University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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From the Office of the Associate Dean

Are On-Site Courses as Effective as Online?

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This article is from *Online Classroom, Ideas for Effective Online Instruction–Volume 1*, and is used with the permission of *A Magna Publication.*

Despite the fact that online learning is pretty well-established learning modality, there are those who continue to discuss and debate whether online is equivalent" to on-site. There are thousands of "no significant difference" studies. For those of us who have been online for some time, the issue is settled. We no longer entertain the question. It is a moot point with us. In fact, a recent experience of simultaneously teaching online and on-site has me asking quite the opposite question: Are on-site courses as effective as online?

Perhaps it is time to change the discussion. Have become acclimated to facilitating online, I find myself declining on-site courses. As I reflect upon my tendency to do so, I realize that it is a matter of efficiency. From my vantage point at this time, on-site courses are less efficient for me compared to online. Nevertheless, this term I accepted one and have had occasion to reflect upon the experience.

In preparing to teach on site, I found myself spending time making photocopies rather than designing learning activities, the equivalent of on-site prepping for the class. At the outset, in trying to present PowerPoint slides, I discovered the room was not equipped for such an approach. In addition, as the class sessions took place, there was this phenomenon called student absences. These were disruptive to the continuous flow of the course as students were at different places in their understanding of material. This is problematic in courses where the material is linked and builds toward a comprehensive understanding, such as accounting.

When students submitted assignments, I found myself toting disorganized stacks of material rather than viewing them through an electronic grade book. I always know where the papers are and haven't lost any with the electronic grade book.

In anticipation of giving tests, I found myself wandering the halls looking for a Scantron machine. If these inefficiencies of on-site course management are the case for me, I began to wonder about the efficiency of the course from the student perspective. Moreover, as I realized the drain the inefficiency of the onsite course had on my personal efficacy in the classroom, I then began to wonder if it had the same impact on the students. I wondered if the course is as effective for them as my online students.

Academically, I have 20 years of experience teaching the subject with six different institutions. But how does this compare with the fact that the vast majority of these sections are taught by adjunct instructors who have likely not studied curriculum design and who take on the course for additional income? According to the students, many of the adjuncts tend to stray from

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curriculum design and who take on the course for additional income? According to the students, many of the adjuncts tend to stray from the syllabus, whereas online the students are all completing the same learning activities regardless of the facilitator in our system.

Online, the students have to become more effective readers. During our discussions in the on-site course, some of the students have pointed out to me that the reason they are in the course is because they tried to take it from other institutions only to find that many of the other students in the course were not serious about the subject. The onsite students also pointed to having had instructors who did not know the subject matter well or could not explain it well. It began to dawn on me that all these factors are largely mitigated online.

As we have continued to develop and improve our online courses, the structure of the courses has increased. Once students become acclimated to this style of learning they seem to excel. Absences largely do not exist and are not a disruption to the course. The student who is serious about the course is largely not affected by the student who is not serious. All of this has me asking myself if on-site classes are as effective as online.

While the on-site classroom has enjoyed the perception of being the place where a student can "really get it" as far as content, on-site courses have issues that can adversely impact their efficacy. This realization has not gone unnoticed by the institutions administration. Some have begun to suggest that the on-site courses need to be as well structured as the online course. In light of all this, is it possible that the "no significant difference" studies have not accounted for some of these on-site realities because they are qualitatively understood and difficult to measure? I have to ask because I don't bother to read them anymore. It is possible that were these on-site realities measured, there might be findings of "significant difference" only in the direction not currently presumed? Actually, never mind! I'm just happy that I'm able to teach both online and on site. I'm glad we are past the day when I was told to shut down my online courses (in 1994) because online is not "academically sound."

By Dale Fowler, instructional designer at the Center for Distributed Learning at Indiana Wesleyan University.

Course Design, Monitoring Help Ensure Academic Honesty

This article is from *Online Classroom, Ideas for Effective Online Instruction– Volume 1***,** and is used with the permission of *A Magna Publication.*

In one of the first online courses taught by Barbara Christe, assistant professor of electrical engineering technology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, it was obvious that two students completed an online exam together. They submitted questions in the same order and changed their answers within seconds of each other. When confronted, these students admitted to using cell phones to collaborate on the exam, but they said they were unaware this was wrong because working together was not expressly forbidden.

Regardless of whether or not the students honestly believed they were innocent, the incident illustrated several important points for Christe regarding academic honesty in the online classroom that have influenced here course design, facilitation, and assessment ever since.

Syllabus

Christe's approach to ensuring academic honestly involves proper instructor and student preparation, a clearly written syllabus designed specifically for the online environment, course delivery that uses technology appropriately and does not merely mimic face-to-face lectures, and assessment and monitoring techniques that make cheating less likely.

Most students know what to expect and what's expected of them in the traditional classroom — they attend class, take notes, ask questions, and take exams — but in the online classroom, students especially those new to this environment, don't know what to expect or what's expected of them.

Course Design, Monitoring Help Ensure Academic Honesty Continued

To make these expectations clear, the syllabi for Christe's courses place a special emphasis on

- Carefully crafted course objectives
- Behavioral objectives
- Definitions of academically inappropriate behavior
- Institutional policies regarding dishonest behavior
- Reasons for being honest
- Relevance of the course material
- A description of monitoring tools for ensuring student compliance with course guidelines
- As assessment of student preparedness for the course
- Clear deadlines
- Procedures for handling common technology problems

Instructor's role

Instructors' understanding of their own roles in the online classroom is also an important part of ensuring academic honesty. "You need to know what your job is so that you can communicate well with your students. If you know what you're supposed to do, then the students will be able to do their jobs well because it's my assessment that students don't necessarily want to cheat, but they don't necessarily know what's expected or how to do what's required. So they make choices that aren't necessarily what you wish they would make, " Christie says. "You jeed to know what your job is so you can communicate well with your students. You need to be a guide, assisting students in their learning and not necessarily the preacher of their learning."

Simply putting lectures online can lead to inappropriate behaviors because this approach, although still prevalent among educators, is not very effective, Christe says.

Monitoring students

OnCourse, the course platform Christe uses, provides her with information on when students log in and how many times students access an assignment page, but she cannot track individual students within the course. "There are lots of privacy issues that I can't seem to get around. It's a dilemma because if I could be more knowledgeable I think I could assist the students a little bit more," Christe says.

At the end of every unit there is a self assessment, and Christe can tell how many students have completed it, but she can't tell whether they've done the self-check questions within a homework assignment.
Although it doesn't enable her to track students. Christe monitors her courses by logging in as a student. This gives her access to e-mail messages students send to the whole class, something that she would not as the instructor ordinarily have access to.

Redesigning assessment

In the type of fact-based courses Christe teaches, exams are still predominant form of assessment. One of the ways Christe reduces academic dishonesty in exams is by using large test banks so that each student gets his or her own set of questions on each exam. "Set it up that way so there's not an opportunity [to cheat]. Don't lay out the candy and say, 'Don't touch it," Just give them the best testing environment you can," Christe advises.

Christe searches for answers for each exam question using Google to ensure that each question is designed to minimize the possibility that they might get answers from the Internet. "I make sure that my questions are always in reverse, meaning that the key word is not in the question but in the answer," Christe says.

Since each of Christe's multiple choice exams is timed, even if a student does use the Internet, textbook, or some other information source to help them, there is not enough time to look up and find the answers to more than a few questions.

Although multiple-choice exams are her main assessment tool, Christe does not rely on them exclusively.

"One of the things I've been trying to do is provide a range of assessment pieces — multiple-choice tests, research exams, position papers, PowerPoint presentations. At the end of the semester, I look back and ask, "Is there another idea I can use?" Christie says.

"I try to find new ways to use the technology to provide them with another opportunity to express themselves in a way that I can grade that will provide some assurance that it's all the individual student's work," Christe says.

ACADEMIC/ ADVISING DATES

Thursday, February 8, 2007
Spring Employment Expo
9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Illini Union

Friday, February 9, 2007
Deadline to drop or elect credit/ no credit for a 1st half-session course
1:00 a.m. – 1:00 a.m.

Tuesday, February 27, 2007
Spring Engineering Career Fair
February 27-28, 2007
10:00 a.m.—4:00 p.m.

Thursday, March 1, 2007
Teacher Placement Day
9:00 a.m.—3:00 p.m.

ExplorACES coming soon! March 9-10

The 2007 Student Awards Banquet will be held on Sunday, April 22nd at 12:00 noon at the Hawthorn Suites in Champaign, IL.

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