

Online Technologies Kill Distance in Learning Managing Participation in Online Journalism Courses

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Online learning is a new form of distance learning, and technological inputs are constantly improving it. Various forms of distance education like correspondence, radio and television have existed for many decades now. But they all faced one major hurdle—lack of interaction between instructors and students because of the inherent nature of media. The advent of the Internet has solved this problem to a great extent. Interactivity is the hallmark of the online medium. It is possible for students to communicate with instructors and also with fellow students as well as resource persons, through the use of web technologies. For the first time in distance learning, the student is no more a passive receiver. Learners have a real chance to use different tools to make their learning experience as close to a face-to-face situation.

TEACHING JOURNALISM ONLINE

E-learning is being used for teaching information technology, corporate training courses and even engineering education in India and elsewhere in Asia. An attempt to start a full postgraduation programme in journalism has been made at the Center for Journalism, founded in 2000 by Ateneo de Manila University and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. The Center (<http://cfj.ateneo.edu>) was envisioned as a training and education venue that does not resemble and replicate existing journalism schools in the region. It is unique in that its students are working journalists from the region and it has an international faculty. In the Center's course offerings, theory is taught side by side with skills courses. Moreover it taps the potential of new media for teaching. But unlike most journalism schools, the Center aspires to be an intellectual haven primarily for working journalists. Teachers of journalists make up a second target group, while professionals in the allied sectors such as public relations make up a third group.

Violet B. Valdez, the Center's executive director and chair says:

It aspires to become the regional hub of journalism training and education. It seeks to foster good journalism in the region, a mission guided by a conviction that a viable and

responsible press is essential to the practice of citizenship and democracy. Moreover the Center affirms that the tenets of good journalism remain valid in a society transformed by information technology. The competencies which the Center highlights are those which it deems a journalist living and working in an information society will need to do the job well. We plan the courses with these competencies in mind.

COURSE STRUCTURE

Bearing in mind a primary target audience of journalism professionals strewn all over Asia and the Pacific Islands, the Center chose e-learning or online learning to deliver its courses. E-learning at the Center is distinctive for its five features, namely:

1. the platform used is WebCT, a standalone teaching and learning environment that can design, manage and deliver courses online—whether purely at a distance or as supplement to the classroom environment;
2. the classes are led by an instructor, very much like in a conventional classroom,
3. the classes are run in the asynchronous as well the synchronous mode through the chat room;
4. core courses in the master's programme such as media ethics, media law and advanced reporting skills combine online and on-campus instruction; and
5. learning in these online classrooms is learner-centred, or one where the participants actively take part in the teaching and learning process.

The online programmes offered are of two types: the certificate courses, which are short courses of three to four modules each and are conducted for six weeks, and the degree programme, which leads to the master of arts in journalism.

The Center's online courses rolled out in 2001 during the pilot phase of the programme. From its inception to the end of December 2004, it conducted 38 online courses. Nine of these were hybrid courses. The experience shows that reflective courses such as media and politics, and media ethics can be delivered online as successfully as skills courses. Of the 38 online courses, only three have been aborted and that happened in the first year of the programme. A total of 433 journalists from 21 countries have participated in the courses. The number of countries represented in a class range from two to nine countries. The most culturally diverse class so far has 20 students from nine countries: Bangladesh, Fiji, Mongolia, Nepal, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vanuatu and Vietnam.

The countries that have been represented in our online classes are: Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines Singapore, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Cook Island, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. So far teachers have come from the UK, the US, India, the Philippines and Australia.

The author has designed and taught two eight-weeks courses on 'Reporting on Social and Development Issues' during 2004 and 2005. The course examines the media's role in society, its potential in development, weak points, and the role that practitioners can and should play, ever mindful of their abilities as catalysts of change. The stated objectives of the course are to sensitize journalists on developmental issues and the strong role media can play in promoting development; to develop special skills needed to identify and write developmental stories and need for long-term follow-up as development is a continuous process; and to expose journalists to various cases that highlight how the media has played a positive role in guiding development policies and pointing to gaps in development approaches of governments and international agencies, particularly in the wake of the new wave of globalization.

TECHNOLOGIES FOR E-LEARNING

The communications technologies or tools used to support interaction in distance learning environments can be divided into two categories:

1. Asynchronous (or deferred-time) tools: These tools do not require all participants to be present at the same time. Electronic mail, computer conferencing and discussion boards are examples of this category. These technologies are extremely useful when participants in a learning environment are located in different time zones around the globe.
2. Synchronous (or real-time) technologies: This set of tools requires all the participants to be present at the same time for an interactive session at a pre-arranged time. These include telephony, audio conferencing, video-conferencing, multi-user object-oriented environments, instant messaging and chat rooms.

In a purely online environment like the journalism course that the author teaches, mainly three web technologies are being used—electronic mail and discussion board (both in deferred-time mode), and chat (real-time mode). WebCT e-learning platform provides an easy and user-friendly environment for the use of these three methods.

Electronic Mail

E-mail is a powerful tool available to instructors for both one-to-one and one-to-many communication. Depending on the processing power of one's PC and quality of Internet connection, e-mail can be used to send text, audio, pictures and even video as attachments. The e-mail facility available in WebCT provides for all this.

Based on experiences with the course on social and development reporting, I can say that e-mail is used more as a functional tool for communication as well as a tool aiding the learning process. Students used it mostly to send assignments (besides posting them on the discussion board), ask for extension of deadlines for submission of class work or seeking absence from a chat session. One area where some students used e-mail extensively was finalization of subjects for their final course paper and sharpening focus of their assignment topics. Basically, students used e-mail for queries that they thought were of a personal nature and may not be beneficial to others.

It is pertinent to note that questions and answers exchanged over e-mail are far superior in quality because both are not instant and are written after due thought. So an online learner may not have a chance to ask a question to the teacher, as in a classroom, but he or she has a chance to get a better reply to the question. Another advantage is, since the answer is in textual or written form, it can be saved for future reference, unlike an oral answer given in a 'live' classroom.

The instructor used e-mail to deal with occasional problems relating to absenteeism, delay in submission of assignments, sending feedback on assignments, arriving at consensus on timings for chat, and motivating the 'backbenchers'. To make sure that all students take note of assignments posted on the discussion board, they were asked to acknowledge the same via e-mail. This ensured greater compliance and regular visits to the discussion board. So e-mail proved to be not just a tool of interpersonal communication, but helped in the learning experience as well. Still, its full potential in learning and interactivity perhaps could not be utilized. I have no information on how e-mail was used by students to interact among themselves, but I have a feeling that it was minimum.

I think e-mail could prove to be a great tool for student support, feedback, supervision and unscheduled consultation with instructors. E-mail can also help in crossing cultural and linguistic barriers that separate instructors and learners, besides sidestepping limits imposed by geographies and time zones.

Discussion Board

The online discussion board is an improved version of bulletin boards used by the Internet community in its early days. In an online academic course, this technology is put to a more serious use. It perhaps provides the most important forum for continuous communication

between all course participants. In fact, its being a deferred-time tool is advantageous as it allows greater and qualitative participation in the form of well-considered postings by students. All the postings are archived and available for review all the time. This becomes a collective body of knowledge and resource for all.

The discussion board was used for posting the following:

1. Weekly e-lecture by the instructors.
2. Additional inputs/clarifications on weekly readings.
3. Assignments by the instructor as well as finished assignment by students.
4. Responses/discussion points by students on e-lectures.
5. Students' views on weekly readings.
6. Additional suggestions on readings by students.
7. Information on availability of books by students/instructors.
8. Sharing of professional experience as well as country-specific issues by students.
9. Exchanging notes among a set of students on a particular issue.
10. Announcement of grades.

Since the number of weekly readings posted is large—about 10 or so—usually students were asked to respond to one or two open-ended questions designed to elicit discussion about the topics. Allocating a reasonable percentage of marks for it institutionalized participation in discussions, and postings were constantly monitored. But my experience says that there is still a greater need for participation from students. One of the ways it can be done is requiring students to respond to other students' postings for a minimum number (say three) so as to have a complete round of discussion among the participants.

A key differentiator with classroom teaching is posting of finished assignments by students on the discussion board. Though usually students' assignments are not discussed, this helps in bringing in openness and motivates students who are lagging or are not up to the mark to do better. This is simply not possible and is not practised in classrooms except where projects are done where the output is non-text material, like a poster or something similar.

Yet another key method of boosting participation is to engage groups of students in projects. Ideally, student groups should select a topic by consulting among themselves online and start working on the project. They can set aside part of the discussion board for their project and use other tools such as e-mail and chat as well to work on their project. Such an exercise could greatly enhance online collaboration among students.

Chat

Chat is the only real-time tool of interaction and communication available in the WebCT platform. Weekly chat sessions were scheduled through consensus. Chat sessions usually lasted

for an hour. Although no subjects were fixed for discussion, chat sessions were used for talking about topics covered during the week. It was largely unstructured—but moderated by the instructor—chatting. Students sought clarifications on academic matters like assignments, course papers, deadlines for submission and grades, and asked questions relating to content of the course. It also provided a forum for students to share their experiences on a particular issue, since all of them came from different countries and backgrounds.

To use the analogy of conventional teaching, a chat room is not exactly a classroom but one can call it the coffee house of the university where students and instructors gather and chat. The basic objective is to give the class a feeling of togetherness and instil a sense of participation. From the learning point of view, the objective is to fill gaps that may be there after the discussion board and reading sessions. It is also a platform for peer learning.

Of course, there are disadvantages as well. Because of the inherent nature of the tool, it allows more than one person to ‘talk’ at the same time. So, if many people are conversing at once, the listening etiquette of a classroom can not really be adhered to. There is also problem of cross-talk at times. But these are minor issues that can be tackled with little bit of structuring and effective moderation. I am not too sure if it may be a good idea to prepare students in advance with specific questions or content for them to mull over before engaging in dialogue.

Posting of chat logs (after a light edit) on the discussion board helps students review what transpired and think over various points in depth. The records are also available for a future reference. These logs may also help absentee students to read and then post their comments and views on the discussion board.

Some factors that can limit student participation are proficiency in English, typing speed and quality of Internet connectivity. However, in my course we did not encounter any problems on the first two counts, but quality of access remains an issue if you have to remain logged in for an hour or so at a stretch.

CONCLUSION

In an online learning situation the conventional student–instructor relationship does not remain valid. In online learning students are not empty receptacles into which the ‘lecturer’ can pour his or her knowledge. Here the role of a teacher or lecturer is not just to lecture, assign students and evaluate them in an exam. An online instructor is more of a facilitator, moderator and hand-holder for students. And he or she is not the sole repository of knowledge and wisdom. Students can learn from each other, and a receptive instructor can learn from students.

For a variety of reasons, a traditional classroom does not provide enough room for feedback, interaction and peer learning. On the other hand, success of an online course is solely driven by these very factors. And in all this, participation of students is the key.

No doubt the so-called human touch—in terms of face-to-face classroom situations and meetings—is missing from online teaching, but there are so many tools available to compensate for this loss. Instructors and students can leverage these tools in a way so as to provide that human touch with aid of communication tools. In cross-cultural settings like ours, text may be more potent and close to human touch than voice-based or personal communication because of differences in how English is spoken in different parts of the world.

Technology has given us a new way to communicate and come together despite boundaries of distance, time zones and cultures. We can use it in a way that furthers human communication and learning from each other, rather than becoming a slave of technological tools.

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