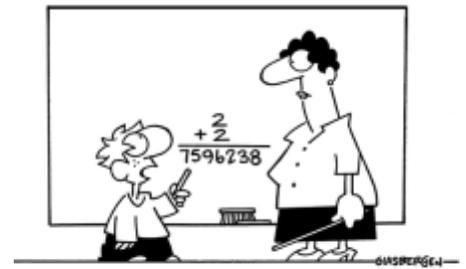


Evaluating Online Courses

“Biases against distance learning programs are still very much in evidence, and skeptics abound. Nonetheless, distance learning technologies are growing at a rate that outpaces our ability to develop sufficient guidelines. The challenges are enormous ones, and very real—so are the opportunities”



“In an increasingly complex world, sometimes old questions require new answers.”

Guess: In what year was the above statement made?

Background Reading: “By evaluating and assessing distance education with the criteria from traditional education models we perpetuate doing what we’ve always done. Our evaluation criteria shape the learning experiences we create. When we strive to re-create the classroom experience we limit teaching and learning to what works best in face-to-face situations. As Bourne and others point out, the “sage on the stage” becomes the “sage in the box” on video and/or audio clips. Online education can be so much more.

We have always been constrained by our knowledge and experiences. Take the invention of the printing press for example. It took a few generations for printers to realize that the new technology created new possibilities. The early printers tried to make their books look just like the handwritten manuscripts that they knew so well. They were using the new technology to do the same old things differently. They didn’t understand that the new technology made it possible to do different things. Eventually they realized they were now able to print much smaller and simpler, thereby reducing costs and improving access and affordability. By focusing on whether we can do the old things just as well in different ways, we are blind to the possibilities of doing new and different things.

The common uses of online education were summarized by Bourne and others. “The most current use of asynchronous learning networks (ALN) transfers traditional classroom/lecture based methods to the ALN setting. There has been little examination of the ‘art of the possible’”. Currently online learning consists of online materials, a convenient method of

submitting and grading assignments, audio and video clips of lectures, and interaction with students via email, bulletin boards, and listservs. However, online education creates a novel instructional environment with its own particular advantages, limitations, and challenges. Consequently, Internet-based education is evolving its own pedagogy that is challenging traditional education. “Too often we try to emulate the classroom The fact is that online learning is affecting how we teach in traditional classrooms”.

Certainly, there are general guidelines that hold true for all educational endeavors, regardless of the content or delivery method. But we need to look carefully at the questions we ask for they shape the programs we develop. We “teach to the test” whether the test is to assess student achievement or to evaluate our educational programs. Old theoretical frameworks and metaphors traditionally applied to distance or traditional face-to-face education may be misleading or serve to limit the potential of computer conferencing. Online education is emerging as a new educational paradigm due to the change in student interaction and independence that telecommunications and computer media can potentially introduce. This new paradigm promotes anyplace, anytime education allowing global communities of learners based on shared interests, changing how we teach and learn, thereby creating a true learning society.”

Is "As Good as Face-to-Face" As Good As It Gets? Jeannette McDonald, DVM, PhD, Director of WisTREC, UW Madison School of Nursing,
http://www.aln.org/publications/jaln/v6n2/v6n2_macdonald.asp 2002

How to Start and What to Look For....

1. Gain Access to the course. Most colleges have a technical support team who can put you into the course. Select a role that will give you the greatest access. Usually that would be as a student or as an instructor. If you can get enrolled in a role that allows you access to course statistics, you should opt for that.
2. Make sure that, if you were a student, you would know what to do first. Look for an announcement or syllabus document that tells students how to navigate the course. If you can't figure out what to do, it's likely students can't either. If you find no beginning instructions, ask the instructor if there were some and, if so, that you'd like to see them. Sometimes, the beginning information is not obvious a few weeks into a course.
3. Make sure that the instructor has made available written expectations (discussion board ethics, rubrics, assignment deadlines, etc.), instructions, and necessary information regarding what students will need for the course (software, books, applications, etc.).
4. Check to see that there's more to the course than just publisher prepared materials! (Instructor prepared lectures, video files, audio files, PowerPoint presentations, etc.)
5. Determine that there is "Regular Effective Contact" going on.
 - Check Discussion Forums (see more detail on the last page of this document)
 - Are there regular announcements?
 - Check course statistics, if you can, for how often the instructor and students visit the course. The time in the communication activities should be often and regular.
 - If you see little evidence of instructor initiated interaction, ask the instructor, "How much email do you usually receive from students, how quickly and how often do you answer them?" Many instructors use email to connect with students. It is good for interaction between the teacher and the student but is usually student initiated, which means that some students won't participate. A combination of discussion forums and email is the best evidence of effective communication.
6. Try to follow one lesson, activity, or unit from start to finish. If you think it makes sense and that students will learn what they should be learning in a comparable FTF course, then you have the beginnings of a good online class!

Course Structure

- Is there a clear sense of structure?
- As a student, can you tell what to do first?
- Are there clear instructions about when things are due?
- Are students using the discussion forum to ask for help finding things?

Course Content

- Are there instructor prepared materials?
- Are there clear and varied methods used for delivering content?
- Is there sufficient content to cover the same material as in the FTF course?
- Are there additional

Asynchronous Discussions

- Learners should be required to participate (and their grade should depend on participation).
- Discussion groups should remain small (class size determines the need for small groups).
- Learners should receive feedback on their discussions and should, for at least some forums, be required to respond to other students' postings.
- Evaluation should be based on the quality of postings (and not the length or number).
- Instructors should post expectations for discussions.
- Instructors need to provide two types of feedback: information feedback and acknowledgment feedback.
- Discussion questions should cause students to synthesize content presented.
- When you check discussion forum responses by students, watch for subject lines that say "Help" and discussion content that suggests students are lost.
- Teachers won't always answer every post, nor should they. You are looking for them to be present in a balanced way. Sometimes, a teacher just summarizes several student postings in a discussion, and that works well. There is a fine line between interrupting student participation and encouraging it.

Other Things to Consider...

In Canvas, there is an opportunity for teachers to give direct feedback in the speed grader function. You should check to see that there are grading rubrics and comments given when grading student work. Comments can be written and/or recorded in an audio file directly into the grading tools. Is the turn-around time for feedback stated in the course policies and do you see evidence of it being done in a timely manner?

Email is also used more in Canvas due to the course level inbox that makes it easier for teacher and student to track. The course may be designed so that email is minimally used and that's okay, too. Just be sure that there is an obvious teacher presence.

It might be useful for you to review the [OEI Course Design Rubric](#) and the [@ONE Teaching Standards](#) before you start an evaluation. Both will give you an idea of what effective design and teaching practice should look like.

Did you guess correctly? The statement on page 1 was made in 2002 in the original article by Jeanette McDonald.