

Web-based Courses: What Students Need to Know Aside from Content

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Abstract

When learning takes place far from campus via the web, the student has only one direct link to the resources of the college or university: the course instructor. Information that may seem obvious to traditional students must be clearly identified to the distance learner. This is critical when course participants are older and have been away from a classroom for many years. A four-course certificate is offered at Indiana University-Purdue University-Indianapolis to provide additional training for currently employed field service representatives of a major health care industry. Two important topics have surfaced that pertain to on-line teaching and learning. First, what general guidance and assistance regarding course success are useful to these participants? Examples of topics include course grading policies, university schedule requirements and communication skills with classmates and instructors in the virtual classroom. The information this certificate program uses to address these issues will be detailed. Secondly, what have been student reactions to Web-based learning when coupled with the return to a university environment? How should this guide the instructor? Anecdotal examples results will be presented. Implementation of this certificate has extracted essential information for the web-based instructor and student, which is critical to participant satisfaction and success.

I. Introduction

A four course, web-based certificate is offered at IUPUI to provide additional training for currently employed field service representatives of a major health care industry. Participants are located throughout the country. IUPUI has learned important lessons applicable to all those who desire to offer college courses via the web. This paper will focus on two important areas. First, what general guidance and assistance regarding course success are useful to course participants? Information in this area is divided into three parts. What needs to be explained prior to the beginning of the course? As the course progresses, what issues must be addressed? Once the course has completed, what follow-up information is necessary?

The second area of focus involves reactions of program participants to web-based learning as well as a return to the university environment. How should this guide the instructor? What types of learning do the students exhibit and does this vary from the traditional classroom? Does the instructor need to compensate for the lack of face-to-face communication, which is part of distance education? How can the habits of successful students guide the instructor and assist participants in future semesters?

II. In the Beginning of a Course

Several important issues need to be addressed before the start of a course and as the initial contact with the student is made. Clear expectations must be outlined. Important points include:

- University Integrity – Students must understand that a course via the web will have the same requirements and expectations as traditionally taught courses. Participants must also understand that university rules about cheating will not vary for distance learners. Below is a the paragraph used as part of the certificate “Keys to Program Success.”

“Grading: The courses which comprise the CLET certificate are Purdue University courses. Each course is taught and graded using the same standards as on-campus courses. Expectations of participation and performance are not varied as the delivery method varies. Web-based instruction *does not* alter students’ rights and responsibilities. Material must be understood, assignments must be completed and communication with the instructor must be maintained. It is the student *and* the instructor who must work together to insure that this new delivery method is successful.”

- Academic Schedules – Participants must be reminded many times of the importance of schedules and withdrawal dates. Many have the mind-set of the business world and have difficulty adapting to an academic calendar. Tuition payments from non-participating students are not beneficial toward overall satisfaction. Earning a grade of “F” for non-participation is not a logical consequence for many students new to distance education of the university environment in general. Below is the paragraph used as part of the certificate “Keys to Program Success.”

“Academic Schedule: Purdue University academic schedules will be followed. Course completion dates and on-campus dates are fixed and cannot be altered. In the event that you cannot complete a course, the university does allow for withdrawals. Be aware of these dates and make informed decisions based upon them. Your instructor will keep you notified as the semester progresses, however, it will be *your* responsibility to take action (participation or withdrawal) as you see necessary.”

- Learning Via the Web – The main difference between traditional classrooms and distance education is the method of student learning. Web courses are *student centric*. That is, students must synthesize prior knowledge and seek out additional information. While this point is difficult to grasp before the student begins the course, it is helpful to point this out early to enable the student to recognize the challenges as they occur within the semester. Below is the paragraph used as part of the certificate “Keys to Program Success.”

“Format: This certificate has been designed to be student centric. Student will synthesize prior knowledge and seek out additional information. This format may be different than other courses or training experiences you have had in the past.”

- Participant Backgrounds – The instructor must stress tolerance of students for each other. Distance education brings a wide assortment of students to the virtual classroom. For successful participant interaction, each person must realize that their background is unique when compared to other students. Below is the paragraph used as part of the certificate “Keys to Program Success.”

“Participant Backgrounds: Recognize that the depth of knowledge of the students in the program varies tremendously. Some people have extensive electronics backgrounds; yet have not had exposure to the clinical laboratory environment. Others have medical technologist degrees with relatively little formal electronics training. The self-paced instructional method allows each person to concentrate on specific areas and proceed quickly through familiar material. Be patient with the other participants!

- remember each person gained their knowledge from different places in different ways.
- remember each person may or may not use material a course may cover. If you work with electric circuits everyday, your skills will be different than someone who has not used those concepts in a long time.”
- Syllabus Design – Because the student must present the information to him/herself, a *highly* detailed syllabus is essential. It must include many dates to act as milestones for student progression assessment. The syllabus must also include detailed course grading policies as well as supplementary texts and references for those who need additional sources.
- Tips for Success – At the initial contact and as the course progresses, suggestions to help the student succeed are critical to positive outcome and satisfaction. Areas include technical help (with web browser and course framework), time management and learning via the web. Below are some of the tips used in the certificate program.

“use all available tools including

- understand how to use Oncourse completely. Click on "Take a Tour" from the "Getting Help with Oncourse" area of the Oncourse opening page (<http://oncourse.iu.edu>). You do not need any ID or password to do this.
- email: correspond with the instructor as well as other students. ASK QUESTIONS!
- forum (in Oncourse): use this method to have discussions and post messages, for example, if a particular homework problem is giving you trouble, post a question on the forum to allow others to give you suggestions and tips to complete the assignment. **It is important to work as a class even though the class does not meet in the same room at the same time.**

time management: these courses will take time. Budget a certain amount of time (only you know how much) each week to download information and complete the

assignments. A good starting amount of time is about three hours per week to obtain the learning units from the web and review the textbook. Additional time may be needed to complete assignments and study for exams. You will need to pay close attention to the suggested syllabus/time line provided.

Do not fool yourself by believing that reading the material (scrolling through the learning units) is the same as *understanding the material*. The final exam will be given in the traditional pen/paper format and will cover all presented topics. There will be no way to pretend during the final exam.”

- Contacting the Instructor – Include office hours, telephone numbers to use, what should be done when problems occur on the weekends, and what to do about system problems. It is critical that the instructor try to remain very receptive and available. Home numbers may be a reasonable request, given that many questions may occur during evenings and weekends. Instructor use of email during this time can be very helpful to students.
- Positive Outcome Identification – The instructor must identify specific positive benefits to motivate the student to actively participate in the course. Goals and objectives can be used to clarify the big picture. Students can become so fixated on a tiny content detail during the course. Without the instructor aware of the student’s focus, that motivation can be lost. Below is a paragraph used for this purpose within the certificate program.

“You can successfully earn the CLET certificate. You will need to work hard and expand your thinking about the clinical laboratory environment. When you hang the certificate on your wall, you will have improved your ability to communicate and function in the clinical laboratory. You will better understand the staff that work there and the regulations that govern them. The essential role of the clinical laboratory in patient care will be clearly evident. You will function as a knowledgeable member of the health care team. Lastly, you will continue life-long learning. This skill enables you to be successful in both your personal and professional life.”

III. During the Course

“Scrolling learning” is a student’s misguided idea that scrolling through the material is the same as learning. In order to prevent this, instructors must place obstacles in the midst of content. Embedded email assignments are useful to force students to stop and answer a question, and then send the answer to the instructor. This technique is also useful for an instructor to monitor student progress through the course content.

Isolation and frustration are reported as troublesome side effects of distance learning. Instructors must work to avoid these issues. Being open and available is the best antidote. By communicating with the students regularly, aggravation can be lessened. Another technique to deal with isolation is to mandate student interaction by the use of assignments. First, students need explicit instructions regarding the use of communication tools. Second, simple assignments, such as the requirement to post a humorous fact about oneself to the message board, compel interaction. These tools are essential to extinguish the “I’m the only one” dilemma.

The “first time syndrome” is also an issue in distance education. For many courses, both instructor and student are experiencing the unique delivery method for the first time. Students have never learned via the web and instructors have never taught via the web. As errors crop up, simple reminders of the newness of the modality are very useful. Encourage everyone, instructor included, to feel “in the same boat.” Using this commonality to bring everyone together (virtually) can be empowering.

Occasionally, the ugly side of web-based learning will appear, usually in the form of cheating, anger and apathy. Flaming emails are not uncommon. These must be dealt with in a manner that reflects the knowledge of the circumstance. Web-based education can be very stressful. It is important to have documented regulations in place (as discussed in Section II) to handle some predictable anger. However, every course is a learning experience (as true in the traditional classroom, as well) and it is impossible to predict types of complaints and issues students will have.

When all else fails, students will disappear. Certainly this happens in a traditional classroom but it is much easier when the instructor had never met the students. When emails go unanswered, phone calls must ensue. If the student is to be successful in the future, contact, at least to withdraw, is essential.

Lastly, instructors must find a way to communicate their love of the subject matter as well as their genuine love of learning. Without this enthusiasm, students learn only content and miss an important function of education in general. This is no easy task. There are no hand gestures or voice inflections. What there can be, though, are sidetracks. Enrichment is provided through related stories and personal examples that bring the theory into the practical world. These are important and, though it may seem frivolous, must be incorporated into the course design and presentation.

IV. After the Course

Surveys are an essential tool to evaluate course presentation techniques as well as to profile participants. Well-defined questionnaires will provide the faculty member with information about student participation as well as student perceptions and satisfaction with content.

The information interpreted from surveys should influence the course materials. Redesign of the content web-pages and assessment of teaching strategies after each semester is essential for two reasons. One involves the instructor and the other, the students. First, the faculty member must constantly assess what facts are presented and in what manner. It is easy to use the same material over and over without feedback. Secondly, the students need to feel some contribution to the class. In a traditional classroom, students are able to ask questions and offer information that can guide an instructor in the pace and depth of material presentation. This is empowering. In a virtual classroom, students must feel as though they have “made a difference.” This is essential for overall satisfaction and a positive experience.

V. Conclusion

Quality instruction relies on many skills. The web-based course requires some new techniques as well as a redefinition of some old abilities. Without face-to-face contact, the instructor and his/her technical abilities play a new and critical role in student success. Simply typing content

onto a web-page is not enough or satisfactory. Faculty must learn to foster inter-student communication and cooperation using new tools. “Scrolling learning” must be stopped. Instructors must monitor student participation in new ways. Faculty must describe and detail their expectations as well as those of the university. Lastly, instructors must communicate their love of a subject in new and different ways to preserve and enhance student success and satisfaction.

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