

eLearning Course Design Approaches and Authorship to Promote Collaborative Learning: Let the Students Create the Course Content

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Abstract

Students can author much of the eLearning content for an online course. A novel approach to creating and designing such a course is for the faculty to relinquish many authorship duties to the students. Many methods allow faculty members to let students create some of the course content. There are also strong rationale and justification for this academic approach and methodology as a solution to other problems identified in research on eLearning. Some of the methods are in use by the author. A critique of this personal experience follows a discussion of the various techniques available that allow student authorship of content. Some of the final examples given or suggested are new enough that the methods and software programs and features still need testing in eLearning courses. The author firmly believes that allowing students to choose their own course materials and their own presentation techniques will greatly enrich the eLearning experience and increase the amount of interaction that students have with the course, each other, and the faculty member. It allows the faculty member to be a mentor and facilitator rather than just an information provider.

Background

One of the biggest impediments to more faculty members using the technology of eLearning is the need to write individual materials, to convert paper materials, or convert or import other software into the eLearning platform. Even the new supplemental materials created by the publishing companies to accompany their textbooks needs editing, selection, and additions during preparation before delivery can commence. In most cases, there are no suggestions from the publisher or author about individualizing the course for students at various levels and no additional interest items beyond the scope of the basic course. These additional authoring tasks left to the faculty member are frustrating and very time-consuming. There must be an easier and more effective way to prepare eLearning courses and engage elearners. A way that works better for the faculty and for the students enrolling in a course is necessary.

One of the biggest challenges for the student entering into an eLearning environment is dealing with what has been called “the faceless alienation” and sense of ‘lost’ that can often occur (Johnson, 2005). This often results in poorly done and missing assignments. The problems if left

uncorrected can turn into poor completion rates for the course and high drop out rates for programs using eLearning in their course offerings. eLearning often struggles with this problem and often loses. Many solutions address the need for the faculty member to be proactive in student contact to combat these problems. Materials and methods that can be helpful to decrease or eliminate the isolations and failures are available but not addressed as an additional solution.

How can faculty members create lots of eLearning content for their courses while addressing the problems of student alienation, boredom, and poor performance? In many eLearning environments, the course supplies little incentive for the students to explore and express themselves or even to perform well. Is there a solution to this problem for which both faculty and student can benefit? The right solution is mutually beneficial not only to the faculty and students individually but also to the eLearning community in general.

Solution

The solution envisioned here puts more of the course content authorship into the hands of the students. This does not give the faculty member a free pass to disappear during the course! This is the golden moment for the faculty member to step up to the role of facilitator and mentor and leave behind much of the role of information provider. Initially elearners always depend mightily on faculty members for knowledgeable and helpful instructions regarding the course. The emphasis on instruction preparation must be on facilitation measures rather than on supplying content or manipulating materials. First and foremost, for quality results, faculty members must provide quality guidelines and clear expectations before students undertake the first projects

posted online. Secondly, faculty members must have some criteria on how they determine the background references for the student presentations to be accurate, authoritative and useful. Further, students are accountable for using some model of scholarly citing and documentation. Reminding students that quoting is very acceptable, stealing is not, is just as important in the eLearning process as it is to the more traditional written assignment. Students are accountable for honest scholarship. Finally, faculty members must give immediate feedback if not before the first assignments are posted online. Obviously, this will help the students with a less than clear understanding of their responsibilities. Less obvious but equally necessary is the fact that the anxious over-achiever may need to be pacified.

General Guidelines

Some general guidelines, technology guidelines and appropriate reference materials guidelines regardless of the subject matter in the course follow. Some good examples are:

General Formatting Guidelines:

- Descriptive and Accurate Title
- Table of Contents
- Logical balanced progression through the material
- References supplied in the document and at the end (hyperlinks when appropriate)
- Question and Answer or FAQ's page
- Contact page of the presenter
- PP, HTML, DOC, WMV, WAV, PDF formats etc. chosen

Technology use guidelines:

- Clear directions for the use of available technology (i.e.,

download of special players, installation instructions of special applications software, changing browser settings, required registrations at certain websites)

- Reference links to the new technology to share with other participants
- Tips, traps, helpful hints for use. For example: sound can be problematic for some reason and just letting the student know that sound is on the program is very helpful

Appropriate reference material guidelines:

- Documented professionally
- Appropriate to the academic level of the audience
- Vetted to determine truthfulness, appropriateness and accuracy
- Accepted as a standard in the subject matter area

Once guidelines are in place, building collaboration (Chew, 2006) and eliminating (Dickey, 2004) isolation (Johnson, 2005) becomes the priority. Asynchronous web-based technologies are useful in promoting a collaborative learning environment among university students.

Asynchronous Technology

Building the Content and Collaboration Environment

The following structures and strategies seem to foster the type of balance needed between content building and collaborative effort (Chew, 2006).

Discussion Groups

Many faculty members agonize over questions to post for a discussion group.

Every instructor would like to see stimulating, thought-provoking online discussion take place in a course. A helpful hint to remember is that what is of interest to a faculty member is often of little or no interest to the online student. Let the students propose the discussion board topics. Each student receives points in the course to post viable discussion questions. Grades for the content consider such measurable qualities as length, number of responses, and quality of discussions. Additional students participating in the discussion accumulate points.

Current Events

Younger students have probably given up reading newspapers and magazines. They prefer to get their information about topics of interest from online news sites and special interest sites that cater to the subjects they are interested in knowing about. Make it a requirement that each student contribute some current events and note the sites that students like to gather information from about the subjects in the online class. If the students regularly go to message board pages, it can be very valuable for the instructor to join and peruse these pages for ideas.

Group Emails

With text messaging and palm pilots and blackberries, many online courses can assign students to send group and class emails out to links in the current events area or discussion board or even just send out an online article of interest they have found. A course designed and authored with collaborative group efforts for the posting of course materials has an ever-changing environment for the student with each post. This seems to intrigue the over achievers who like to work in an intense mode on many different tasks at a time. The overachievers often send out too many

materials and need reining in on occasion. For other students avoiding logins and homework it often piques their interest in seeing what changes are occurring in the course. One working professional in an information systems course posted his subscription material supplied by a software manufacturer from his employer (with permission) from work in current events and sent out a group email alerting students to impending virus problems, network outages and other very timely matters making the materials for such a course up to the minute like news.

Helpful Hyperlink Post

It is amazing how much information students are aware of about the subject matter they are studying in online courses that is available on the web and how much of it may be helpful to the other students in the course once posted and made available. Students posting these links should give a paragraph description of salient points and possible applications to course work

Polls and Surveys

There are poll and survey sites on the web, which allow free use. Most eLearning content management systems do not have any such function yet but students often like to express opinions in a simple yes/no format and determine where they stand among fellow peers. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/tools/polls/>

Just Fun

A goof off area with games or fun stuff links will at least accomplish the goal of getting students who are more reluctant to log in regularly. Do not reject this suggestion out of hand as irrelevant to the course.

Profiles

As long as students agree, having them post small profiles about themselves and their personal interests hosted on the content manager system or linked from a page on the course, can be helpful. It allows students to post preferred contact information and to ask to meet other students online for messaging about course work etc. So many students have personal or company web pages and can just post that link in the course if they would prefer to do so.

Course Suggestion Box

This might be a good place to allow anonymous postings, which some course management systems do allow. It is also a problem area to keep abreast of for a faculty member. It is good to know if there is a problem or good suggestion but wise not to let the course turn into a mean spirited free for all controlled by the students.

If a course suggestion box is problematic, the instructor could make it available only at the end of the course. The comments in the suggestion box often help in creating content for a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) area in the subsequent offering of the course.

Interactive Technologies

Chat rooms

At least once during the course and preferably early a timed regular online chat room should be available. The Blackboard system allows full electronic classroom and chat in a more controlled environment. This keeps unwanted intruders out of a course. This allows students to meet up and make online buddies for the course, which can increase retention and improve grades. This is similar to students meeting before or after

class in study groups and is a virtual modeling of the activity.

Instant Messenger Hours

Some regular instant messenger hours under a screen name devoted to use for faculty instant messenger office hours helps. This can really increase communications. It is wise to make a special screen name just for the class and be online at certain times. Faculty members, who use a generic name and leave it up constantly, can find themselves overwhelmed with too much chitchat and too many student requests that are hard to sort out among multiple class loads.

Further, you may need the students to identify themselves to you so that you can note when students contact you during instant messenger office hours. Students often use unrecognizable nicknames they share with family and friends or very formal names for work that are not easy to connect to course members. This is also true of email. Who is old kissylips@aol.com? Privacy concerns have made many online faculty members decide to enforce rules about using university assigned email and student names. It is important to determine exactly which student the faculty member is chatting with in the online environment.

Internet Phone Connections

Content management systems such as Blackboard have not incorporated phones, yet many online students are familiar with Skype, Yahoo Voice, and other internet phones, which are free or have nominal charges. Students who face long distance charges are not likely to call. Some internet phones have voice mail features. Making a Skype or other internet phones available allows students who are reluctant to incur

charges to contact the faculty member in this new medium.

Deciding on the Medium

Even beginning students at the university level have exposure to PowerPoint and some web creation packages based on HTML. These formats publish quite easily in the course space or are published in separate web space areas and linked for easy viewing and later discussion by the course participants.

Current and Future Mediums

The impact of Wiki technology is not ignorable. In the past few years, students at every grade level are using Wikipedia.org as a resource for everything from pop culture to physical sciences and historical debates. This technology allows participation by anyone who registers and wishes to edit. This new environment has raised expectation levels of participation and this new environment is now available and applicable to eLearning. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>

Web logs, (Dickey, 2004) podcast, blogs and vblogs, which are short downloadable and playable internet films in windows media or realplayer format from the more advanced students, can certainly bring many additional logins to an eLearning site.

Ecommerce sites have long known that this constant posting of new material is essential to creating a “stickiness value”, which is both the number of times a user logs into the site and the amount of time the user stays logged into the site. Many eLearning systems log this information for an instructor and it can be very helpful in evaluating the impact of materials.

Interactive Technologies on the horizon such as Groove in the new Windows Vista Operating System may add new ways for students to present content to each other. Vista Groove has a new mock up meeting system available that includes agenda and note taking and distribution of minutes. This technology aids businesses with online capability in hosting distance discussion meetings. It could be helpful to online study groups. It will be widely available for free and in the system so that online students will have the option of using it.

Conclusion

When the responsibility for producing quality content as a collaborative author becomes a course requirement for students, some complaints from students are natural. Many students have become accustomed consumers of passive learning. In many ways, many teaching professionals have enabled students to persist in this passivity. This occurs despite the overwhelming evidence that collaboration and interactivity create better learning environments and those environments create superior stimulation and retention.

One mature adult student said, "I noticed in school a few years back at the undergraduate level the faculty taught the students. Now in graduate school the students teach the faculty." She found her first experiences in graduate school of being responsible for authoring, presenting, and posting some course content clearly somewhat disturbing. She got used to the idea and became very proficient before she crossed the stage May 19, 2007 with a new Master of Applied Computer Science.

However, in final comments on the very same academic program and for the very same courses a younger student commented in an email, "The excessive number of

presentations builds confidence, something we would need for our final presentations, and our lives to come, and basically a skill that everyone ... is lacking... Furthermore, you gave us opportunities to explore the things we wanted to and really forced us to do a lot of work on our own. I really appreciate that because without your class I don't think I would have learned a thing about my field, and that is not solely because of my research, but also because of the research of others. I found your classes to be fun, interesting, and greatly beneficial, and I also feel they helped build comradery [sic] between the 12 of us, something I didn't have in my undergrad."

As students grow accustomed to this method and even start to enjoy their newfound eLearning environment, it may prove difficult at times for the professor. The roles of student and professor may reverse somewhat. The student may no longer have a feeling of detachment or a lack of control or input into a course but the professor might! The collaborative effort works both ways. The Chair of the Computer Science program admitted that a student gave him password and code cracking software many years ago which inspired his interest in security. Students can now be a source of new and inspiring ideas and this is a welcome new benefit of letting the students create course content. The professor must make every effort to mentor and to facilitate student progress. This progress needs to include competence and self-sufficiency. In addition, competency and self-sufficiency yields confidence! What could be better?

Some additional words of advice are in order about grading here. Students will respond to the course if the course has many small graded opportunities. It is unreasonable to expect the student to contribute if they do not see points adding toward the final grade. Course content

systems like Blackboard offer a flexible grade book to put point scores in that the student can check often to determine progress. This will reinforce the need for increased participation in order to do well in the course and bring students back to the course more often.

As the endless drudgery of creating long one-way exchanges ends, the professor will learn to enjoy it too.

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