

DEOSNEWS

Volume 13 - Issue 4

April 2004

13.4: Less is More: Designing an Online Course

Editorial

In keeping with the intent of DEOSNEWS to offer a mix of practice descriptions and research results, this month's issue offers a reflection on practice by a professor emeritus of journalism and American studies at the Pennsylvania State University.

Faculty workload in the online environment is a commonly identified focus of concern among participating and non-participating faculty alike. Of particular concern is the possibility that teaching online courses may sentence instructors to become the slaves of their course e-mail, threaded discussions, or chats. The emphasis of this article by an experienced online instructor is on balancing structure and openness in the design and management of online courses to promote a positive experience for both students and teachers.

Melody Thompson
Director, American Center for the Study of Distance Education
DEOSNEWS editor

Less is More: Designing an Online Course

R. Thomas Berner

A couple of years ago the *Chronicle of Higher Education* ran a long article about distance education. The article focused on an instructor in meteorology who seemed chained to his computer because of his promise to answer all posts within 24 hours. The headline on the article: "The 24-Hour Professor: Online Teaching Redefines Faculty Members' Schedules, Duties, and Relationships With Students."[\[1\]](#)

It was an unfortunate piece of publicity for the instructor, the university and distance education. It showed that the instructor's department had not properly prepared him to design an online course and it sent the message to would-be online instructors that teaching online was onerous and unrewarding.

As someone who has developed and taught four online courses and who in the decade before retiring turned all of his residence courses into hybrid courses, I have found online teaching to be just the opposite: It is not an overtime job and it's fun.

But in order to obtain that state of grace, one needs to design an online course with an attitude that it is different from a residence course. Instead of piling on the assignments that instructors must grade and making irrational promises to answer all posts, the instructor must design a course with one thought in mind: less is more.

That might sound heretical and antithetical, but it is not. That theory extends current pedagogical thinking about involving students more in their learning. The notion of a student-centered classroom in residence courses can be extended to online courses without any loss of quality and with the potential for a better course.

How does one do that?

First, not just any instructor should be asked to design and teach an online course. The person cited at the beginning of this article was something of a beginner and lacked the pedagogical background a faculty member of vintage would bring to the assignment.

Second, before designing an online course, faculty should attend workshops that focus on successful online teaching. Recruiting faculty who have designed successful online courses to lead workshops in best (and worst) practices would help others learn about the nature of online vs. residence courses. Encouraging faculty to join any number of distance education listservs also would help. And faculty could, if the funds are available, take an online course themselves, which I did (finally) in my last semester of teaching.

Third, with the mantra of less is more in mind, another guiding principle should be: Don't transfer a residence course—transform it. When I was asked to design a course I had never taught (Mass Media and Society), I looked at the syllabi my colleagues had developed for an online course and figured out how I could mimic the residence course in an online environment. Because I was transforming a large-enrollment course that had breakout discussions led by graduate students, I needed to instill a similar student involvement in my online course (which I'll explain presently).

Fourth, someone developing an online course needs to go from being the center of attention to being someone on the sideline. The catchy way others have expressed this goes like this: Don't be a sage on the stage, but a guide by the side.

Fifth, have a good textbook. That enables students to study offline. A massive amount of online reading material chains students to their computers and dulls their thinking. I have taught courses without textbooks, but I was meeting with students twice a week in a classroom and as necessary in my office. Such contact can't be duplicated online unless the faculty member wants to eat and sleep at the computer.

That's the philosophy, now here's the practical.

Contrary to what some believe, an online course needs structure. Too many students for my taste have signed up for my distance education courses thinking they could check into the course as they deemed fit. They had been misled by a favorite distance education slogan of "anytime, anywhere." Well, no, not exactly.

Just as you would meet with a residence class at certain times in a certain place, students in an online course must do something similar. In my Mass Media and Society course, I set up learning modules of Monday/Tuesday, Wednesday/Thursday and Friday (which I called the seminar). Using a set of questions that the author of the textbook had given me, I required students to answer a specific question from a specific reading for the first two modules of the week. Students were also required (not expected) to reply to a certain number of posts. For the seminar, students were required to post an essay discussing what they had learned that week and putting it in the context of the course. They also had to respond to the original posts. The course management system tracked their posts and replies and their online activity became part of their grade.

Mandating posts and replies engenders discussion. I asked my students to conclude their posts with a question that needed more than a yes-or-no answer. That encouraged interaction among students. The students talked to teach other, not to me. I merely monitored their discussions and stepped in to add supplemental material rather than act as the sage on the stage.

Students tend to help each other but only if someone asks a question. In all of my online courses, I have a message board titled "Orientation," and I tell students to post questions about the course there and I'll answer them. Increasingly, though, students answer other students' questions. Who needs the instructor?

Finally, avoid irrational promises such as vowing to respond to all posts in a given period. Such promises make the faculty member a slave to the course rather than a facilitator of learning. The goal of any course is to help students learn how to learn, and being at their beck and call does not accomplish that goal. I check my course twice a day—in the morning over coffee and in the evening before I go to bed.

In summary, when designing an online courses, remember that less is more and

you'll have a good teaching experience and the students will have a good learning experience.

Author Note

R. Thomas Berner is a professor emeritus of journalism and American studies at the Pennsylvania State University. During his final four years at Penn State, he was the College of Communications' director of continuing and distance education.

[1] Jeffrey R. Young, "The 24-Hour Professor: Online Teaching Redefines Faculty Members' Schedules, Duties, and Relationships With Students," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 31, 2002, pp. A31-A33.

Hit Counter