Improving Distance Education Through Student Online Orientation Classes

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Abstract

When offering an online class the academic institution's major concern should be on ensuring that all learners will be successful in the class. This paper outlines the issues faced by Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) in its struggle to improve retention rates in their distance education courses. The case study will also serve as justification for student to complete an orientation class on distance education. While these courses span multiple facets of higher education such as technology, criminology, mathematics, business, and general studies, the core competencies when completing an online class remain unchanged. The need to have students who are educated on the dynamics of an online class and to understand what will be expected of them as an online learner will improve the student's success within the course.

One author of this paper currently sits on the IUP Distance Education Committee that has begun to look at methods that may be implemented to educate and prepare students on the elements of a virtual classroom and what is expected of an online learner. The intent of this paper is to identify the need for such an orientation class by looking at recent trends in both online and face to face education at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. The data gathered for online courses is only compared to the same course that is offered in a face to face setting.

Keywords: distance education, orientation classes, online education, student enrollment and retention

Introduction

This paper addresses the importance of implementing mandatory training sessions for students who wish to take online classes at IUP and the elements that would be included in a preparation class for online learners. Like other academic institutions, IUP has a diverse student body and must take into account different learning styles. This research study opens with a review of related literature that details the challenges facing online institutions in preparing students for distance education courses and an outline of the elements in an online orientation class. The paper then focuses on the recent history of online and traditional retention rates at IUP and recommendations for future research.

Correspondence courses, training files, radio, television, and most recently the Internet have all played a key role in the history of distance education (Blake & Blackwell, 2005). The availability of offering classes in an online setting has changed the face of education as traditional schools are now in a rush to offer online courses. The number of programs offered in an online setting and student enrollment has skyrocketed since its introduction in the 1990's. As the Internet has grown in popularity, programs have become more advanced, telecommunication speeds and accessibility are increasing, and interactive applications are more readily available. During this time online institutions have searched for methods to increase enrollment and retain students. As applications and programs become more advanced the face of online learning is

changing. No longer are online course limited to text and PowerPoint presentations. Advances in online platforms, programs, and interactive tools are providing an opportunity for courses to look as though the instructor was in the room. As this technology changes, students must be kept abreast of the ever changing online classroom.

The launching of new systems, technology tools, and applications has created enthusiasm among educators and academic programs offering online courses. This enthusiasm may sometimes blur good judgment as student success should be placed before the financial gains that online education can generate. A long term vision needs to be sought when studying online enrolment rates as students who are successful in their first online class are more likely to take additional online classes and recommend online courses to their peers.

Literature Review of the Components of an Online Orientation Classes

The reasoning behind an orientation class in distance education is twofold. This course should be designed to acclimate the student with the technology involved in an online class and the faculty expectations. Online classes can be developed using tools such as e-mail, instant messenger, company intranets, or through online platforms. While each platform has a different look and feel, the content, communication methods, and tools used to deliver the material will be similar. While the technology may change, the core expectations of an online learner must be identified. Ongoing distance education orientation classes would insure that students are aware of the new educational technology and pedagogy that may be used in the course.

The delivery of an online course may be very foreign and difficult for a student who does not have a technical background. The content within a course is to a large extent dependent on the technology utilized. Examples of online technology can be found in lecture postings, discussion boards, streaming video, voice technology, interactive study material, online labs, exams, virtual chat sessions, and a multitude of additional distance learning tools.

Technological advances have made it more complicated for the novice user to attain and participate in an online classroom. Today's online courses are not restricted to lecture notes and a discussion board. Distance education courses now include a wide range of programs such as multimedia technology, streaming video, graphics, voice communication, applets, and other advanced technologies that may have to be installed and configured to meet the course objectives. Due to these additional technical requirements, an online preparation class that familiarizes students to the platform and the technology involved becomes essential to ensure the student's success in the virtual classroom.

The variations in online platforms vary significantly and require certain knowledge and training in order to effectively navigate the course. There are numerous online platforms such as WebCT, Blackboard, and eCollege. While each platform provides a series of training manuals and online help, the fact remains that novice users must have special knowledge of the configuration options offered within each system in order to be able to work effectively with the content of the course. Faculty will also differ in the technology that will be required in each class. In other words, some students may need to be assimilated into the interface provided in online courses.

The first part of any online training for online learning should be a self assessment. In addition to the technical requirements of the course, students should complete a self assessment to see if online learning is the best choice for them. A study showed that students who developed

a specific schedule were better able to manage their time in the course. "Students identified the most helpful time management strategies as sending a scheduled for study time (78.9%) and devoting time daily to the course (31.6%)" (Roper, 2007).

Academic institutions such as Lake Land College, North Iowa Area Community College, and Roane State Community College are a few examples of schools that provide a short survey for students to see if they are a good fit for distance education courses (Lake Land College; North Iowa Area Community College; & Roane State Community College, 2008).

The fact remains that while online education is convenient, it is not the best choice for all learners. The underlying goal for all academic institutions should be student success, even if the outcome is that the student realized that online education is not the best choice. As Roper noted:

> "One challenge facing an online student is the self-discipline required to devote adequate time for class in courses that might not have regularly scheduled times to me synchronously online or in person. Most students found that establishing their own schedules for class time help them and sure enough time for class preparation."

While the interfaces may vary from one platform to another, the knowledge of the different tools within the platform helps in simplifying the content of the course. In most platforms the use tools such as discussion boards, chat sessions, announcement, exams, lecture notes, video, and other tools will be required to mirror a face to face course. A first time learner may be accustomed to a few of these tools, but a thorough understanding of all options and technology within the online course room is required.

A student orientation course should be delivered in an online environment to accustom students to the interface they will encounter and the necessary skills requirements. The training should begin by explaining the core areas within the course room such as the discussion area and pages used to view class material such as the syllabus and student grade book. Short training modules should explain all of the hardware and software requirements for the class as well as the steps necessary to download the required applets.

Step by step assignments in using the discussion board and taking an online exam or quiz should also be simulated in a real time environment. Live chat sessions should be scheduled during this training to simulate what the student will see in their first online course. Good housekeeping tips will also help the student prepare for what is expected of them as an online learner. Roper also noted that:

> "A key difference between in person and online learning is the independence ability to participate in an online class at a time convenient to the student. This also presents a potential problem, as procrastination could cause a student to fall behind in the online course. A study of graduates found that (15.8%) commented that logging into their course portal everyday and checking for new postings or updates help prevent them from falling behind. Other students (36.8%) comment that weekly assignments from the instructor kept them on a regular schedule in the course."

Data

In the fall of 2008 a request was made on the author's behalf to IUP's Planning and Analysis Department. The data sought was a head to head comparison of online courses that are also taught in a face to face environment. Classes offered only online or only face-to-face were not used in this study. The data retrieved was broken down first by the grade earned by the student and the withdrawal rate. In addition this data was also categorized by the class level of

the course offered. The data gathered showed results from the 2003 through 2008 academic years. The results of each course were provided so that specific classes and trends could be analyzed. Traditionally drop rates are higher for online classes as compared to traditional face to face courses. As noted by Diaz that:

> "Drop rates for distance education classes have been consistently higher than those of traditional classes and, according to some researchers, tend to suggest academic non-success."

The data used in this study were gathered by the research Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment at IUP. While the dataset could not be obtained for this study, the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment were able to provide all of the statistics requested for this research study.

Results

In reviewing the withdrawal rate it was found that both online undergraduate and graduate students are more likely to drop out of an online class as compared to the same traditional face-to-face course.

Table 1 Traditional Course Grades by Student and Class Level - 2003-2008

Letter Grade / Withdrawal Rates	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**F**	**W**	**W %**	**Total**
GRADUATE								
500 and above	861	289	48	0	5	29	2.35%	**1232**
Total	861	289	48	0	5	29	**2.35%**	**1232**
UNDERGRADUATE								
100-199	23650	20598	14586	6432	8279	5175	6.57%	**78720**
200-299	4162	4551	4028	2106	2010	2043	10.81%	**18900**
300-399	5272	5020	3246	998	702	771	4.82%	**16009**
400-499	1691	1293	706	142	100	133	3.27%	**4065**
Total	34775	31462	22566	9678	11091	8122	**6.36%**	**117694**

In reviewing Tables 1 and 2 it was found that online undergraduate students are more likely to drop out of an online class as compared to the same traditional face to face course. Traditional courses had a withdrawal rate of 6.36% as compared to 9.78% in the same class offered online.

Table 2 Distance Ed Grades by Student and Class Level - 2003-2008

Letter Grade / Withdrawal Rates	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**F**	**W**	**W %**	**Total**
GRADUATE								
500 and above	863	172	23	0	12	56	4.97%	**1126**
Total	**863**	**172**	**23**	**0**	**12**	**56**	**4.97%**	**1126**
UNDERGRADUATE								

100-199	2288	1293	589	226	524	487	9.01%	**5407**
200-299	413	448	392	236	292	413	18.82%	**2194**
300-399	1096	1464	850	271	259	324	7.60%	**4264**
400-499	1010	652	298	82	87	82	3.71%	**2211**
Total	**4807**	**3857**	**2129**	**815**	**1162**	**1306**	**9.78%**	**14076**

Tables 1 and 2 also show that the graduate withdrawal rate of online classes were also much higher as compared to face-to-face classes. It was found that online graduate students are more than 53% likely to drop out of an online class as compared to the same traditional face to face course.

It was also found that the withdrawal rate in 300-399 and 400-499 are much lower as compared to 100-199 and 200-299 level courses. This trend continued as the graduate withdrawal rates were lower than all other undergraduate withdrawal rates. While many arguments can be made to why this trend exists, the fact cannot be ignored that higher level students have probably had more experience in online classes. Unfortunately, since IUP has no distance education orientation class to train for online education, many students early experiences in an online classroom are done through trial and error. If the university was to mandate that all online learners first pass a training course of what is expected from an online student, it is suffice to expect that the retention rates would improve, especially in 100-200 level classes where students usually enroll for their first distance education course.

Summary

As online withdrawal rates continue to increase, academic institutions must brainstorm methods to ensure that students are successful within an online course. This study outlined the dilemmas facing online education at IUP, and possible methods being discussed to improve the withdrawal rates of online classes. The study also explained the resent history of online withdrawal rates at IUP and their attempts to address the challenges of improving students success in the online world.

While the focus of online orientation class in distance education are still in the discussion phase within the Distance Education Committee, additional variables are also being examined. Some of these variables include where to house such a class as the University is changing from WebCT to a new online learning platform, and possible conflicts with the student scheduling system. A follow up study is required to assess the effectiveness of the planning and the delivery of this distance education orientation class, thus additional reviews and audits during the discussions will continue.

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