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Successful Strategies for Content Creation and Design of Online Classes

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Abstract

Given the consequential need for colleges throughout the world to move classes online amid the spread of COVID-19 in 2019-2020, there is a growing call for higher-educational bodies to launch high-quality online classes that allow students to pursue their education as part of a successful risk management strategy. Thus, more than ever, guidance is needed on how to design an online class successfully. Drawing on the design of an asynchronous Digital Marketing online class, this article discusses strategic decisions regarding content creation, personalization, assignments, and assessment ideas that may hold the potential to increase students' engagement in an online class. The insights provided may be relevant and applicable to instructors tasked with teaching online. They will be of interest to a largely academic audience from various backgrounds. Detailed directions on how to replicate the procedures in order to design online classes successfully are illustrated.

Keywords: Online Instruction, Instructional Design, Student Engagement, Canvas

Introduction

Providing equal learning opportunities for students of various backgrounds is an essential goal for premier, student-centered higher educational bodies to achieve. Specifically, at a land-grant university such as Utah State University, serving the public through learning, discovery, and engagement is a value deeply embedded in the university's mission and culture. As personal circumstances, such as restricted funding opportunities or family commitments may often impact a potential student's decision to pursue a degree in higher education, it is crucial to identify ways in which individuals can be offered the opportunity to successfully complete a higher education degree amid their individual situation. Web-based instruction represents one such example enabling students to fit their education around work, family, and unique lifestyles and demands they may have.

In addition, the recent spread of COVID-19 throughout the world has prompted universities to innovate their teaching models in 2019-2020. Colleges were tasked with moving classes online in order to assure a premier education for all students remotely, with the goal of preventing an amplified spread of the virus. Online classes do not only help to promote “social distancing,” but also provide students the ability to manage their workload, both remotely and independently, for a set period of time. In contrast to traditional face-to-face classroom instruction or synchronous broadcast classes, which are mediated by technology (Webster & Hackley, 1997), sections that are taught asynchronously online are typically pre-recorded, allowing students the opportunity to complete learning materials and assignments with a greater degree of flexibility. Critics of online instruction voice their concerns of “digital diploma mills” replacing professors, a pervasive lack of visual cues (Tiene, 2000), and depersonalization of the learning process (Salmon, 2004) that may give advantage to the technology-savvy student segment (Navarro, 2000). However, enthusiasts see the potential for a more individualized learning environment that enables different learning types to perform better (Zhan et al., 2011) and can reduce students’ anxiety (AbuSeileek, 2012). While the adoption of online courses should be critically evaluated, instructors witness a growing demand for asynchronous online classes, challenging institutions to adopt effective curriculum.

In 2001, Mark Prensky defined a large segment of our current student population as Digital Natives, based on their ability to act as “native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet” (Prensky, 2001, p.1). Specifically, he suggests:

Digital Natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to ‘serious’ work. (p. 1)

While the above list of attributes may be particularly descriptive of students titled digital natives, it remains important to acknowledge that age is not the single determining factor of students’ technical abilities. Rather, additional characteristics such as individual usage experience, self-efficacy, and education have to be taken into consideration when classifying a student as Digital Native (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). Specifically, students may be digitally excluded due to socio-economic factors, their cultural background, or personal interests (Bennet et al., 2008; Selwyn, 2009), encouraging instructors to take various levels of technology awareness into consideration when designing their materials.

The following strategies—derived from case studies and the literature—are designed to help instructors develop successful online classes. While the following ideas were applied using the learning management system (LMS) Canvas, all strategies and ideas are transferrable to a variety of other LMS solutions.

Strategy 1: The Creation of Content Cubes

When preparing for upcoming travels, we are often faced with the dilemma of being unable to pack our entire wardrobe or everything we would like to bring into one suitcase, and we realize it is impossible to make everything fit. A popular packing tool for traveling is “packing cubes”—which enable the user to sort and compress personal items and organize suitcases more efficiently. The same analogy applies to online classes; instructors must understand that while it is impossible to include all content from a traditional face-to-face class into an asynchronous online class, it is important to break the content material down into structural “cubes,” which could be modules, weeks, or sessions centered around a particular topic. Based on case experiences, it has proven successful to create a class around three to seven of these content cubes depending on its overall length and topic suitability.

Once the number of content cubes are agreed upon, the same principle applies to the recording of videos. Thus, shorter videos of no more than 15 minutes are recommended by instructional designers and can be broken up by short quizzes either within the video itself or between video sections. Generally, instructors may wish to consider recording original videos using a combination of two software - a camera (to record the instructor) and a screen capturing software (to record the slide deck) - rather than voicing over a large slide deck and not personally appearing in the videos. Media studios on campus are often equipped with the respective technology. This approach allows students to either focus on the captured slide deck and the information displayed on the slides, or the instructor screen, focusing on the instructor, which hones the potential to address different learning types (e.g., visual, aural, verbal). In addition, expert videos, TED Talks, or other YouTube material can be used to make the class as timely as possible. Note that research has found that Digital Natives consider YouTube as a credible helping source for self-instruction (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Instructors might consider applying this insight by using the Canvas function to embed a playlist or by creating a YouTube playlist with various videos integrated into one playlist. Thus, media content can be made more accessible to students.

Additionally, it is advisable to use a digital textbook where possible. Digital Natives may appreciate the use of a digital textbook as it allows them to access their readings from anywhere

and facilitates a learning environment that matches the already familiar digital reading environment.

Strategy 2: The Personalization of Asynchronous Online Classes

Given the need for Digital Natives to collaborate and belong in a digital age (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), it is more important than ever to weave personal elements into an online class. Prior research shows that social presence significantly contributes to effective instruction (Aragon, 2003) and suggests that face-to-face meetings with the instructor and contact with other students serve as a predictor for students' achievement and attitudes (Bernard et al., 2004). As a result, in addition to the recording of personal videos as suggested in Strategy 1, it is crucial to establish online relationships with students that allow personal feedback and interaction, cultivating students' experience and application of emerging technologies in work-related settings (Webster & Hackley, 1997). Drawing on a media channel that is already embedded into students' daily life or setting up calls via video software such as Zoom, Skype, or Google Hangouts can be a fruitful tool to engage with Digital Natives on a personal level and allow for two-way communication rather than one-way lecturing. Canvas, for example, offers a calendar function, allowing instructors or teaching assistants to set up meeting slots that can be booked by students individually, allowing for more effective scheduling of remote video calls.

Additionally, research shows that “student-student and instructor-student communication are strongly correlated with higher student engagement with the course” (Dixson, 2010, p. 1). Thus, based on these findings and practical experiences, it may be recommended to facilitate social interaction not only with the instructor but also between students and their peers. For instance, Canvas allows for the creation of discussion boards that can be used for a variety of tasks (e.g., student introductions; student discussions; student Q&A). In order to provide more personalization and, ultimately, a higher level of perceived social interaction in asynchronous online classes, it is key to provide a variety of meaningful ways to interact.

Strategy 3: The Creation of Relevant and Impactful Assignments that Include Technology

Based on their research insights, Mohr and Mohr (2017) recommend designing assignments that give students a certain degree of empowerment, choice, and sense of

freedom. In addition, they demonstrate that it is vital to understand the impact that assignments can have on Digital Natives and why it is relevant for their personal skill development and future careers. As such, depending on the subject area, it is recommended to consider industry certifications or trainings as part of an assignment which can be completed by students remotely. This allows students to develop their professional skills while being able to add a novel certification to their résumé in order to distinguish themselves in the job market. Examples may include certifications obtained from the Google Academy or other industry-relevant educational programs. Simulations are another fruitful way to allow students to apply their learning in a practice environment before starting their careers. Examples for the field of marketing may include the MIMIC Pro Simulation or the MIMIC Social simulation (Stukent, 2019), in which students run digital marketing campaigns with thousands of simulated dollars.

In line with critics who fear a growing isolation of students learning in online environments (Song & Singleton, 2004), it may be helpful to design assignments that foster group work and student-student engagement online. Such assignments may involve introducing students to case studies, or if possible, to real companies that allow students to work on a small consultancy or campaigning project with the company's guidance. One example applicable in the marketing field may include giving students the opportunity to complete a group work project by acting as an agency that consults a business of their own choice on a given task or subject matter. Another example could be providing a group of students with an opportunity to develop a Public Relations strategy or marketing communications campaign for a business. This campaign could include communication materials, creative ideas, a proposed campaign timeline, and/or a specific budget depending on the instructor's tailoring of the assignment based on student needs/course objectives. Thus, students are enabled to connect with professionals in their field of interest and gain real-life experience working with a business while improving their teamworking skills online, which increases their future employability and likely fuels their interest in the subject-related field. Together, assignments involving certifications, simulated realities, or real-life projects show students the relevance and applicability of the content material while fostering peer-to-peer interaction.

Strategy 4: The Value of Student Reflection

This final strategy builds on all previous strategies and focuses on the formulation of ideas for the individual student with particular regard to suggested assignments and projects. Educational research has continuously demonstrated the importance of student reflection in both traditional and online learning environments (Johnson & Aragon, 2003) in order to foster students' learning experience and increase understanding of the class material and novel

content. Referring to learning as “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1), the highest level of student learning can be achieved by triggering a revised level of interpretation accompanied by critical reflection.

While this may seem naturally achievable by posing questions, sharing personal experiences, or encouraging student discussion in a face-to-face class, it is equally important to implement reflection as a core value into asynchronous online classes. As a result, assignments such as a reflective statement or reflective diary can be paired with the assignments or projects described in Strategy 2 or Strategy 3, serving as an additional way to help students internalize, understand, and value a certain task or group project and its related learning outcomes. Reflective statements will provide students the opportunity to reflect on their performance and critically analyze successes, failures, and key learnings. This will enhance their mastery of subject-related skills by enhancing their understanding of applications in real-world environments and fostering their ability to solve problems independently.

In order to set up a reflective assignment, it may be crucial to educate both instructors and students about the meaning of reflection and the different levels of reflection that can be achieved. For example, this could be based on the four-category scheme for determining the levels of reflection in written work by Kember et al. (2008). In their work, the scholars distinguish between non-reflection, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection and provide helpful examples and definitions with regard to written reflective work. Providing students with a definition and category similar to this example may help them achieve the best reflective outcomes. Reflection can successfully be encouraged in asynchronous online classes by including reflective assignments, embedded with the preceding principles.

Conclusion

Online instruction is an important component of higher education and has witnessed immense growth over the past decade, particularly catalyzed by the spread of COVID-19 in 2019-2020, forcing universities worldwide to move classes online. While the present paper aims to suggest strategies for successful content creation and design of online classes drawing on the example of an asynchronous Digital Marketing online class, the final design of a class will remain sensitive to the subject matter of the course as well as the individual and personalized approach by the instructor. A meta-analysis conducted by Bernard et al. (2004) reveals that findings regarding the effectiveness of distance education vary largely across studies and may be subject to each individual component involved, which emphasizes the difficulty in providing an overall solution as well as the important role that the instructor plays

within this process (Lavoie & Graul, 2020). As a result, this work aims to provide a first-hand account of ideas for successful online instruction—derived from case studies and the literature—that are both relevant and applicable to other fields. This work intends to stimulate future research in the areas of higher education and online instruction with particular regard to the importance of individual instructor characteristics. The creativity and openness of the instructor to embrace novel teaching approaches, assignments, and projects is expected to be crucial in designing successful and engaging online classes.

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