Benefits

Students, generally from diverse backgrounds and geographic locations, have been able to share experiences and ideas. The activities reinforce a sense of collaborative educational community as participants apply the concept of being a scholar-practitioner while engaged in decision-making, problem-solving, and critical-thinking. Not to be overlooked is the potential advantage of participants creating a network of colleagues upon whom they may rely for other information.

Program Benefits

In an environment of budgetary constraints and reductions the Program is a beacon for how to

grow, improve, and provide faculty with unanticipated professional development and more favorable circumstances for publishing their scholarly work. The quality of work produced by students generally far exceeds what is found in conventional graduate courses, and perhaps much of it can be attributed to the reflection time students have when participating. Also, the dynamic nature of the interactions fosters a broadening of intellectual horizons for most people. Not to be overlooked are the multiple written models students find from the work of colleagues and instructors.

Scholarly results are found in more than 17 completed doctoral dissertations related to distributed learning, more than 19 peer-reviewed publications, in excess of 30 peer-reviewed professional presentations at national and international meetings, and the multiple successful and submitted grant applications. Feedback on the Program's 16 Outcomes continuously is solicited from both graduates and employers, using a five-point Likert survey and open-ended questions. The information helps to further strengthen an already robust program of graduate studies, while providing evidence of its successes.

Time Demands

Working in a computer-mediated asynchronous environment is not for all members of a faculty. Personal experience is that time demands per course can be up to four times as great as with conventional face-to-face courses, and conversations with colleagues, throughout the country, support such a claim. It can increase dramatically if course enrollments are not capped. Depending on the nature of a course, a reasonable number of graduate students would be 15-24, depending on the nature of a course; with an understanding there would be two or three virtual classrooms each containing seven to eight members. Instructors vary in how they approach working with students, but it seems best to proceed from the position of being a facilitator for learning instead of a disseminator of knowledge. Giving students the responsibility for what they do fosters an active learning environment and seems to enhance their scholastic maturity.

Instructors need to front-load courses so they are ready when a semester begins. There is little course wiggle room for an instructor, but special activities certainly can be infused, even at a late date and fit into the notion of real-time communication. Illustrative of such opportunities were video-streaming of special presentations held at the University, such as when Mikhail Gorbachov and Dr. Gene Budig spoke. The latter was an instance of using technology to also provide the virtual audience with opportunities for engaging the speaker via computer-based question submissions. Dr. Budig then replied to a person via the video streaming. Importantly, the Program is not a hybrid but does take advantage of ensuring the distance students are afforded the special opportunities provided to on-campus students.

Adult Learners

A course syllabus needs to be fully developed and it is helpful to develop it with an attitude of anticipating questions students might ask. Course requirements and grading practices generally need detailed explanations, including some illustration. It is healthy for an instructor to believe at least one student might misinterpret something unless it is carefully and clearly presented.

Not to be overlooked is the fact many adult learners have different needs than so-called conventional students. The adults commonly have been gainfully employed and usually have earned a degree of respect for their work. Subjecting them to a system in which peers and instructors constantly scrutinize work oftentimes is unsettling. Instructors need to be sensitive to such possibilities. Another issue is when critical events arise in students' lives. Sometimes they

are joyful but other times they are not. Clarification of how such events might be handled should be presented in a course syllabus, but allowances need to be considered for special circumstances.

It is advisable for an instructor to closely monitor the work of students during the initial third of a course. When work is not measuring up to expectations either in terms of quantity and/or quality it is incumbent upon the instructor to notify a student, and to keep a record of the communication. Sometimes unsuccessful students challenge instructors claiming they were not told about poor work. Maintaining an electronic record of all communication with students is a means for avoiding possible awkward circumstances.

Feedback

The online feedback an instructor provides should be supportive, but not definitive. There are two kinds. Involvement with student discussions is time-consuming but necessary, but to a limited extent. Instructors can debilitate themselves by trying to become involved with all discussions. Instead, commenting to each student at least once or more during the course of a module seems effective. Doing so as a participant instead of a director helps lower potential reservations in students about responding. Use of an instructor's title might be comfortable but it seems to inhibit students. Experience has shown first name interactions work well for encouraging more substantive exchanges, which is the objective of the courses.

The second form of feedback is giving students some appraisal of their work. It can be done within a virtual classroom by pointing out postings with particularly good points or perhaps those needing additional clarification. Framing comments indirectly avoids giving the impression of a definitive answer and seems to embolden students for further discussion. Many novice students are grade-oriented and express discomfort without some comment on their work. Some instructors elect to provide periodic grade feedback during a course. Others make statements in their syllabi about the lack of such feedback and if necessary a student will be contacted when work is not satisfactory. Perhaps it is best to shift away from providing continual grade reports because the objective should be to encourage students to assume the responsibility for their learning.

Encouraging student involvement early during a semester is important. Those who wait for more than week before posting oftentimes do not get totally involved, and late enrollees should be discouraged. A cut-off date for course enrollment probably should be set for at least five days prior to the start of a semester. Distributing the course materials and student acquisition of texts requires time, and it is recommended a student be ready to begin working in a course on the day a semester starts.

Advising

Advising is pivotal to enhancing student persistence. With recognition for the fact participants are unable to easily take care of issues, such as registering for courses, completing forms, securing texts [particularly difficult for international students], developing a Program of Studies, selecting a Supervisory Committee, securing approval from the Institutional Review Board for research, scheduling their comprehensive examination, working on their dissertation proposals and later their dissertations, and arranging the oral defense, it become incumbent upon Advisors to serve as mediators and even do some of the mundane errands for their advisees.

Conclusion

The winds of change can be expected to blow continuously. Some will be soft and enjoyable but others will be strong and harsh. This has been a story of how the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Program of Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership and Higher Education changed in anticipation of both the force and direction of the winds and flourished during a time of apparent drought. The salient features of the story were:

1. An environmental scan, which probably is healthy for most academic programs regardless of perceived health.
2. Thinking out-of-the-box and courage to be innovative.
3. Keeping the needs of students as a paramount concern.
4. Moving to a paradigm of learning instead of teaching.
5. Instructors adopting the philosophy of being facilitators instead of teachers.
6. Accepting the fact many of distance learners have insecurities and it was necessary to consider how to best assist them overcome their reservations and succeed as scholars.
7. Fulltime access to a university library substantially enhanced the learning opportunities.
8. Technical support is necessary for distance students on a 24/7 basis.
9. Student services do not need to be made available to distance students except as it relates to registration, fees, and financial aid.
10. The workload upon instructors is marked greater than typically reported with conventional courses.
11. Scholarship should be cultivated and insisted upon from distance students, and the earlier it is done during a program of studies the greater likelihood of more favorable results.
12. Technology allows for blending real-time experiences into primarily CMAL programs of instruction.
13. There is a growing demand for such advanced graduate programs.
14. A program of studies needs to be conceptually developed and the temptation to initiate a series of courses potentially unrelated should be resisted.

It is believed the lessons learned during the ten-year voyage have enabled the UNL faculty members in the Educational Leadership and Higher Education specialty to further improve an already robust program of academic studies: modularizing courses; infusing case studies requiring small-team collaborative learning; providing research design and analysis courses online; fostering more product-oriented scholarly work; creating a portal where current and prospective students may obtain information; networking current students with graduates who serve as mentors; having graduates serve as guides for candidates engaged in the dissertation process; and relying more extensively on the use of technology for meetings (program approval, aspects of the comprehensive examination, dissertation proposal, and oral defense). Perhaps other academic programs might find the success of this venture appealing and consider a change in their respective learning paradigms as they reflect upon how to best be positioned to meet consumer needs with existing resources.

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