

Converting to a Distance Learning Format

Pre-Planning Strategies

Prior to starting any online training program the instructor should make sure that the course is “ready” to begin. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) This means making sure that the flow of the entire course is thought out with a syllabus that shows connections between topics and most of the instructional materials and activities have been created. Students will quickly lose interest if the instructor is falling behind on their work especially if materials are not available when the student is ready for them.

“The syllabus is the single most important document an instructor can prepare.” (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) It helps students know how the course is structured, the assignments and expectations, and how they will be assessed. A well made syllabus can help students mentally prepare and have a more thorough understanding of what kind of work is going to be expected of them.

Before the beginning of the online portions of the course the instructor should advise students about the time they are expected to spend. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) Often students do not understand the time commitment for online courses. Before enrolling students, the instructor should make it clear just how much time it is going to take.

Taking time to create strategies for encouraging a learning environment that promotes shared learning and teamwork should be planned out before implementation. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) Starting this positive classroom culture before students begin the online portions can be helpful in making each student feel open to communicate in the discussion boards.

Enhanced through Distance Learning

Discussion boards are one of the most useful tools for teaching in distance education. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) When comparing to the face-to-face (f2f) classroom there are several advantages. First, students have equal say given that they are all expected to post responses to the original question. In the f2f environment outspoken students can easily dominate the conversation while more timid or lazy students can blend into the shadows. Second, conversations between students can be easily monitored by the instructor. In the f2f environment if students are expected to dialogue about the content, it is difficult for the instructor to actively observe everyone to make sure that students are not learning the material improperly.

From Instructor Focused to Student Focused

When instructor’s move to the online environment they need to make a shift in focus from presenting material to facilitating students. In distance learning, instructional materials are immediately available to the students which means instructors do not have to present the material. The success of online discussion boards are often measured by the reduced role of the instructor. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) The instructor’s new primary goal is to monitor and react to student learning.

“... methods that focus on the learners and incorporate interactivity have shown to be most

successful. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) The instructor and instructional designer should always be looking for ways to improve the instruction by creating interactive components for the online learning portion. These components will actively involve the learner and encourage learning.

Encouraging Online Communication

“... distance education demands that students become engaged in the learning process.” (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) Helping the students understand how critical communication is during online learning can create motivation to be more involved. Informing students how being passive will take away from their learning and their and the learning of their fellow students, can generate active interaction.

Icebreakers are a great way to humanize the new learning situation. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009) Letting people know that there are actual people on the other end of the many lines of text they are reading can help them stay more involved. Also, being able to put a face or voice to the words will help them come to life.

As with any learning environment if students are going to be sharing and utilizing each other's knowledge they need to be courteous and respectful. (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009)

Resources

Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2009). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education* (4th ed.) Boston, MA: Pearson.