Teaching and Learning Online

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Introduction

The need for online learning components is ever existent in today’s education system. For many educators the transition to convert aspects of traditional classrooms to online learning environments is an intimidating task. Simply posting traditional content to an online platform is not enough when designing an effective online course. Therefore, teachers must understand and become proficient using the many tools available to help teachers be effective online.

Online Learning Technology

Learning Management Systems

As many aspects of education transfer to online platforms, it is necessary for teachers and students, as well as administrators and parents, to have one common meeting place to substitute the traditional classroom environment. For many courses, programs of study, and even entire institutions, a Learning Management System (LMS) provides that common online meeting ground and so much more. A LMS is a “server-based software that controls access to and delivery of online learning resources through a standard web browser” (Wichadee, 2014, p. 2). Functions of a LMS include and are not limited to, communication applications such as an announcements, messaging, calendar, and discussion boards (Wichadee, 2014, p. 2). These communication tools help online instructors and learners to create a collaborative environment without the need for the class to meet in one physical location.

“For many students, the era of submitting typed papers is gone. Students can now log in to their accounts on their, school's website, where they can engage each other and their instructors through discussion boards and submit their homework assignments directly through a sub-site. The site is constantly updated, as the instructor posts homework assignments, announcements and links to articles and videos” (Feintuch, 2010, n.p.)
For instructors, a LMS also offers many functions that facilitate effective delivery of an online course such as grade books, calendars, assessment tools, and even storage for files. Therefore, it is clear that the use of a LMS to facilitate an online course is essential.

**Blackboard, Inc.**

Blackboard Learn by Blackboard, Inc. is an example of one of the most widely used learning management systems throughout K-12 and higher education. Blackboard, Inc. also released a free version of the LMS, a Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) program called CourseSites. Blackboard representatives refer to CourseSites as a “complete solution” including “end-user support (phone, virtual chat and Web),” while also maintaining various Blackboard platforms such as “Blackboard Connect, Blackboard Mobile, and Blackboard Collaborate” (Feintuch, 2010, n.p.). Even though historically the large scale, no cost, open enrollment technology offered by MOOC programs such as CourseSites, have not seen great successes in student completion of courses due to little or no consequence for not finishing a course; this type of LMS can still be used by K-12 educators on a smaller scale in a blended environment with success (Lokey-Vega, 2014,p. 62). CourseSites for example, allows an instructor five free courses to administer and there are enrollment restriction options so that teachers can ensure only their specific students can enroll in the courses offered. Therefore, teachers at any level from P-16 can integrate technology into their classrooms to create blended, hybrid, or even flipped environments using LMS and MOOC technologies such as those offered by Blackboard, Inc.

**Social Learning Networks**

Many of today’s learning management systems have been modeled after popular social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace. In fact, learning management systems of this type such as Edmodo and My Big Campus are more specifically referred to as “social
learning networks.” Writing teacher, Audrey L. Harper, wrote about her overwhelmingly positive personal experiences with Edmodo in her own classroom. Most importantly, this learning management system opened up avenues of student and parent communication previously inconceivable. For example, it was found that for the first time, students were able to communicate with their teacher regarding assignments while absent and even on snow days when school was cancelled (Harper, 2010, p. 20). Harper found the rewards of using Edmodo to be transformational not only for content instruction but also for modeling digital citizenship (2010, p. 20-21). According to Harper, “By practicing proper digital citizenship on Edmodo, teachers are able to create safe parameters to educate students how to interact online and model appropriate communications for students” (2010, p.21).

**Google Apps for Education**

Google Apps for Education is not a learning management system in its own right; however it is a useful technology tool when facilitating an online course as it offers many features which encourage student collaboration and safe, online engagement. Using Google Apps, students have access to all of their files through Drive (cloud storage) and free software programs such as Docs (word processing), Sheets (spreadsheet), Slides (presentation), Sites (websites) and more, wherever they have internet access. According to Rowe, Bozalek, and Frantz who engaged in research in order to evaluate how instructional practices change with new technologies, Google Drive is an ideal tool to facilitate authentic, collaborative learning experiences not only with their physiotherapy clinical student subjects, but in all facets of education (Rowe, 2013, p. 597). Most importantly it was found that using Google Drive made students develop as metacognitive learners, thinking critically about the real-world implications of their learning (Rowe, 2013, p. 603).
Mini-Course Experience

During an online graduate course, the author engaged in a mini-course experiment in order to gain experience in facilitating online courses through the use of a LMS. The author had the chance to act as both a student and an instructor, and then reflect on the experience and its implications of future classroom use.

Student Perspective

Taking on the role of a student was an important part of the learning experience of how to become an effective online instructor. Sometimes educators can quickly forget the stresses of student life, or the simple things that teachers can do, or not do, to be more effective. The author found most of the mini-courses to be well organized and good examples of effective online instruction. However, the few mini-courses that proved to be non-examples of an effective online learning environment actually provided the most educational experience. Because the focus of the mini-courses was not to acquire the content knowledge of the topic taught, but rather to experience the administration of an online course from both the student and instructor side, it was really informative to see the mistakes made, so that they would not be repeated in the future. For example, organization was a major factor in the effectiveness of the mini-course. Courses that were organized well showed evidence of thorough planning which transferred to meaningful instruction and clear expectations. While on the other hand, it was very evident when an instructor had not put the time in to plan out and organize the course because it became difficult to navigate and therefore confusing to understand the expectations and purpose of the course in general. According to Reisetter & Boris, “good organization, clear procedure and expectations” as well as “clear timelines” are essential aspects of an effective online learning environment.
Therefore, the author’s perception of what made a course effective or ineffective was based mainly on its overall organization.

**Instructor Perspective**

As an instructor, the author found the online mini course to be very self-affirming. The feedback from students submitted through Google Form was overwhelmingly positive. One student said that the course was her “favorite lesson” from the course and described the course as “very interactive and unique.” Another student who is also a Spanish teacher said that she was able to take ideas from this course in order to implement into her own classes in the future. All students found the course to be well organized and felt that they learned meaningful information while being engaged through technology. However, one piece of constructive criticism that arose from the survey was the lack of collaboration and student interactive in the lesson. The instructor agrees with this constructive suggestion, and therefore for future classroom use, student collaboration will be an important addition to the lesson in the form of an authentic assessment using Google Apps for Education.

Only one of four students left an assignment incomplete, otherwise all students completed all required assignments and did so thoroughly. All students seemed very engaged in the lesson and responded well to the video lessons and interactive activities; meanwhile students mastered a majority of the course content. The author believes that when administering an online course it is very important to engage and motivate students through the instructional tools chosen. Because in an online environment one loses the face to face interaction between instructor and student, instructors must find other ways to provide meaningful instruction. For example, rather than posting an article for students to read, the author chose to post a video recording her own voice and PowerPoint slides to cover the topic. Also, rather than having
students complete textbook or workbook activities, the author used an interactive website for vocabulary reinforcement and created an authentic online shopping activity. Therefore, the implementation of highly engaging teaching strategies conducive to effective instruction in an online environment is just as important as the content covered. The author firmly believes that if an online instructor uses a course management system or other online learning technology to simply post traditional content for student reference; then students will become disengaged and will therefore be unable to truly master the necessary material.

**Conclusion**

Following the research and mini-course experience, it is evident that an online learning environment which is highly organized and highly engaging is most conducive to student learning. For future classroom use, the author will incorporate either a LMS or MOOC technology tool for organizational purposes, supplemented by Google Apps in order to create authentic activities which allow for student collaboration and meaningful understanding of content. Due to the fact that the author teaches in a school district which is transitioning to cloud computing and 1:1 technology use, it is extremely important that an effective blended learning model which embodies both of these characteristics be integrated into classroom instruction.
References


