

A POSITIVE LOOK AT ONLINE LEARNING

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In a previous *AFA Dialogue* Ted Crowell^a used Chickering and Gabon's *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*^b to compare online teaching to face-to-face (F2F) teaching. This prompted authors Carole Bennett, Business Office Technology, and Phyllis Usina, Library & Information Resources,^c to compare their own teaching experiences. "Each year an estimated 5 million Americans pursue education or training through distance education."^d The first online course at Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC) was taught in 1996. By 2005 SRJC offered 416 online sections serving 9,623 students.^e

SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

PRINCIPLE 1: ENCOURAGES CONTACT BETWEEN STUDENTS AND FACULTY

Online teaching is not just putting up text as lecture. The online classroom encourages a sense of shared responsibility using technology to build and enhance a learning community. Online student contact takes many forms – office visits (in person), phone, chat room, message list, email, and instant messaging. Online instructors are visible and known to their students. Usina weekly posts a different photo of herself resulting in recognition both on and off campus.

PRINCIPLE 2: DEVELOPS RECIPROCITY AND COOPERATION AMONG STUDENTS

Thoughtful questions about a lecture, assignment, or test can be

asked in discussion areas, chat, email, or instant messaging. These forums provide online instructors with the "pause," not always available with F2F instruction, to allow other students to answer the questions. The anonymous setting also encourages even the shyest student to ask questions. Just as a responsible F2F faculty is alert to appropriate discussions and might guide conversations, a responsible online instructor also watches discussion areas and guides conversations.

Online learning is blind to color, disability, age, or gender. "P.J. Smith" can be "P.J." without students recognizing a male or female. Further, there is no knowledge of P.J.'s color, age, or whether P.J. has a disability. Online learning neutralizes the classroom as everyone starts on an equal platform.^f

PRINCIPLE 3: ENCOURAGES ACTIVE LEARNING

Online learning allows students to master additional technical skills like uploading documents or participating in electronic discussion areas. These skills make students more attractive in the competitive employment market. Online students solve problems independently with a great sense of accomplishment.^g Deeper learning happens when a student discovers rather than being "spoon fed." Online testing technology allows student learning at different levels based on selections. Multiple-choice test selections can give immediate feedback and take students along paths tailored to their level providing a

customized learning experience. Online discussion areas allow students to ask questions when they get them.

PRINCIPLE 4: GIVES PROMPT FEEDBACK

An online instructor always has a clear receipt of delivery. Instructor feedback for online assignments can be sent as a private email message, recorded comments in the grade book or a public evaluation could be posted to the discussion area allowing students to do peer review. Online comments are typed with less chance for misinterpretations. Returning online assignments is not dependent on a scheduled day and time. No valuable class time is taken distributing assignments or discussing individual grade problems. Students can reply for clarification. It allows privacy and quality time for students to challenge grades. It means no long line for prescribed faculty office hours (which time may not be convenient for all students) or waiting until the next class period or longer. Errors can be corrected immediately and tutorial help suggested as needed.

PRINCIPLE 5: EMPHASIZES TIME ON TASK

Online instruction is delivered in manageable time blocks that today's busy students appreciate. Electronic syllabi and schedules are always available. Deadlines are built into the system and student work receives a clear "day and time stamp." To meet changing global needs students cultivate a broad base

(continued on page 2)

ONLINE LEARNING (continued from page 1)

of skills such as self-discipline, independent work habits, and time management skills. These are all desired skill sets which build job market confidence and are requested by employers.^h One of Bennett's students said, "when I applied for a new job, I was offered the position immediately after they learned that I completed my degree online. To this company, my ability to complete a degree online signified that I was a motivated individual."ⁱ

PRINCIPLE 6: COMMUNICATES HIGH EXPECTATIONS

An always visible online rubric table shows exactly what constitutes an A report, a B report, a C report, etc. Such tables are linked on the assignment page, on the schedule, and as a follow up with the instructor's comments and grade.

PRINCIPLE 7: RESPECTS DIVERSE TALENTS AND WAYS OF LEARNING

Online technology provides multimedia options for course delivery to meet the needs of auditory, visual and kinesthetic learners. Studies show that "students can be equally successful in face-to-face and online environments regardless of learning style preferences."^j Students who are hearing challenged, students who have difficulty understanding an instructor with an accent, students with limited English skills, or students with a variety of learning disabilities are all able to process the online lecture at their own speed.

ONLINE DELIVERY EXPANDS ACCESS

Chickering and Gabon believe that good practice

in undergraduate education depends on the students and their circumstances.^k Online education allows students not able to come to the college due to burdens of childcare, transportation (owning a car), and loss of work hours to attend classes with a computer and Internet connection. Students in online classes often comment that their work schedules hinder them from furthering their education. Jobs with varying shift demands, overtime travel, and emergency on-call status, military service are challenges that interfere with students taking a structured F2F class.^l One of the primary reasons students choose online classes is family responsibilities.^m The cost of child or family care as well as the necessity to be home makes online classes ideal.

CONCLUSIONS

Bennett and Usina conclude that online teaching meets or exceeds the *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* outlined by Chickering and Gabon in 1987. Internet technology has revolutionized online classroom interaction. The revolution in online education has made this form of educational delivery dynamic, and in many respects surpasses traditional education methods.

(ENDNOTES)

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- m Demographics surveys, *loc cit*.

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