

What Do We Know? Best Practices in Online Education

Dr. Jackie Booth, Keiser University
Dr. Andrew Kirschner, Keiser University

Online education enrollment has increased by nearly 20% annually in recent years. Approximately 25% of U.S. college students are enrolled in at least one online course (Sloan Consortium, 2007, as cited in Bacsich, Bourne, & Mayadas, 2009). The online population includes learners with a “wide range of ages, work experience, and family circumstances...” (Bacsich, Bourne, & Mayadas, 2009; Gramling & Hu, 2009). This data illustrates that despite an economic downturn and a 10% national unemployment rate (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010), a diverse and significant body of students continues to enroll in online universities.

The increasing enrollment of these students in distance learning courses highlights the challenge for online instructors to educate this new wave of learners, many of whom have never studied in a virtual setting. The purpose of this article is to provide post-secondary educators with best practices that may help improve all stakeholders’ experience in an asynchronous learning environment. An examination of recent research of online best practices supported by a case study conducted by Nkonge & Gueldenzoph (2006) highlights the importance for faculty to focus on improvement in the areas of communication, discussion rooms, assignments, and writing. Devoting faculty meetings and professional development resources to improve learning environments can produce student outcomes related to current and future societal demands

Communication

While online courses include both synchronous and asynchronous communication, the predominant method of communication in the vast majority of courses is text-based, asynchronous communication. This type of online conversation between teacher and students and student-to-student has the potential to promote learning, assist inquiry, and develop critical thinking skills (Baglione & Nastick, 2007). Communication is also a major component of Vygotsky’s social learning theory that describes learning as the link between previous and new knowledge and skills (Vygotsky, 1978). This construct takes place when learners both synthesize information and ideas individually and through communication with others. Most courses include different media for communication, including email, chat rooms, discussion posts, question and answer, and places to exchange and share documents and websites.

Developing group dynamics. One of the main differences between online and face-to-face class communication is the difficulty of developing a group dynamic conducive to learning. Online learning groups take considerably longer to develop than do those in traditional classrooms (Koh & Hill, 2007). Additionally, they are more fragile and tend to quickly dismantle or break down over delays in feedback and confusion about expectations and procedures. Deliberate and specific efforts to personalize communication, connect with individual students and promote student-to-student interaction can be effective bridges in building group dynamics and strengthening instructor-student relationships.

Identifying academic achievement gains. While there is considerable research that supports a correlation between strong social relationships and academic achievement, research is lacking to support that this correlation also holds true of online social relationships. In fact, a Meta analysis of research prior to 2006 revealed no significant correlation between online discussions and improved critical thinking skills (Maurino, 2007). At least one current study, (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), found that high levels of student satisfaction with all aspects of a course, including instructor, classmates, content, and procedures, increased collaboration and quality of group work. Connecting qualities of online collaboration and group work to student achievement may close the gap in this important research area.

Instructional strategies. Communication and strong social connections between student and instructor can also contribute to a teacher's ability to promote student progress in online courses. Such strategies as differentiating content through a variety of media or adding customized resources to help explain or demonstrate a concept have the potential to strengthen individual achievement and improve the quality of the learning community. Focused professional development training in these aspects of the online communication process can be valuable for both new and veteran instructors. Faculty members need to devote time and resources for additional research studies that could enhance the knowledge base about the effectiveness of online course communication.

Discussion

The discussion areas of most online courses (also called threaded discussions) are considered the gathering place for the class. This area has been described as a place where "students negotiate meaning of course content through interaction with the instructor, materials, and other students" (Bliss & Lawrence, 2009, p.16). Physical anonymity and time flexibility encourage participation, for both students always eager to contribute to class discussions and for those who have been reluctant participants in more traditional settings. Students have the opportunity to think about the questions in advance of a response and read or re-read the text and other sources in preparation for their response. In many cases, students must support their discussion comments and responses with additional research as a portion of their grade.

Convenience Factors. Teachers and students value the flexibility offered by asynchronous online discussions. With discussion threads continuing for hours or days within a course, all students can read questions and responses as often as desired. Faculty can take advantage of the extended time for responses to analyze individual student responses and find ways to guide the class and individual students. Posting unique questions, responding with research and additional resources to support or refute student opinions, and encouraging creative and analytical solutions and ideas enables faculty to support student engagement.

Research Findings. Much of the research on the effectiveness of online learning and in particular, learning through discussion, has focused on student satisfaction and accessibility (Conrad & Pedro, 2009). Although some recent studies have examined ratios of critical thinking in online discussions compared with face-to-face discussions between students and instructors (Maurino, 2007), there are limited examples that replicate this finding or determine its significance. In fact, many of the research studies on discussion and learning outcomes highlight the *potential* for increased critical thinking

skills rather than actual evidence of it (Gerber, Scott, Clements & Sarama, 2005; Bliss & Lawrence, 2009; Baglione & Nastanski, 2007).

Preparing instructors to become effective in online discussions requires current study of research and relevant learning theory as well as practice with both the technological requirements and targeted instructional strategies. It is also important for course designers and faculty to consider carefully the grading emphasis and rubric for assessing student participation as it relates to this important gathering place for learning. Creative and robust research needs to be increased in this area to focus on the reality instead of perception or potential.

Assignments

Online instructors favor providing a wide array of course assignments (Booth & Kirschner, 2010). Differentiated assignments engage students and provide increased opportunities for learning (Nkonge & Gueldenzoph, 2006). Such assignments may prove especially important in an online setting where students risk feeling detached from the traditional, brick and mortar learning environment that provides more face-to-face contact. Assignments should also require high levels of critical thinking to prepare students to meet employer demands in the workplace (Brodie & Irving, 2007).

Differentiation of assignments. An online course may include live synchronous audio-visual chats, interviews, tests, discussions, collaboration, student and instructor constructed videos, field work, essays, television, radio, and newspaper advertisements, research papers, websites, puzzles, PowerPoint and other multimedia presentations, and student-generated assignments. Since students may feel removed from campus life as they complete their assignments remotely, varying the nature of assignments and providing flexibility may fill such a void and energize learners (Nkonge & Gueldenzoph, 2006).

Writing

Quality writing skills help individuals succeed in post secondary education and the workplace. Employers rank written communication skills among the highest sought after quality in an employee. Universities need to develop their writing programs to meet the needs of employers and teach students how to apply college writing in the workplace (Gray, Emerson, & MacKay, 2005). Online instructors report that students often struggle with summarizing text, writing succinctly, and using the active voice (Booth & Kirschner, 2010).

Summarizing text. In order to summarize text, online instructors should advise students to read a passage in its entirety, highlight key points, and record relevant information in their own words. It may be necessary to return to the assignment directions or rubric to ensure the proper focus. Students often summarize information they don't comprehend. This approach may lead to indiscernible direct quotations that don't fit in the larger context of the student's paper or a nonsensical summary that fails to convey an intended message. To avoid this common problem, students should read text repeatedly and deconstruct it for meaning rather than summarizing text they don't understand. If this approach fails, students may search for alternate and more simplistic explanations of subjects through library databases to bolster their comprehension.

Writing succinctly. The adage “less is more” applies to scholarly writing. Wordiness often impedes writers’ ability to convey intended messages. Students should avoid redundancy and be frugal with words. The works of Ernest Hemingway provide valuable examples of the effectiveness of succinct writing. Students often mistake quality writing with superfluous writing and attempt to impress others with an advanced vocabulary that does not fit properly. Easily recognized, this style of writing detracts from the quality of a paper. Students should focus on thinking critically, applying theories to real world situations, and satisfying assignment requirements. Providing exemplary papers in online courses may provide students with samples that help them understand how to write effectively. Instructors should also advise students to write from an outline, proofread, and enlist the help of a peer editor, and revisiting assignments after setting them aside for a few days may also prove worthwhile (APA, 2010).

Using active voice. Students should employ the active voice, a hallmark of scholarly writing, as often as possible. Use words such as “are, am, is, were, be” sparingly (APA, 2010). Students should also avoid using dead and non-descriptive verbs such as “went”. The following sentence provides an example of the difference between the use of the passive and active voices:

Passive Voice:

The boy went home to tell his parents because he is happy about his report card.

Active Voice:

The happy boy rode his bike home to tell his parents about his report card.

Notice the verb “went” has been replaced with the action verb “rode” and the passive verb “is” has been eliminated. The sentence retains its tense.

In order to assist students with the writing process, online professors can model effective writing in the discussion rooms, track changes in content and APA format on assignments, include exemplary papers for students to reference, make referrals to writing centers, recommend effective writing books such as *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White, and hold live video chat sessions within course rooms to model writing strategies.

Conclusion

At this point in the history of distance education, the research should be concentrated more clearly on determining the effectiveness of various elements of online instruction and learning. Convenience, flexibility, and opportunity for increased communication are important considerations in designing education to meet workplace demands. In order to continue the argument in favor of online education, faculties should discuss, collect and share information, and conduct research on best practices for evidence of effectiveness.

References

Bacsich, P., Bourne, J., & Mayadas, A. (2009). Online Education Today. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 13(2), 49-56.

- Baglione, S., & Nastanski, M. (2007). The superiority of online discussion: Faculty perceptions. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 8(2) 139-150.
- Bliss, C. & Lawrence, B. (2009). From posts to patterns: A metric to characterize discussion board activity in online courses. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 13(2).
- Booth, J. & Kirschner, A. (2010). [Best practices in online education]. Unpublished raw data.
- Brodie, P., & Irving, K. (2007). Assessment in work-based learning: Investigating a pedagogical approach to enhance student learning. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(1), 11-19. doi:10.1080/02602930600848218.
- Conrad, D. & Pedro, J. Perspective on online teaching and learning: A report of two novice online educators. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(2). 1-17.
- Garrison, D.R., & Vaughan, N.D. (2008). *Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles, and guidelines*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gerber, S., Scott, L., Clements, D., & Sarama, J. (2005). Instructor influence on reasoned argument in discussion boards. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 63(2), 1042-1629.
- Gramling, J. & Hu, H. (2009). Learning strategies for success in a web-based course: A descriptive exploration. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, (10), 123-134.
- Gray, F., Emerson, L., & MacKay, B. (2005). Meeting the Demands of the Workplace: Science Students and Written Skills. *Journal of Science Education & Technology*, 14(4), 425-435. doi:10.1007/s10956-005-8087-y.
- Koh, M. H., & Hill, J.R., (2009). Student perceptions of group work in an online course: Benefits and challenges. *Journal of Distance Education* 23(2), 69-92.
- Maurino, P. (2007) Looking for critical thinking in online threaded discussions. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 25(3), 241-260.
- Nkonge, B., & Gueldenzoph, L. (2006). Best Practices in online education: Implications for policy and practice. *Business Education Digest*, (15), 42-53. Retrieved from Education Research Complete database.
- Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2010). 6th ed., Washington.
- U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics (2010). <http://www.bls.gov/cps/>
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The Journal of Career Education Principles and Practices
<http://www.keiseruniversity.edu/jcepp/>
Vol. 1, No. 1 (April 2010)