FACULTY FOCUS – facultyfocus.com

Five Common Pitfalls of Online Course Design

Elizabeth St. Germain

Much of what passes for an “online course” these days could more accurately be described as the electronic version of class hand-outs. These courses usually consist of a course description, a syllabus, lecture notes, reading lists, and assignment checklists. In other words, whatever materials a student might have viewed on paper in the past are now read onscreen, and whatever presentations a student might have watched in the classroom are now observed on their screen.

Perhaps this suffices to replicate the classroom experience for students who are participating at a distance, but is this the best way to use the capabilities of a computer to support learning? It’s not unlike typing text into a slide presentation without realizing you could add sound, images, animations, colors, links, and videos. If you would like your online course to go beyond the offline paradigm, you will need to avoid the following five pitfalls of online course creation.

Online Course Design Pitfall #1: Upload your course materials, then call it a day.
Reading your course material on a computer screen does not make for a memorable learning experience. Step back and take a fresh look at your content in the larger context of the world and the Web. Think about how you can re-author your materials so that they leverage Web resources and computer applications. Rework that hand-out on tedious lab procedures into a colorful, animated slideshow. Bring a historic context to life through links to period paintings, historic sites, or even contemporary Google street views. Use your imagination to leverage the capabilities afforded by a computer connected to the Internet.

Online Course Design Pitfall #2: Let the course management system drive your thinking.
Course management systems (CMS) are usually preconfigured with a course template that instructors are expected to populate with their course description, syllabus, assignments, and announcements. Often these templates are focused on content that is more related to course administration rather than the educational experience. An empty template invites you to fill it with text-based information rather than opening your mind to wider possibilities. Start by thinking about the kinds of learning experiences you want to create rather than letting the CMS define a more limited view of putting your course online.

Online Course Design Pitfall #3: Insist on being the “sage on the stage.”
In the old model of education, the instructor stood on the podium and served as the students’ revered and primary access point to the desired knowledge. Today, your students may be Googling your lecture topic while you speak and finding three sources that update or improve upon your presentation. The Web provides instantaneous access to an enormous volume of opinions, commentary, and knowledge related to your topic. As a result, your role is now more of a content curator—the one who prunes and trains the branches that extend from your expertise out into the world. The Web enables interdisciplinary links, associations, relationships, and
openness. Your course should be a place where students come to participate in the connections that can be made between your subject and the outside world. Build these bridges into your online course materials, and become a facilitator of these important connections.

**Online Course Design Pitfall #4: Expect your students to consume knowledge rather than create it.**

Most online courses aim at pouring content into student containers rather than supporting students in making that knowledge their own through practice, experience, and play. The interactivity and interconnectedness of computers provides increased opportunity for students to actively participate in their learning rather than passively consuming what you feed them. Developing content that asks students to recall and apply what they have learned is essential to the education process. In many cases, you can ask students to use the same digital tools you have used to explain your ideas in order to demonstrate their own understanding. In an online course, this could mean peppering your online content with quick test-your-comprehension questions or developing exercises that ask students to generate data, capture and upload photos of evidence, research connections to real-world conditions, or create explanatory slideshows.

**Online Course Design Pitfall #5: Ignore the ways students learn from each other.**

Many online courses assume a two-way dialogue between each student and the instructor, and they forget about the ways in which students learn from each other’s mistakes, ideas, and input. Consider creating wiki spaces in which groups of students can work together. Include assignments that require students to share ideas and resources, present topics to each other, and critique each other’s work. Use online communication tools and collaborative spaces to foster a class-wide web of supportive contact rather than settling into multiple parallel channels between you and each student.

The “online” in online course does not mean uploading Word documents into a course template rather than printing them out. Expand your view of how computer applications and Web resources can be used to increase the relevance, power, and memorability of the educational experiences you create.

*Elizabeth St. Germain is the vice president of publishing and editorial services at nSight, a content development and communications services firm that specializes in learning and information products — and the people who create and produce them. To learn about nSight’s eLearning and course development services, visit [http://www.nsightworks.com](http://www.nsightworks.com)