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Online Instruction: What works, what doesn't?

By Phil Garing

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T.H.E. Journal has published a study where researchers interviewed 21 online instructors with a series of open-ended essay questions. We review their findings and add our own comments [in brackets]:

A lot of issues related to bandwidth limitations and the dominance of text in Web-based classes. [While wider bandwidth systems are being installed all the time, it seems that a lot of that extra capacity is being soaked up by new users, rather than allowing faster access to existing users. This problem may be around a while. One solution: don't rely solely on the Internet as your delivery medium. Text is more accessible to people in PRINT so leave it that way, exploit the Internet for its strengths as a visual medium, and a point of access to current information].

Some instructors feel as if a lifetime of teaching skills goes by the wayside. They can not use their presence and their classroom skills to get their point across. Nor can they use their oral skills to improvise on the spot to deal with behaviour problems or educational opportunities. [Synchronous communication methods such as chat provide a forum for immediate and personalised feedback, but they require a new set of skills from facilitators. They don't however facilitate the 80% of communication that is non-verbal. Look carefully at your learner profile, face-to-face contact may well be an essential component of your delivery mechanism.]

Because of the reliance on text-based communication and a lack of visual cues, every aspect of the course has to be laid out in meticulous detail to avoid misunderstandings. [In many face-to-face environments, presentation materials such as OHPs, handouts etc. account for less than a third of the process of instruction. The bulk comes from the interaction between instructor and learner. Migrating to an online environment necessitates finding ways of capturing this process. Online courses that rely solely on the conversion of existing

teaching resources will lack this depth of structure, and are consequently more likely to result in shallow learning and low motivation and retention levels.]

They respond to threaded discussion questions, evaluate assignments, and above all answer questions clearing up ambiguities, often spending an inordinate amount of time communicating by e-mail. [Fact: it takes longer to type something than say it. While online learning remains text based, it will always take more time to communicate. Because it is often asynchronous, the process will continue to be repetitive for instructors. Solutions: design learning activities that provide extensive feedback for students; design instructor communication so that it addresses a range of issues in one hit; build communication between learners so they support each other.]

The Web environment presents a number of educational opportunities and advantages over traditional classes, such as many informational resources that can be seamlessly integrated into the class.

[Proper integration not only requires making access to the resources, but also putting in place learning activities that guide learners in the use of the resources.]

The fact that students must write their thoughts down, and the realisation that those thoughts will be exposed semi-permanently to others in the class seem to result in a deeper level of discourse.

There is an initial feeling of anonymity, which allows students who are usually shy in the face-to-face classroom to participate in the online classroom.

[These two points together illustrate one of the fundamental differences between emailing an instructor and posting to a threaded list: privacy versus exposure. When dealing with reticent learners, good communications systems will build confidence with the technology through private email communication prior to 'group' communication.]

This same feeling of anonymity creates some political differences, such as more equality between the students and professor in an online class. [Very true. Learners will often be quite vocal and insistent in an online environment in a way they wouldn't face-to-face. Instructors who prefer to maintain a level of professional status in their relationship with learners may not be comfortable in an online environment.

<http://www.thejournal.com/magazine/vault/A3407.cfm>

Learning Management Systems: Dotcom collapses, minimising your risk

Choosing the right Learning Management System

A recent Updater looked at a range of issues you should consider when selecting a LMS. We've got another one to add to the list: financial viability of the provider. Recently there's been a rash of mergers and shutdowns, precipitated in part by the broader Dotcom shakedown. Some examples:

Click2learn has bought Intelliprep

Pensare is closing its doors

Headlight.com is turning out the lights (CyberU will provide Headlight's former customers with continued service)

SmartForce announced it will buy icGlobal

Saba will acquire Human Performance Technologies

Centra acquired MindLever

(Source: Brandon Hall)

This raises the issue of service continuity when buying into a proprietary system. The downside of buying into a proprietary system is that the more time and effort invested in building up courseware, the greater difficulty there is in migrating to a new system. When buying into a system you're betting that it will survive financially, and that it isn't going to get behind the pack with emerging technologies.

Other options to consider:

Go with a service that delivers your content for you, and let them worry about maintaining the infrastructure. While you'll pay higher service costs, you'll find it easier to change providers if

necessary.

In the early stages, don't rush in and buy into a system. Take time to experiment and develop a clear understanding of your organisations needs, and also gather information on who the leaders are with the sort of delivery infrastructure you require. The chances are that you will have a range of knowledge management and skills development issues to address, whatever system you use. Make inroads here first before limiting yourself to an off-the-shelf delivery system.

Phil has been involved in a number of projects in the field of flexible delivery, both research based and product-based. In addition he has developed a number of industry based flexible delivery packages and open learning packages in the Polytechnic sector. He also works as a staff development consultant.<http://www.toucanhouse.co.nz>

Golf Instruction

By Andy West

A boy once learned to double his driving yardage from a single tip, and later wrote a book about it and dedicated it to his instructor. A career in golf instruction can be extremely rewarding, and lead to unexpected great occurrences. The key to getting involved in golf instruction is simply finding it in your heart to make time to do it.

Common misconceptions about golf instructors are that they were PGA professional players, or local golf pro's for a country club. This is not the case most of the time, and often those involved in golf instruction simply have experience in the game of golf. They have received some education that allows them to instruct others. While being a former pro might add to your credibility, it won't make or break a golf instruction career.

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Often people will wonder what the best way to get involved with golf instruction is if they aren't to become a professional golfer. The answer to this commonly asked question is through education. There are academies that will train students to become golf instruction experts, and help them earn relevant certifications to prove it. This is the easiest way to get certified, and help your business career in golf instruction take off.

While chances are the most suitable job will be at a country club, there are other places one can be involved in golf instruction. For one thing, the driving range is a great place to get many clients and keep a robust business. On a driving range people are often working on their swing, which of course is one of the most fundamental elements of golf instruction. It makes perfect sense that a large amount of business would come from the driving range.

Another great way to make money on golf instruction is through freelancing. The usual routes taken to obtain a qualified golf instructor can intimate many people. They will normally look in the local classified ads. As golf gains in popularity, the opportunity for freelancers is great. Also, freelancing in golf instruction allows one to obtain valuable experience that they can use towards building a career in golf. There aren't many freelance careers with more demand than that of golf instruction. Everyone seems to want to improve their swing, and you can be the one that teaches them how to do it.

Finally there is the traditional route that most golf instruction experts follow. This route is to gain expertise, and to work for a country club. This is something that works well for those looking for a steady paycheck, and a lot of upward mobility. Working in golf instruction at a country club can lead to bigger and better things in the future for your golf career. Such as gaining a healthy freelance business on the side and possibly getting involved with course management or pro shop sales.

Before any of these jobs are possible, it is often necessary to gain golf instruction experience. Some will take jobs apprenticing for established golf instructors, while others will go to school to pursue this career. While both roads lead to the same destination, often school is a better choice because of the benefits that it offers outside of golf instruction. At most golf schools today one can achieve a degree that allows them to both work in golf instruction, as well as in other facets of the golf business, such as turf management, course management, and other exciting areas of the business. A career in golf instruction is literally just a few steps away, for those that choose to get an education.

Andy West is a freelance writer and communications specialist for SDGA. San Diego Golf Academy is a premier golf school with five locations across the United States. For more information on golf instruction, please visit

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