Considerations for Online Course Delivery from Educators' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of information technology, and market demands, distance education is becoming increasingly popular for both students and educators because of its flexibility and convenience. The Internet plays a key role for delivering online courses. Operation of online courses involves many players such as administrators, software facilitators, students and instructors. However, what should an academic educator consider when offering an online course? In what forms can the communication between instructors and students most effectively take place? What kinds of assessment are better suited for online course? Based on the authors' experiences with online course delivery, this paper explores key issues regarding the above questions from an educator's point of view. It briefly points out the characteristics of online education. Considerations for online course delivery are particularly discussed. It describes what an educator should consider during the four stages known as planning, designing, developing and delivery for an online course. Suggestions are provided as to considerations for online course delivery.

Keywords: Online Course, Delivery, Considerations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Distance education has been described as planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from the teaching and, as a result, requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements [1]. Nowadays, with the rapid development of information technology and the demand of market conditions, distance education is getting increasingly popular because of its flexibility and convenience to suit a variety of populations. Among the delivery methods available, the Internet plays a key role for delivering distance courses in what is commonly referred to as an online delivery mode. In most situations, many players such as administrators, software tool facilitator, students and instructors participate in the management of online courses. However, *what should an educator consider when offering an online course? In what form can the communication between instructors and students most effectively take place? What kinds of assessment are better suited for an online course?* Based on the authors' experiences gathered from online course delivery, this paper explores the key issues regarding the above questions from an educator's point of view. The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 briefly discusses the characteristics of online education; Section 3 addresses the considerations for online course from an educator's point of view. It presents considerations to be taken into account during the four stages of online course delivery, which are: planning, designing, developing and delivery. Suggestions are provided as to considerations for online course delivery; Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Online education possesses characteristics of distant education. Students and instructors are physically separated; there is no face-to-face contact between educators and students; communication is conducted via electronic media. Apart for these features, online education also possesses its own characteristics, which can be summarized as following.

Online course is *informative*. The World Wide Web provides a vast source of informative resources. This means that leaning materials are not restricted to textbooks and other paper based materials. This is a remarkable advantage as students can benefit by readily accessing numerous references. However, the large volume of reference material might misguide students into losing appropriate study focus. Educators should be carefully to select the most relevant references, and make that selection available to students.

Online education is *flexible*. Online education, teaching and learning takes place in a very flexible environment. Students can manage their study according to their preferred time. As long as the course is set up online, instructors can also manage their instruction in a flexible time. With this flexibility of teaching and learning, system

administration is required to ensure that the course's online presence is accessible at any time.

Online eduction is *convenient.* Course materials, communication and assessment can all be achieved through services that the Internet provides. Teaching and learning will be run under a whole *E* environment (i.e. Electronic environment). For students, there may be no more books and other printed stationery needed. The web browser, email application and other Internet ready software either replace or augment these. Educators can update and modify online course quite readily.

Online education is *applicable.* Online education suits a wide variety of population. In particular, it suits those people who have jobs, disabilities and family responsibilities.

Online course could be *animated.* By means of multimedia technology, online course can be delivered in a vivid and attractive way. For example, course contents can be demonstrated by games, animated simulation so as to stimulate students' study interests.

3. CONSIDERATIONS FOR ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY

The characteristics of online education require that online courses be well planed and designed, and that special instruction techniques be employed. In addition appropriate technical support must be available. It has been suggested that there are four key stages in delivering a successful online course: planning, designing, developing and delivery [2]. Figure 1 shows the four stages of an online course delivery. As educators, we need to concern ourselves with the quality of education we are providing. The following considerations are recommended for an eductor/instructor/coordinator during the four stages of online course delivering.
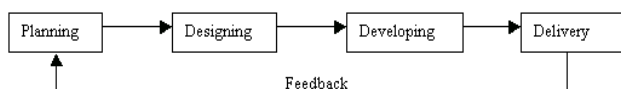

Figure 1. Stages of Online Course Delivery

3.1 Considerations during Planning

Course criteria. Well-designed course criteria are a must for an online course. Course aims and objectives should be clearly addressed so that students know what benefits they can gain from the particular way the course is delivered. Considering that online students come from different backgrounds, it is also necessary to address appropriate entry requirements for students, including any prerequisite or corequisit course requirements. Other criteria such as the delivery model and the assessment model also need to be addressed.

Administration support. To maintain the characteristic of flexibility, it is the educator's responsibility to ensure that the course is accessible at any time. Reliable technical administration support is essential to ensure that the course website is accessible, to ensure communication and assessments submission is achievable, and to ensure course materials are available to students and maintainable by teaching staff.

Development toolkit. The availability of a development toolkit aids the building of the course website, and ongoing management of students and the course. Successive course coordinators can use the development toolkit to provide rapid response to course offering decisions. Such questions arise as: What online tools are available? What functionalities do these tools provide? Is training required for using the tools available? These questions should be taken into account when planning the online course.

3.2 Consideration during Designing

Content delivery model. The content of an online course may be similar to that of traditional classroom teaching. An important difference that we need to be aware of during design is that the resource materials should be presented in much more detail form, and be better organized. One should consider how the course content would be presented. Possibly the content may be grouped module by module, according to topic, or organized weekly according to scheduled student progress. Maybe the materials will be released all at once, or progressively. Consideration needs to be given to what type of file format(s) the material will be developed in. Formats such as, HTML, PDF or PPT, (as well as others) may be used to present your contents.

Assessment types. What kind of assessment is to be used in the course is another crucial issue that needs to be considered. Students enrolled in an online course may not be physically collocated. Group projects need to be designed to take into account the probable geographic dispersal of the group members. Online quizzes may be a convenient method for formative assessment, but are dubious for use as summative assessment due to the insecure nature of online quizzes in general. However, automated quiz generation and marking facilitate administration of large classes. Questions for online quizzes are mostly restricted to multiple choice, true/false and short answers for the purpose of automatic marking. Online quizzes are not appropriate if the course requires essay writing or research reports. However, essays and written reports can be submitted online by other means. Furthermore, the question of academic honesty needs to be considered. Consequently, whilst the choice of assessment methods depends in part on the course criteria, the delivery media also influences it. For many courses, combining

online assessment and other assessment methods is a better option.

Communications. There is no doubt that communication between students and instructors is a very important issue for consideration. *Mailing Lists* and *Discussion Boards* are the two main communication technologies used for online courses. Mailing lists allow students to subscribe to a common email address. Students can actively participate in the discussion or passively listen to the traffic [3] .The course coordinator administers the mailing list, or delegates this responsibility. One disadvantage is that if a large number of students actively participate on the mailing list, the volume of traffic tends to make it difficult to maintain the association of questions and answers. It is the author's experience that many students receive emails passively, sometimes, the email topic is not of interest to individual students, or some students may not have reached the topic yet. On the other hand, discussion boards don't require the students to explicitly subscribe. They provide a flexible public forum for students to post and answer questions. Students post message and read messages in an active way. It is believed that an active participation is much more efficient than passive participation for learning quality.

Evaluations. Course evaluation is necessary to determine whether course objectives are being achieved, and to improve further quality of teaching and learning. During course design consideration needs to be given to how the course will be evaluated. Anonymous online surveys may be used to solicit student feedback about the course and instruction. Questions for the online survey may be provided with multiple-choice answers to facilitate deployment and analysis [4]. An anonymous course barometer is another option for gathering students' opinions about the course. Student may submit any text comments to the course barometer to express their feelings and opinions [5].

3.3 Considerations during Developing

Website Development. The opening page of the course website sets the tone for the whole course. Properly designed home pages will encourage thought, discussion and active participation by your distant students [6]. The layout should be clear, simple, attractive and consistent. Avoid colourful background, animated images and large graphics/voice to keep text easy to read, and to optimise download time for viewers. A main index should jump to other pages to keep page lengths short [6]. Using links to internal information rather than links to external information.

Contents of website. An online course normally consists of course instruction information, study resource materials, assessment items, class communications, and reference materials. Course instruction information should be concise and clear. Study resource materials may include study notes, lecture slides, reading materials, tutorial sheets, and practical exercises. It is suggested that these materials are viewable online and available as downloadable files. Assessment specifications, submission methods, marking criteria, and appropriate hints should also be provided. For simple computer programming assignments, it is often useful to provide the students with an executable version of the sample solution as part of the assignment specification. Class communication should be accessible from the course website. A bibliography page providing links to suitable online reference material may be appropriate.

3.4 Considerations during Delivery

Closely monitor the Course delivery process. Continuous administration of the course website is required to ensure that course materials and resources are made available in a timely fashion. This is especially so for materials designed to be progressively released, such as tutorial and practical exercise solutions.

Actively monitor students' performance. Most online Learning Management Systems provide functions to monitor students' progress and performance. This can be done by tracking the number of times particular students visit course web pages, and by tracking online tests results.

Liaise promptly with administration or other support staff. Promptly report any technical problems to ensure the online course website and Learning Management Systems are continuously available.

Communicate regularly with students. Respond to students' questions in a timely fashion. Students need to be reassured that there really is someone listening to their problems. The social comfort of face-to-face contact with the students needs to be replaced with prompt and interactive online communications. When responding to students don't use terse answers. Short, sharp answers convey to the students a sense that their question has been seen as an annoyance rather than a legitimate request for information and assistance. Provide the students with full and comprehensive replies. This develops the pastoral aspect of online communications.

3.5 Summary

To successfully deliver an online course, an educator should take a series of considerations during the four stages of online course delivery.

Figure 2 summarises the considerations for delivery an online course from educators' perspective.
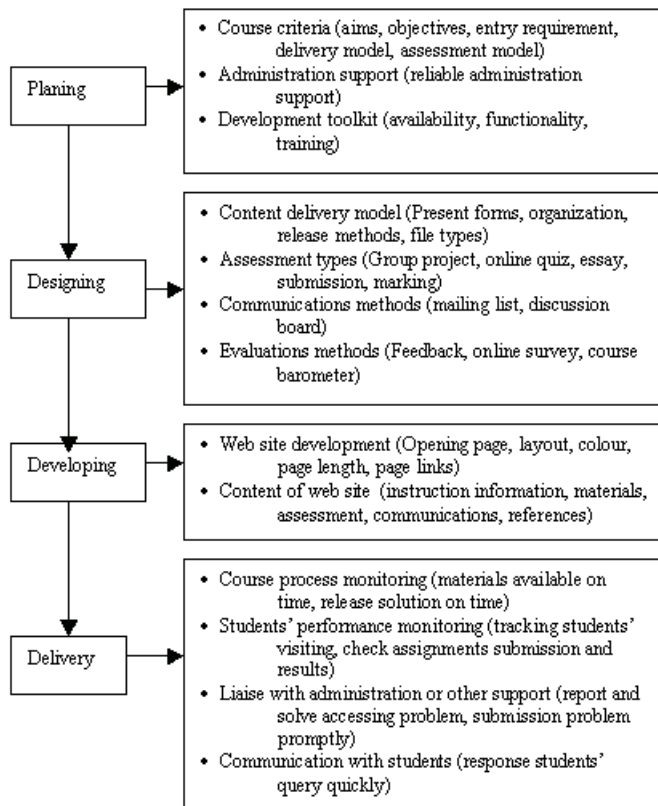
Figure 2. Considerations for Delivery An Online Course

4. CONCLUSION

This paper briefly describes the characteristics of online education, and discusses some concerns regarding online course delivery from educators' point of view. It presents considerations for an educator to take into account during the four stages of online course delivery. Aspects such as course requirements criteria, administration support, and available development tools should be considered when planning the course. Course delivery models, assessment methods, communication techniques and evaluation methods should be considered during the course design. Website visual presentation, and course contents on the website should be considered during the course development stage. Course process monitoring, student performance monitoring, liaison with administration, and communication with students should be considered during course delivery.

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