
Technology: a tool for the learning environment

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Abstract

Shows a course model for distance education and the profile of targeted learners for a course in classical mythology. In addition, it demonstrates how electronic delivery was developed to fit two paradigms: a successful course and the learners most likely to have success. Also analyzes the types of interaction necessary for a successful learning environment within the electronic delivery system. The goal of the article is to show the validity of the technological tool chosen for this distance learning situation and to suggest that a quality learning experience is possible within this environment.

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Introduction

There has been steady pressure on regional campuses throughout the USA to develop skill with computerized technology within their colleges and departments. The University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM) has encouraged this development across our campus, and the language department at ULM, with its long tradition of quality teaching, has encouraged my growth. I quickly realized that my teaching methodology had to keep pace with the technological potential of the computer, both to satisfy the demands of my department's reputation and to satisfy the demands of our administration. I began as early as the summer of 1995 to study the incorporation of multimedia materials into the culture and history portions of my language course[1]. My discovery at this point was that I was too old to retrain in a new "language" which is what was necessary to develop Toolbook presentations. I returned to ULM and began working on a grant through the Louisiana Board of Regents for Technology. The award of this grant in 1997 put PowerMacs in our lab, including a multimedia authoring station for faculty, and allowed us to purchase Adobe Persuasion, a multimedia software package which required no computer authoring language knowledge from me. From this point on I have used that criterion as the hallmark of a good technological tool. It allows me to focus on what I know well – Latin – and facilitates my presentation with limited computer expertise[2]. A second grant in 1998 allowed the wiring of our lab, all faculty and departmental offices, as well as every classroom in the building, for Internet access. My department head decided that my language was the logical first language to pursue delivery via the Internet. I chose to begin that venture, not with the language, but with the mythology course, which is a companion course. Classical Mythology, Engl393/Latn303, was offered electronically in the spring of 2000 after a long tradition as a successful on-campus course.

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The university began to research types of electronic delivery systems for distance courses through the various college technology committees. Because I sat on the Liberal Arts Technology Committee, I was aware of Blackboard's existence and its successful use in other states[3]. Because blackboard.com offered a free trial course to professors interested in testing its service, I chose to develop my mythology course using that system. I also decided to enhance the course with the other standard electronic delivery system, the compressed video room, so that ideally the course would use the best of all available technologies.

For the purposes of this article I will use my Classical Mythology Course, offered via blackboard.com[4], as an example of a course which works well electronically. My premise from the beginning was that success with a distance course requires some basic thought and preparation. The questions which assist that thought process are related to quality in the learning environment. If a course works well on-campus, I question the wisdom of offering it electronically unless one can create an equally successful learning environment electronically. The following list of questions was my guide in preparing the mythology course for this method of delivery:

- (1) Is the course capable of standing alone as a valid learning experience for multiple learner profiles?
- (2) Can you clearly define the learner profiles and what the course offers to them?
- (3) Is the course clearly developed in your mind with objectives and goals which are compatible within this medium?
- (4) Have you successfully delivered this course in the traditional classroom so that standards for measurement are available to you?
- (5) Have you set up a clear process for acquiring points in order to achieve grade success for the students?
- (6) What process will you use to reach the non-performers in a timely fashion so that your concern and actions to express and enforce that concern are documented and reasonable?
- (7) How will you deliver your talents as a mentor and guide to these learners?

- (8) What will you consider the proofs of your success beyond completion of the course requirements?

Is the course capable of standing alone as a valid learning experience for multiple learner profiles?

Classical mythology is a course extremely capable of standing alone, that is, outside of a major or minor, as a valid learning experience for multiple learner profiles. It is the mythology which infuses Western literature and art so completely that knowledge of it is often the key to understanding a work of art, written or otherwise. It's not that understanding cannot occur without a mythology context, but that understanding is aided and often multi-layered when a viewer/reader recognizes the artist's use of these symbols and references. To that end the course is timeless in its appeal and increasingly valuable in a distance format as basic components of the liberal education are dropped from standard curricula.

If one understands the tremendous equalizer that the Internet is as a source for knowledge, then offering something so basic to literary and artistic expression becomes eminently justifiable. Further, quality texts and graphics necessary to successfully offer such a course are available at academic Web sites on the Internet. The course may concern itself, then, with guiding and directing the student learner rather than with creating the material for the learner.

Can you clearly define the learner profiles and what the course offers to them?

It is easy to understand that the course itself holds interest and valuable material for a multiplicity of learner profiles. From my experience with the on-campus course, the best profiles for the distance education format are listed below.

- *Profile 1.* The adult seeking a pocket of information not learned previously but now of interest and importance. This learner will possess discipline and drive because of the desire to fill in gaps in information

formerly missed, overlooked, or not available. This learner will have few problems meeting the course deadlines and will most likely be able to fit the work into regular productive periods of the days and weeks of the course.

- *Profile 2.* The adult whose present job/life has shown a legitimate need/use of the material for better job performance. This learner will possess the discipline and drive because of the promise of improved job performance with the additional knowledge gained. This learner will have no problems meeting the course deadlines and will fit the work into regular productive periods of the days and weeks of the course.
- *Profile 3.* The student on a campus who recognizes the need for learning this material and has no access to the course, or has missed the opportunity to take it on campus in other semesters. This learner will find the discipline and drive because without it the opportunity for this unit of credit may be lost. This learner will manage to work out the problems of meeting course deadlines and fitting the assignments into the productive periods of the days and weeks of the course.

The course was supposed to be published as one of the Southern Regional Campus offerings for the spring of 2000. That did not occur, so my enrollment was predominantly from Northeast Louisiana and presently enrolled in on-campus classes. Therefore, the highest number of enrollees did not fit my concept of the best learner profiles for a distance course in that they were students on-campus accustomed to the regular class meeting and attendance rules of the campus. The distance course does not “meet” in that traditional sense, and its attendance becomes the students’ regular involvement with and participation in, the discussion boards and e-mail communications. The reading assignments are posted and necessary to that interaction, but no one is policing a student’s reading performance.

A total of 21 students enrolled, 18 of whom were on-campus students carrying the bulk of their loads on-campus. Of the remaining three students, one was from Oak Grove, a small

community down the road, and was an English teacher in the high school there. One was an older student living in Conroe, Texas, and trying to work on a degree while holding down a job. The last one was a woman from Crossett, Arkansas, who was commuting for this and another class. I offer this information because it helps clarify the problems one has in attempting to institute this avenue of course production. Those students on-campus who did not possess the discipline to work on their own, much less the desire to acquire this knowledge on their own, were not successful in this environment.

Eleven of the 21 dropped the course before the final drop date, mostly at my suggestion through regular notices to deans of the respective colleges advising the students to try again in the fall with my on-campus course. Of the ten who completed the course, there were four As, two Bs, one C, one D, and two Fs. Essentially, the on-campus students who stayed with the course were disciplined performers, predominantly older students, who kept up with the reading load and regularly took part in the discussion boards. Their e-mail contact with me was consistent throughout the course and they attended the video presentations or requested the video tapes, if unable to attend. The two Fs and the D students were all on-campus students who did not really understand that they would have to access assignments and interact with the other students via the Internet. Each quit working at a point in the course and did not bother to submit the final paper. The successful students in the class fit the profiles given above. The four As were all older students, some on-campus, and one, the teacher from Oak Grove, off-campus. The two B students were the two from out-of-state. This performance record supported my contention from the beginning that distance education courses are best suited to those possessing discipline and drive due to circumstances, age, need, or a combination of those factors. Students who are able to access a course on-campus are best served by the on-campus course unless a job or other factors demand the self-discipline to complete it in the distance format.

Is the course clearly developed in your mind with objectives and goals which are compatible with this medium?

Classical mythology enjoys a good level of enrollment and course completion on most campuses where it is taught. That performance record and course development allows the developer of the distance course to apply standards for the goals and objectives of the course. This gives an underlying strength to the conversion of it to an electronically delivered course where technology becomes the tool and not the end purpose of the experience. It is the realization that the same standards for course quality must apply to both the distant course and the on-campus course which will keep the technology supportive of the experience for the learner.

In delivering my course via blackboard.com, I made the technology work as a tool for delivery. Quizzes, discussion boards, e-mails and lecture documents were easily developed through the Web site. Use of a compressed video room three times over the semester allowed me to create an initial face-to-face introductory session where I could explain the course goals and give a guide to the learner in how to tackle the large amount of reading successfully. Then the compressed video room allowed me to bring in a guest lecturer approximately two-thirds of the way through the course to challenge students to follow an expert presentation and interact with that presenter in a confident manner. Finally, the room allowed me to give one traditionally monitored written exam.

Although this component was not necessary, it enhanced the course's effectiveness. I discovered that even the successful students felt better about the course when they could see me and interact with me in real time. Several of them expressed appreciation for what they perceived as my enthusiasm for the subject, and felt the interchange offered them a clearer picture of what was expected and how to deliver it. In the guest lecture compressed video session they were able to interact with another mentor which offered them the opportunity to test their knowledge against another's standard. The guest required some advanced reading, but also worked from the syllabus demands of my

course, so that what we had been doing was being applied to another line of interpretation or reasoning. It was a rewarding experience which helped them feel successful in what they had learned to date and what they were now capable of understanding. The first major exam was in the video room so that the traditional testing method was a component in making the grade. This gave closure to the opening segment of the course and allowed me to put focus on the paper and their discussion boards for the later grade components.

I selected a text which has an excellent Web site as a support to its material. This gave the learner an excellent resource to support the large reading requirement and to assist in preparation for discussion board and test performances. I use Blackboard to link students to other Internet locations for texts, graphics and archeological sites relevant to the readings.

Have you successfully delivered this course in the traditional classroom so that standards for measurement are available to you?

My on-campus course gives me the standard to which the off-campus course must compare. The normal mythology class is vibrant, interesting, and challenging for both the students and me. I find the same adjectives need to apply to the distance course. My expectations, therefore, are high for what this electronically delivered version should elicit from my students. That forces me to interact with them regularly, to monitor their learning experiences as much as possible, and to mentor their thought processes often. Although this takes time, both at the discussion board and in e-mail communications, it is not more than the out-of-class preparation and communication for the on-campus class. My motivation for regular involvement is to insure a good performance on the test and the paper, and a successful closing commentary which will reflect that the student has learned and will carry something of value away from this course.

Have you set up a clear process for acquiring points in order to achieve grade success for the students?

My online course syllabus had a carefully worked out system of point acquisition and I maintained a folder for each student on my desktop where e-mails, grade reports and other such personal electronic communications were filed together. This gave me a visual location from which to monitor the involvement of each student and against which to check my grade book. The total course points were 500 and they were arranged so that a student could not make an A in the course without doing the interactive, participatory chores of the course. This insured the learning environment I wished to create for an asynchronous group of self-motivated learners:

- I awarded a small number of points each week for an e-mail check-in with me on where the student was in the reading assignment, and any other problems, and also to allow for that student's involvement with the discussions posted on the board (105 pts).
- I had a small number of quizzes over specific materials which I wanted the students to learn and which I expected them to use the book to answer to insure correct spellings (70 pts).
- I awarded a small number of points for each compressed video session in order to reward active involvement with the course (15 pts).
- The test, the paper, and the final summary made up the remainder of the course points (310 pts).

What process will you use to reach the non-performers in a timely fashion so that your concern and actions to express and enforce that concern are documented and reasonable?

After the first four weeks in the course, and well before the drop date, I reported to the appropriate college deans any student not participating in the course at all, or not participating adequately. I also sent each student, via e-mail, a grade report on the

participation activities of those opening weeks. Any student not performing in those weeks was encouraged to drop the course and take it on campus with me another semester. I waited until after the monitored exam, which was before the drop date, to send out another report to the respective college deans, and another e-mail grade report. After that point I considered it the student's responsibility to either drop or see to catching up.

How will you deliver your talents as a mentor and guide to these learners?

I carefully read the discussion boards three to four times per week and entered my own thoughts or my own reactions to student conversations. When I felt something needed clarification, this was the avenue I used, although I could also send a group e-mail via blackboard. I utilized individual e-mail and phone discussions when students had problems and wanted specific clarifications of points. In short, I made myself available through the electronic means, as well as the telephone and office time, for students in Monroe. Finally, the compressed video lectures and testing environment helped create a visibility for me as the guide and mentor. All of this together encouraged interaction with students, and it fostered my own enthusiasm for the subject, which can be transmitted, I discovered, as well from a discussion board or an e-mail, as it can from a live lecture.

What will you consider the proofs of your success beyond completion of the course requirements?

The best measures for my success as a mentor are, in my opinion, the interaction of my students with a guest lecturer, the quality of their papers, and the tone and knowledge displayed in that final summation due at the end of the course. These three measures come late enough in the course for a good reflection of details and thought processes resulting from the material covered. There should be some

depth so that discussions are lively and cogent points get made.

The real measure of success, though, is one I may never know, as it comes after the course is over, when a student's use of this knowledge enhances another aspect of work, life, reading skill, literary, and artistic expression or appreciation. Some will continue to communicate with me and indicate these successes. Others will simply go forward with a larger body of knowledge.

Conclusion

The final point of this article is that in my opinion the technological tools of this generation are tremendously effective in enhancing the distance education course, but they are just that, the tools for delivering a better distance course. Technology is not the purpose for offering a distance course, but it is an excellent enhancement. It allows me to deliver a distance course which recognizes that my best distance students are actually more suited to the asynchronous learning environment which computerized technology accommodates so easily. The student not able to function in this format should always choose the on-campus version of the course if possible.

Notes

- 1 I attended the Institute for Academic Technology in Durham, North Carolina, to study Toolbook, a forerunner of PowerPoint, to learn the process. This was done through a foundation grant from ULM.
- 2 I can work a word processing program. I can use the scanner and those software packages which facilitate the development of multimedia. I can access the Internet and use it with or without a media presentation. I have learned to hook up a portable computer to a projection panel. Beyond these basic skills, I have expertise in my field and knowledge of multiple teaching methodologies which work well in that field.
- 3 Blackboard.com is used by a large number of university systems in many states to facilitate both on-campus enhancement of courses and the delivery of distance courses. It has an impressive track record, particularly in the state of California, as a simple way to regularize distance courses formats across a campus so that each offering from that campus has consistency, and to simplify this method of delivery for a wide variety of proficiencies.
- 4 ULM decided to purchase Blackboard's Internet platform for the enhancement of on-campus courses and as an alternate delivery system for distance education courses. I was one of two professors who used the system in a trial test that spring before the actual campus purchase and installation occurred. Now it is available for any professor on campus to use as is appropriate with any course, on or off campus. I have started using it as a supplement to my upper level on campus courses to explore its effectiveness with language instruction.