

Overcoming Facelessness in the Online Classroom

In an effort to understand and improve their students' experiences in the online classroom, Lorretta Dicker and Svetlana Marzelli, assistant professors of computer information systems at Atlantic Cape Community College, asked their students to write essays describing the advantages and disadvantages of online learning.

Most students said that they enjoyed the convenience of being able to take a course without having to attend a physical classroom but that they missed the face-to-face interaction of the traditional classroom.

Students did not merely miss the social aspects of the traditional classroom; they also missed the live instruction that a teacher in a face-to-face classroom can provide. The students wrote things like, "Nothing replaces truly live conversation," "It's easier to get help from a teacher who's physically there with you," and "It's easier to have a teacher there to show you examples."

Dicker was somewhat surprised by her students' need for interaction. "There are times when it seems that the biggest reward you can give traditional students is to let them out early, which really made me think they would just as soon be off working on their own. I was surprised by how much [online learners] crave the human interaction," Dicker says.

"When we realized that they missed this face-to-face contact of traditional classes, we started to think, 'What can be done to make online teaching as engaging and personal and as close as possible to the traditional classroom?'" Marzelli says. "We read a lot. We talked to our colleagues who had more experience than we did, and we came up with a list of techniques that can be used to make online classes friendly,

engaging, and productive learning environments for our students."

Instructor presence

Icebreakers

Marzelli and Dicker begin each online course with a welcome letter that includes information about themselves, the course, and what they expect from students. They also use icebreakers to introduce themselves and students to each other.

Marzelli often uses icebreakers that feature questions such as, "What makes you unique?" and "What is the most exotic place you've traveled to?"

Dicker mentions her interest in outdoor recreation, including kayaking. "We're in an area where there's a lot of boating, and that usually gets students to jump right in to discuss the kind of boating they do," Dicker says. "I also usually mention that I raise my kids as a single parent, and that I particularly enjoy teaching online because I can offer the flexibility that single parents often need when they're juggling childcare, work, and school."

By offering that kind of personal information, students often describe their own situations and motivations for taking an online course, which also helps them connect with each other.

Homepage

Dicker and Marzelli stress the importance of regularly updating the course homepage. "The homepage is the first thing they see when they log in to the course," Marzelli says. "In the beginning of the semester, it's important to give a warm welcome on the homepage. I usually ask them to read the welcome letter and the course syllabus. I explain where all the assignments and tutorials are, and I ask them to get familiar with all these materials.

And throughout the semester, I use the homepage for various announcements. It's important to update the announcements regularly, but at the same time, it's important to not post too much on the homepage."

Marzelli logs in to the course every day and posts a new announcement at least once a week. These announcements are usually one paragraph.

Dicker posts much shorter announcements—approximately four or five words. "I just put headlines on my homepage, and then if there's more information, I'll say, 'See announcements for this topic,' and then that directs them to a link of a lengthier message," Dicker says.

Cognitive apprenticeship

In their essays about the advantages and disadvantages of online learning, students frequently mentioned the need for prompt feedback and frequent communication. Dicker makes it a point to log in to her courses four or five times a week to provide this communication. She also has structured her courses to facilitate peer interaction.

Dicker uses a principle known as cognitive apprenticeship in which she'll instruct her students to post any questions they have about the course content to a general bulletin board rather than asking her, and she assigns extra-credit points to any student who can answer another student's question. Dicker uses this principle across different levels of her programming courses. For example, she teaches beginning, intermediate, and advanced C++ courses simultaneously and gives the students in all three sections access to the same WebCT shell. Students

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from any level may post questions for their peers across all three levels.

“As a test approaches, the activity escalates. Students will post questions up until one or two in the morning. I monitor this, of course, and if there’s a question that nobody can answer, I jump in. But for the most part, having students explain things to each other is very powerful,” Dicker says.

In addition to encouraging students to help each other, working collaboratively in this manner simulates working as a computer programmer in the field, Dicker says. “A lot of times your job is

to maintain code that somebody else has written, so to be able to find mistakes in somebody else’s code and to make changes to that code is a skill that needs to be developed. This is an exercise in which they not only get help for their questions, but they can then practice this skill of trying to find problems in somebody else’s code.”

Multimedia

Dicker uses Camtasia with narration and Java animation to present course materials in interactive, nontext formats. She uses Camtasia to record computer screen demonstrations with voice-over explanations to teach specific

skills and Java learning objects to illustrate abstract concepts. Dicker uses these tools primarily to explain concepts that are difficult to convey with text alone; however, she says it also improves interaction. “I think it loosens them up a little bit more, and they’re more likely to interact if they’re looser.”

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could log on a couple times a week, and that the students would teach themselves. “In some respects, it’s more time consuming” than face-to-face classes, she says. The performance targets, she says, “give us a backing, if we have someone who just isn’t cut out for the online environment.”

Long distance faculty

The bulk of the faculty at eCampus is full-time instructors at the college or local adjunct faculty. However, several are not local, and they posed a challenge for administrators. In the beginning, the college’s human resource department wanted the far-flung faculty members to come to campus to fill out papers. Now, those faculty members can fill papers out and attend a new employee orientation online. Off-campus faculty can attend faculty meetings streamed through the eCampus website: They may type questions that are read aloud during the meetings. Those meetings occur about once a semester, says Womer, but

administrators are in communication with the faculty throughout the semester.

The question of how to handle student testing was a controversial one, says Womer. About 75 percent of the faculty allows online testing. The remaining 25 percent require proctored tests. Local students come to campus to take their tests. Off-campus students find proctors at nearby colleges or universities.

Service your students 24/7

Many of eCampus students would not be in school at all if they couldn’t take the classes online, says Womer. Many of the program’s 16,000 students work full-time; others live far from campus, including some international students. As a result, all student services – registration, advising, placement testing, financial aid, tutoring – are online.

Three cyber advisors are assigned to students, who are divided up alphabetically. The advisors pull up transcripts and advise them based on their majors. The students have the same advisor

throughout their time at eCampus. They can take a computerized placement test that show if they’re ready for college-level math and English. Tutors in math and English are available online or by phone. They also have access to an online library, with a librarian available to chat online or by e-mail 24 hours a day.

Another important aspect of student services is the help desk, which is open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. “It’s expensive but necessary,” says Womer. A business-hours-only help desk wasn’t working for eCampus students, she says, many of whom do most of their work Friday nights and on the weekend. If a student had a problem logging in during those hours, they’d lose the whole weekend if they didn’t have access to the help desk.

A feature meant to prevent some technical problems is a self-diagnosis test. Students can click on a link to find out if their computer has the capabilities to handle the technical requirements of their course. Students may

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