

Teaching and Learning with Technology: An Assessment of Best Practices

Final Report - June 2008

1. Original objectives and strategies

The overall goal of this study was to identify “best practices” of instructors teaching purely online courses. The following specific aims guided the research process:

1. To identify, through individual interviews with instructors teaching completely web-based courses:
 - a) key pedagogical practices
 - b) perceptions of their students’ learning styles, with a specific focus on strategies used to address learning needs of diverse audiences
 - c) lessons learned from teaching online courses.
2. To assess instructors’ teaching styles, using the Trainer Type Inventory (TTI) survey and compare these data to instructors’ perceptions of their students’ learning styles.
3. To use interview and survey data to develop a matrix of “best practices” to explain the experiences of instructors teaching online courses.
4. To prepare a manuscript for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.
5. To position ourselves to submit a follow-up grant application that will support validation of the matrix.

2. Activities carried out

- Forty-six individuals were contacted from the UMass Amherst College of Social and Behavioral Sciences; the Schools of Education, Management, and Health and Health Sciences; and Outreach. A total of 21 individuals were interviewed in person.
- Data have been analyzed and a preliminary matrix of best practices is being drafted.

3. Accomplishments

- In October 2007, I was asked to make a presentation to the Nutrition Environment Measures Survey (NEMS) study group at Emory University in Atlanta. This group received funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to support development of an online training to use the NEMS measures for food environmental observations. They were interested in discussing findings of my study.
- In April 2008, I presented preliminary findings at the Technology Conference in Boxboro where a number of people from OIT and CE expressed interest in establishing an ongoing dialogue.
- In June, one of my Masters students started work on her thesis, which will be an expansion of this study with a specific focus on instructors who teach completely online nutrition courses. Her data will be compared to the data from this study to identify similarities and differences regarding training and pedagogical needs. Our plan is to publish the combined findings from the two studies to describe training needs and experiences of instructors teaching purely online courses.

4. Assessment

- A total of 13 females and eight males were interviewed representing faculty and support staff from six colleges, Schools, and programs at UMASS, Amherst.
- Participants' background data:
 - 3-31 years of experience teaching in face-to-face classroom settings (mean: 14.7 yrs)
 - 2-12 years of experience teaching online (mean: 5.2 yrs)
 - participants taught an average of 8.9 times online (range: 2-21 times)
 - most (82.4%) had no online experience prior to teaching online for the first time.
- Trainer Type Inventory (TTI) scores revealed the following (n=17):
 - Coach (41%)
 - Director (35%)
 - Listener (12%)
 - Interpreter (6%)
 - Coach-Interpreter tie (6%)
- Key themes that that emerged from the interviews:
 - Sense of online community
 - High level of student-led learning
 - Great diversity of online learners increases interest for instructors and other learners
 - Heavy workload and time commitment
 - Need for both structure and flexibility
 - Need for relevant content
 - Need for frequent and timely feedback
 - In-house (within department) support is critical
 - Mentors are usually not available
 - Need for technical training to deal with multiple platform changes
 - Need for ongoing, advanced training once initial technical issues are learned
- "Best practices" may best be described at both the individual and organizational levels.

5. Issues and further questions

I welcome the opportunity to continue the dialogue with OIT and CE to assess their instructors' needs and to discuss the possibility of designing a training program for online instructors from Amherst , as well as the other UMASS campuses.

6. Disposition of funds

I do not anticipate any unexpended funds.

7. Other comments

This has been a very enjoyable project. I look forward to reviewing and compiling the final results and exploring next steps.