

Getting Ready to Teach Online: A Malaysian Experience

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Abstract

Online discussion in a forum plays a crucial role in the delivery of distance-learning materials. We should not use the learning management system as depository of contents, but as a platform for active exchange of ideas and collective reflections in order to generate new knowledge. This paper looks into online training of lecturers using "e-tivities" to promote online discussions. The training lasted ten weeks and the participants learned the key skills needed to host online discussions and function as e-instructors. This paper also deals with the various aspects of content development for distance-learning modules and the problems encountered.

Introduction

Many private colleges in Malaysia are working towards online education. The basic question is, are the faculty members ready to teach online? Being a good lecturer in a face-to-face classroom environment does not mean that one will be a good e-instructor (online lecturer). When a college ventures into online distance learning there are many things to consider. Among them are training the faculty members and getting the learning materials ready in distance-learning mode. This paper will discuss these two aspects experienced in a private college in Malaysia.

Since there is no need to "reinvent the wheel," some distance-learning content-providers do not give any form of learning materials, as these are easily available in the Internet. On the other hand, some faculty members opt to develop and deliver a complete set of course materials on their own. In this college learning guides—learning materials written in line with the textbook—are used. Our students will have to read the learning guides together with the textbook to get a complete understanding of a topic and perform some learning activities. When producing the learning materials one has to be careful to avoid a standby approach, where traditional course materials are re-worked slightly and then offered as distance-learning materials (Schieman, Teare & McLaren, 1992).

In this college, lecturers were paid to write the learning materials. Hence, the issue of completing these tasks gratis did not arise (Care & Scanlan, 2001). However, we faced many problems getting the lecturers to meet the deadlines.

I believe that the thorny issue of content-writing for distance-learning programs must be addressed carefully. First and foremost, the college must recognize that developing learning materials is creative academic work and, therefore, must be included in the criteria for promotion. Currently, the intellectual property and ownership of the materials is with the college. Many writers were not happy with this arrangement.

Care and Scanlan (2001) are careful to opine that a college policy regarding intellectual property must be handled tactfully so as to encourage more faculty members to write.

Besides preparing learning materials, some academic staff had to attend online training sessions for ten weeks. This is in line with Gold's (2001) claim that lecturers must have actual experience with online learning before they can be expected to be online lecturers. In this online training lecturers learned how to collaborate, reflect and discuss in an online forum. This allows the normal classroom teaching to be replaced by an online forum; the cognitivist style of teaching to be replaced by the constructivist style; and the verbal delivery mode to be replaced by the non-verbal typing mode. In a constructivist learning environment, the lecturer acts as a facilitator who encourages students to discover principles for themselves and to construct knowledge based on their existing knowledge, usually in exploration and collaboration with others. According to McKenna and Laycock (2004) constructivist learning should support knowledge construction through interaction and collaboration. Zhuge and Li (2004) concurred and added that constructivist learning should motivate the students by enabling a more active and exploratory learning process.

The learning experience gained in the online forum was tremendous. The lecturers learned how to design e-tivities (online activities) that will help to integrate their understanding of multiple perspectives through discussion and reflection. The training provided them with the ability to customize learning materials through e-tivities that will help to facilitate the students' ability to construct knowledge. How the e-instructors perform in the online discussion has a major impact on the students' learning and their satisfaction (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003). Moreover, the use of authentic experiences goes a long way in determining the success of online learning. Lecturers were told to put in first-hand experiences when designing their e-tivities (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003).

It is imperative that faculty members recognize the divergence between face-to-face synchronous classroom teaching and online asynchronous teaching. Without proper pedagogical training and online experience, lecturers may simply replicate their best existing classroom experiences onto the online medium. We need faculty support for any educational technological reform to be successful. One of the most important reasons for the lack of faculty support is lack of faculty preparation. Lecturers must be trained in using any new technology.

Content Development for Distance Learning Modules

Two academic schools were involved in the distance learning programs—the School of Computer and Information Technology (SOCIT) and School of Business and Law (SOBAL). The faculty members of each school were selected by their respective deans to write the distance learning (DL) modules. Each DL module team consisted of a content writer(s), a content evaluator, a module leader and an editor. Before the writers began to write, they were trained by an instructional designer. Both the content evaluator and the module leader were given briefing on their roles and instructions on how to fill the checklists.

Content Writer

The content writer had to ensure that the scope of the content matched the learning objectives of the unit. In writing the unit, the writer had to ensure that the contents