

# Academic Programs



*From the Office of the Associate Dean*

## The Evolution of Online Course Development: From Basics to Bells and Back Again

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By B. Jean Mandernach, PhD

The venture into online course development can be a daunting journey. Not only must you navigate the nuances and strategies of effective online course facilitation, but this must be accomplished in harmony with the creation of an online course structure that allows you to stimulate, inspire, and educate students in the novel environment of the virtual classroom.

Typical of many first-time online course developers, I slowly set about the task of uploading electronic imitations of the best practices from my face-to-face classroom into my online course. My first online course consisted of a collection of readings, pictures, lecture notes, and written assignments. I had experienced reasonable success as a traditional instructor, so I modeled my online

course after its face-to-face equivalent. Much to my delight, my inaugural class of online students was generally satisfied with the course and demonstrated learning outcomes comparable to their face-to-face counterparts.

Inspired by this initial success, I began to embrace the unique benefits available through e-learning and my online course started to evolve. In a matter of three years, my online course was transformed from "just the basics" to a showpiece of all the latest "bells-and-whistles." Units of information were supplemented with a dizzying array of audio, video, PowerPoint shows, animations, Flash presentations, podcasts, and similar digitized instructional aids. The written assignments were technologically infused through the incorporation of blogs, wikis, and threaded discussion boards. I even went beyond the limitations of the asynchronous environment to incorporate live-stream video, synchronous virtual office hours, and chat. Unconstrained by the time limi-

tations of a traditional face-to-face classroom, I was now able to include more content, more resources, and more activities. By fully embracing the flexibility of online learning in conjunction with the range of multimedia and educational technology available, my online class had become my personal masterpiece.

My students did not share my perception of this masterpiece as the ideal online classroom; rather, student complaints and difficulties with the course increased. I was now spending a considerable amount of time troubleshooting technology challenges rather than discussing course content. Students lacking cutting-edge computers or high-speed Internet connections struggled to take advantage of the resources available. In addition, the sheer volume of information and resources in the class led to ongoing student problems in meeting deadlines and maintaining the pace of the course. Most importantly, student learning did not overwhelmingly increase as a result of my newfound techno-



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## The Evolution of Online Course Development: From Basics to Bells and Back Again continued

logical savvy. My online course had evolved from the incorporation of best practices and resources that had proven effective in the face-to-face classroom to a smorgasbord of jazzy supplements with little thought placed on their value, role, and importance within an educational context. Despite the outward appearance of a progressive, high-quality, tech-savvy online course, the pedagogical effectiveness of my online course had decreased. And, as such, another phase in the evolution of my online course design has begun.

Embracing the spirit behind the scholarship of teaching and learning, my philosophy toward the incorporation of multimedia and educational technology in my online course has shifted to address the instructional challenge of utilizing the available technology within the appropriate boundaries of student learning, educational goals, course context, and student technology access. Through deliberate monitoring of the educational impact of various multimedia supplements and technology-mediated activities, my flashy “masterpiece” of an online course is evolving back to a manageable balance of “basics and bells.” The result is an integrated reflection of multimedia inclusion founded on learning effectiveness research specific to my course content, objectives, and student population.

Consistent with this philosophy, there is no magic “rule” for determining appropriate incorporation of multimedia and instructional technology that generalizes to all courses,

disciplines, or populations. Rather, these selections must be made through the diligent, reflective balancing of empirically supported strategies within the unique context of a given online course. Clark and Mayer (2002) provide the following six principles of effective e-learning based on research in cognitive psychology as it applies to the virtual learning environment to guide course-specific decisions:

1. **Multimedia principle**- The incorporation of relevant instructional graphics to supplement written text improves learning through the dual coding of verbal and visual information.
2. **Contiguity principle**- To facilitate effective learning, graphics and text must be placed closely together on the screen so that limited working memory is reserved for learning content rather than coordinating graphics with text.
3. **Modality principle**- The inclusion of audio to explain graphics enhances learning more than simple written text via the expansion of cognitive resources by simultaneously tapping both visual and phonetic memory processes.
4. **Redundancy principle**- Generally, learning benefits more when graphics are supplemented with audio alone rather than audio and redundant text as there is a reduction in cognitive overload.
5. **Coherence principle**- Using visuals, text, and sounds that are not essential to the instructional explanation can impede learning by interfer-

ing with the ability to integrate new information with prior knowledge.

**Personalization principle**- The use of conversational tone and a learning agent (such as a person or character who guides instruction) enhances learning by engaging the learner through reliance on social conventions to listen and respond meaningfully.

Student learning undoubtedly benefits when online courses incorporate relevant, appropriate, meaningful multimedia supplements. The key for online instructors and course developers is to identify multimedia enhancements that are uniquely beneficial for each discipline, course, and student population. It is through this continual, reflective process of multimedia inclusion that the evolution of online course development can ensure a focus on the real challenge: enhancing student learning.

### Reference:

Clark, R.C. and Mayer, R.E. (2002). *E-learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer.

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## Making Cell Phones in the Class a Community Builder

This article is from *The Teaching Professor*, March 2007, and is used with the permission of *A Magna Publication*.

By Alan Bloom, Valparaiso University, IN

The first time a student's cell phone rang in my class, I was angry and frustrated. With their musical ringers, cell phones that go off in a class are rude and distracting. But how to respond? I've never been very good at playing the heavy. Was there any way I could take this annoying occurrence and twist so that I would contribute to a more positive classroom environment.

I devised a "cell phone protocol" that has enabled me to make peace with the problem. As it appears in the syllabus, the protocol reads: "**Please turn off your cell phone ringer while in class. Mind you, violation of this protocol will demand punishment—though one that clearly does not infringe on your eighth amendment rights.**" I then ask someone to identify the eighth amendment, and as a history professor, I'm happy to report that someone can always explain the constitutional limits on cruel and unusual punishment. I advise students to turn off their ringers in class, and I note that if someone's phone rings, he or she will have to provide the class with food. It doesn't have to be an extravagant meal (remember the eighth amendment!), but there must

be enough for everyone. In the beginning, I offered the possibility of a subsidy to economically unable students. However, I abandoned it once I realized that if students could afford a cell-phone package, they could provide treats to about 30 classmates.

The community-building process develops in earnest when a phone actually rings in class. During an episode that otherwise involves an unpleasant exchange, there is now occasion for celebration, as students cheer at the prospect of their upcoming snack. The cell phone protocol, much like a kangaroo court in baseball, which exacts minor fines for small indiscretions, helps to build an esprit de corps and I push this outcome even further. When it is difficult to discern whether the cell phone rang or was on vibration mode, I encourage the students to vote as whether or not a violation has occurred.

So what are the drawbacks of this policy? There are few. The biggest is that even with my policy, cell phones still ring in class and they are just as rude and distracting. I see no way around this problem. In my class, students are distracted, but we grow closer as a result of it. The other potential problem is that an instructor might not want food in the classroom. Fair enough, just have the punishment be something like telling a joke or sharing a poem.

The policy also has produced some wonderful surprises that make me proud of my students.

Once a student decided to skip the standard fare of candy and brought in dried fruit. Although most of her peers (and her teacher) were disappointed with the healthy alternative, this student took the opportunity to encourage people to eat a more healthy diet. And at the end of this past semester, one of my quietest students informed the class that she was disappointed in a classmate who still hadn't brought in food for his transgression. The chastened student, who apparently had extra money on his meal card, brought in a buffet for his dumbfounded classmates.

Ultimately, though, the greatest advantage of the cell phone protocol occurs when someone's phone rings in class and the other students start hooting joyously. It doesn't make the phone ringing less distracting; but on the other hand, how often do you hear student cheering in the classroom?



# ACADEMIC/ ADVISING DATES

Friday, March 16                      May 4-11  
**Deadline** to Add a 2nd half-session      Final Examination Period for SP 07  
Course

March 17-25                      Sunday, May 13  
Spring Vacation                      Commencement

Monday, April 2  
Priority Registration for SU 07 and  
FA 07 begins

Friday, April 13  
**Deadline** to drop a 2nd half-  
session course  
**Deadline** to elect Credit/No Credit  
or change to Regular grade in a  
2nd half-session Course



Wednesday, May 2  
Last day of instruction for SP 07

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