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Making the Switch from F2F Online: Is Read, Write, and Test Enough?

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Okay, I will end the suspense right now and answer the question. Of course not, no more than in face-to-face (F2F) courses on campus. A related question remains, however, how is learning in the online environment maximized for varying learning styles while maintaining interest and capturing the creative and critical thinking of students? In this Teaching and Learning column, I offer insights I have gathered over the past three years as I moved courses to hybrid and online versions. I collected information from three sources: a) anonymous surveys collected from students each semester, b) two volunteer focus groups with students who had completed at least one online course in our reading masters' program, and c) reflection on the ongoing review and revision process in which I engage as I continue to develop courses. I will explain how I organize my courses online and manage the large amounts of maintenance information required to run online courses smoothly. I will describe some glitches in assignments that I have encountered, and in the last section I have listed several closing thoughts that the reader may find helpful. The examples are taken from courses in a masters' level reading certification program.

Logical and Sequential Organization

Courses have multiple organizational structures. There is the primary organization of the subject content, which is rooted in the inherent structure of the discipline, components of practice, and structures of the texts. When planning a semesters' course of study, instructors frequently use the weeks of the semester as one framework to organize their courses and the chapters of a text as another. Weekly class meetings and textbooks that generally have approximately as many chapters as weeks in the semester support these frameworks.

Many universities use course management systems, such as Blackboard, eCollege, WebCT, Desire2Learn, or Moodle, to provide online access to materials and communication within courses. Our university uses Blackboard as the learning management system for all courses. The individual instructor decides which Blackboard features will be active for the course but may not use many of its features, opting instead to distribute materials in class, require students to buy packets of readings, and turn in hard copies of assignments during class.

Online courses require instructors to use more components of the course management system to organize uploaded documents, links for submitting assignments, assessment tools, communication within the class, stu-

dent work groups, and gradebooks. The default organization of courses on Blackboard is an opening page, which has current announcements for the course and a left sidebar of content folders. Default content folders include Syllabus, Instructor, Assignments, Course Materials, Work Groups, Email, External Links, and Grade Center. The content folders introduce another organizational framework to the course, that is, task organization. The organization of tasks within content folders is neither sequential nor intuitively logical. If left at the default setting, students may need to search several content folders for one task, such as, retrieving directions from the Assignment folder, required documents from the Course Materials folder, information from External Links, and then finally submitting the completed task to an Assignment submission link. Parts of one assignment, therefore, may appear in several Blackboard content folders.

I have experimented with two organizational frameworks for online courses to match both timelines and task structures and have found both to be helpful to students. The first is a weekly folder organization. Content folders are replaced with folders corresponding to the weeks of the semester. Inside each folder are all the links required for the assignments due during that week. Blackboard allows all types of links, including documents, submission links, podcasts, and external links to URLs, to be inserted into folders. If a task needs several links, I create an assignment subfolder inside the weekly folder to group all links and materials for that task together.

The second time sequence is course modules covering several weeks. Figure 1 shows the module organization of a ten-week summer course in our reading masters' program. Week One is the orientation when students are introduced to course requirements and technology. The class meets on Elluminate, our online in real-time virtual classroom, for a general orientation during which I explain assignments and demonstrate different technologies we will be using. Elluminate's two-way communication allows students to listen and watch and ask questions. Every module has a theme project. There is one semester-long assignment, and there are required readings, journals, and sharing teaching ideas in each module. In the journals students identify key concepts from assigned readings, make practical applications, and add a "wondering," that is, a question or request for additional information. Because the wonderings usually cluster around common topics, I identify discussion threads and post a wiki with my responses and invite further comments.

Module	Module Theme Project	Long-term Assignment	On-going Assignments
Module 1 Week 1	Orientation	Electronic Literature Anthology	Chapter Readings Response Journal
Module 1 Weeks 2-3-4	Book Clubs	Electronic Literature Anthology	Chapter Readings Response Journals Sharing Teaching Ideas
Module 3 Weeks 5-6-7	Workshops	Electronic Literature Anthology	Chapter Readings Response Journals Sharing Teaching Ideas
Module 4 Weeks 8-9-10	Creator Studies	Electronic Literature Anthology	Chapter Readings Response Journals Sharing Teaching Ideas

Figure 1. Module organization of 10 week summer course.

The two time sequences have advantages and disadvantages. The weekly folders keep students more connected to the course because there is some communication or task every week. Students are less likely to lose track of time in the course; however, students selecting online courses may have real-life schedule challenges that need more flexibility.

Modules provide a more logical organization for assignments that require more than one week to complete. The modules are ordered in a time sequence, and the contents within the modules are grouped by tasks. Figure 1 shows a course organized with theme projects that are each completed within its respective module, a major project due at the end of the semester, and the on-going reading and writing assignments connected to the textbook and reading professional journals. Students organize their work within the module to fit their own schedules. Over-extended students, as well as procrastinators, may become lost in modules that require assignments to be submitted only at the end of a module spanning several weeks.

Lots of Time

In addition to difficulties in organizing the assignments of an online course, students frequently underestimate the amount of time they need for the work. At our university students can select either F2F or online sections of many courses, and we find many students taking both online and F2F courses during their time with us. Anonymous surveys taken every semester and communications from students indicate they make course selections based on availability and convenience rather than on concerns for their individual learning needs. These data indicate students do not select course format that fits their strongest or preferred learning styles, perhaps because of a lack of understanding of what is required in online learning. Many students may have the notion that online courses take less time and effort because there are no pesky, time-consuming class meetings, but as the semester wears on many realize their online courses are taking more time.

There are reasons why online courses require extra time for some students: oral language (lecture and discussion) usually takes less time than written communication

(reading, writing responses), and students who are slow readers and/or writers need even more time to accomplish the additional reading and writing tasks required online. Moreover, discussions that take place in 20 minutes in a classroom will take days to occur in asynchronous blogs or discussion boards. Instructors can require all students to take part in online discussions, but this creates additional problems for maintaining interest in a topic. Instructors and students in F2F classes are rarely required to respond to every comment on a topic. In F2F class discussions students decide whether they wish to respond and to which questions and prompts. Everyone simply does not join in every discussion, and redundancies are filtered out by the discussants themselves. They do not repeat points already made.

For these reasons, students may not be prepared for the time demands of their online courses. The orientation during the first week of class includes a discussion of differences between F2F and online learning. A second support system includes aids to help students manage the flood of maintenance information in the course.

The Flood of Information

In addition to content specific information in courses, online courses must rely on written directions for maintenance information. The flood of this type of information becomes background noise after awhile. The syllabus may not receive a careful read after the first week of the semester. Students often don't bother to check for new announcements because they all look alike. Emails, especially if too long, are skimmed, often missing important information. There are several aids I use in my online classes that I find grab students' attention and act as reminders.

Homepage and Calendar

Blackboard's default opening page is Announcements. I change the Announcement opening page to the Homepage option and create an opening page that acts as an organizer for students. Figure 2 shows the Homepage with the Module Folders in the left sidebar and a reminder with a link to check Announcements at the top, a calendar with frequently updated reminders, and a link to a personalized glossary of technology terms that are

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Home page
Meet the Instructor
Syllabus
Module 1
Module 2
Module 3
Module 4
Email
Tools
Grade Center

<u>Announcements</u>
Check here regularly for <u>News Updates.</u>

Calendar

Module/ Theme	Dates	Notes
1 Orientation	5/17 – 5/22	Don't forget to attend one of the Orientations to the Course on Elluminate. You must complete the Elluminate set-up before the orientation. Download documents to bring to your Orientation. Pick your choice for Book Club early.
2 Book Clubs	5/23 – 6/12	
3 Workshops	6/13 – 7/3	
4 Creator Study	7/4 – 7/23	

Figure 2. Blackboard menu at Homepage

essential for the course. At the beginning of each module, I add reminders and important information to the calendar using text enhancements, for example, font, size, text color, and highlighting, to capture students' attention. At the end of the module, I change text back to standard size and color, and then post and enhance reminders in the next module.

To Do Lists
Like many instructors in F2F classes, I always end with "Next week we will do a and b, and don't forget c and d are due, and bring x, y, and z to class." A "To Do" list in each module is a simple list of tasks to be completed. It does not replace the syllabus; it is a list of highlighted keywords to act as reminders and keep order. On the end of semester surveys students indicate this is one of the most helpful aids in organizing the flood of information in their courses.

Virtual Office Hours
Elluminate sessions can be set up to offer virtual office hours for students who need to conference with the instructor. Remaining online for a few minutes after other sessions, that is, the Book Clubs and orientations, allows students to ask questions either in a group or in a private break out room. Since Elluminate sessions can be set up at any time, an invitation to meet online allows you to answer a detailed question you receive in an email or demonstrate a difficult technology application.

Adapting F2F Assignments to Online

In this section I briefly describe four generic formats for online assignments that parallel class activities students experience in F2F classes. The technology enhancements add interest and challenge, and some cautions are included.

Online Book Clubs
Students select books to read and Book Club sessions to attend on Elluminate during the semester. Two potential difficulties are technical problems novice users have logging into sessions and dead air during discussions. During the first semester I offered Book Clubs online, different students attended each session, and a few students had difficulties logging into each Elluminate session. Since different students attended each Book Club, I had to deal with these problems during every session. After my first online semester, I required all students to attend a general orientation on Elluminate during the first week of the semester so technical problems would be resolved and not recur during every book club.
My second worry was keeping the book discussions going without my having to act as a ringmaster. Students submit five open-ended questions several days before their Book Club meeting. I synthesize them into a discussion list and post it for group members. At the beginning of each meeting, I explain procedures and describe how the pacing of online may differ from in-class discussions

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because participants cannot gauge timing of talk turns by visual cues. Wait time may seem to be unnaturally long at first; but once students gain confidence, they relax and join in. Previewing discussion questions also allows them to think ahead to what they want to say during their discussions.

Feedback from students indicates the Book Clubs are a very positive experience. When large numbers of students select one session, Elluminate's breakout rooms create small groups so popular books do not end up with discussion groups too large to manage. Making their own book choices increases students' investment in the experience, and they report they appreciate personal contact with students they do not otherwise meet.

Enhanced Powerpoint Presentations

Students in F2F courses frequently prepare and make presentations on individually researched topics. An online assignment requires students to select and view workshops produced by the Annenberg Foundation (www.learner.org). Students synthesize key information from their workshops and produce a Powerpoint enhanced with recorded comments. Microsoft Office 07-08 allows students to easily embed short recordings into slides, and this discourages them from turning Powerpoint slides into Word documents. I particularly like this format for an assignment because it is an alternative so that every assignment is not traditional reading information and writing reports.

Problems arise when students use outdated programs. The limited functionality of older programs is difficult to overcome even with substantial technology support. I require students to use the Office 07-08 version to produce their reports. Requiring updated technology allows students to use student loans if they need to purchase programs, releases instructors from trying to provide instructions on old technology to which they no longer have access, and sends the message that our online programs are not a collection of cobbled together assignments.

Movies

Both Windows MovieMaker and IMovie are easy to use and can be appropriately challenging to students with varying levels of expertise. There are always students who, without any support, can produce a report in movie format worthy of an Academy Award. Both programs can be greatly simplified for the technologically challenged. By using movie enhancements built into the programs, students can produce a "text movie" without actually having to master video production. Text movies are easily made by using titles, scrolling text, transitions, and embedded program music and sound effects. Students can drop in jpeg pictures to give the impression of "moving pictures" without actually having to produce videos. As a finishing touch, the student movie producer adds his/her own narration using the recording feature in the program.

Electronic Notebooks

Many instructors require students to collect and organize materials from their courses in a notebook that becomes a teacher resource. Students leave the course with a notebook of reading strategies or assessment strategies or a literature anthology. Free wikis, such as pbworks.com, allow students to create electronic notebooks with multiple levels of organization using hyperlinks. These notebooks are far superior to paper binders. Hyperlinks move the user back and forth to various sections in the electronic notebook, and also out to URLs to add internet resources. Wikis look and operate like webpages, but have an additional feature that teachers find beneficial. The owner of the wiki can grant writers' privileges to colleagues, and the wiki can become a collaborative work group. Many teachers in our masters' program continue to use their wikis as a planning tool with teams of teachers at their schools.

Quick Closing Thoughts

In closing, I include a few random thoughts that I have collected. I made some of these conclusions only after the same situation occurred several times. Hopefully they will be an alternative to long experience for readers.

First, be prepared to answer lots of emails. Many questions are redundant or could be answered by rereading the syllabus, but students are just trying to handle the flood of information.

When troubleshooting tech problems, ask students to let you know when and how the difficulty is resolved, if your suggestions worked, and if they found the solution from someone else. This helps you build a storehouse of problem fix-its to share with other students.

Anonymous surveys with a minimal point incentive provide extensive information for future course building. If students know you will use their feedback, they are more likely to give it. Unlike standardized student course evaluations, you can ask for information you really need for immediate impact on instruction.

Suggest as many free downloadables as possible. Many sites encourage upgrades at a cost, so warn students if this is not necessary. Note: I have never required or needed an upgrade to any free program I use or recommend to students.

And finally, emphasize honoring copyright as a professional responsibility. Since copyright protects all text, students' works are also protected and recognized as part of their professional development as educators. ▪

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