Abstract

Online teaching is in its adolescence and needs to mature in order to overcome some of its growing pains and reach its potential in the field of education. After teaching at a Master’s level with an online school for over a year and then moving to the GCU environment for the past two years on both an undergraduate and a graduate level, I have noted some practices and commitments that have helped me better participate in and facilitate lifelong learning. The impersonal and disconnected nature of internet education as well as the situation of modern American education in general calls for instructors to develop creative and personalized practices in order to meet the needs of students. This paper offers some foundational guidelines and a few specifics designed to benefit institutions, instructors and students.

The online classroom requires creative and personalized input from instructors in order to craft and maintain an effective educational environment. Such creativity and personalization takes time, effort and some love for the students and the job. Two general problems are especially notable. First, faculty must find unique ways to overcome any lack of foundational skills among students [this is a problem in both regular and online classrooms, but the online classroom demands special attention]. Second, faculty in the online classroom must motivate student attention and diligence. As a part of this issue, faculty must overcome the two-edged sword of the personal and community disconnect of the internet classroom.

By community disconnect, I mean the common view that an online education is inferior to on-the-ground classrooms. Unfortunately, there is significant evidence that online education is inferior because of the prevalence of current online universities that are more like diploma factories [http://www.stthomas.edu/rimeonline/vol5/hebert.htm]. The community disconnect is heightened by the reality that most online universities are for-profit. Washburn (2005) observes, “From the beginning, however, it was clear that the dream of using information technology to enhance teaching and learning risked being subordinated to other, less noble goals, namely, the desire to make money, cut costs, and further reduce the need for full-time professors.” Several steps can be taken to work on overcoming the community disconnects. First, online colleges and universities can work toward hiring better faculty members. Second, learning institutions can work on improving and maintaining high academic standards. It will also provide great benefit as online graduates are placed in jobs in which their major field of study can be used [http://www.stthomas.edu/rimeonline/vol5/hebert.htm].

In order to affect resolutions for these major problems in the online classroom, faculty may need to request additional support and structure from the college or university in which they teach. It is common knowledge that discussion forums make up a key aspect of online learning. GCU online Classroom policies include the statement, “Participating in classroom discussion is paramount to the learning experience” [http://angel04.gcu.edu/section/default.asp?id=828321]. The difficulty in such forums can blossom to ridicule toward students who lack basic writing skills. The university or college of the 21st century must provide tutorial
and remedial courses in writing [as well as in reading comprehension]. The Student Success Center at GCU appropriately includes the Writing Center. Also provided by GCU are Smarthinking Tutoring Services, Ask A Librarian and http://my.gcu.edu/centerforlearning for help finding personalized assistance [GCU, Welcome to Academic Writing presentation]. Faculty must present the opportunities for such mentorial, tutorial and remedial courses strongly yet with sensitivity. Students may protest both a lack of time and lack of need for such courses. It then becomes incumbent upon the faculty to empathetically promote professional academic writing. The faculty should remind the student that even current versions of Microsoft spell and grammar check are inadequate to produce an essay with academic writing.

There are at least two sources for convenient help with professional writing. The first basic source is the wealth of online spelling and grammar checking software. Unfortunately, these online sources cost initially and have regular renewal fees. There is however online grammar websites like The Purdue Owl [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/ ] which is very helpful if the student is encouraged and willing to use this resource. The second basic source is the student plus their family and friends. If the student struggles with academic writing many issues in a poorly written essay can be overcome by simply reading the essay aloud [http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/proofing_grammar.shtml]. A second effective means would be reading the essay aloud to a family member or friend that has a better grasp on academic writing. As the reader stumbles over a particular sentence it is a red flag that perhaps the writing is cumbersome or grammatically errant.

Motivating student attention and diligence requires time and effort by faculty. Both students and faculty generally have huge demands on their time. This results in both students and faculty being distracted and therefore unaware of pertinent classroom situations. The university success courses at GCU [UNV103 & UNV303] are helpful in overcoming this problem by providing teaching and examples for budgeting time. Beyond these introductory classes the faculty must take on the responsibility [and find the balance between appropriately mentoring the student while not enabling incompetence] of gaining and maintaining student attention and diligence.

Faculty can become not just effective facilitators, but online cheerleaders for students. As such faculty needs to be cheerleaders that enter the stands to get student attention and motivate diligence. Several steps are essential. First, the faculty member must have prepared beforehand clear and specific course policies, faculty contact information, course announcements and grading rubrics [in the areas of both content and spelling/grammar/mechanics the rubric can provide specific expectations for every assignment]. A single generic grading rubric will rightly be ignored by many students. Even with a specific rubric the faculty should plan on regularly reminding the students to download and review the rubric while preparing an assignment. For complex assignments it may become necessary to provide additional specific instructions for individual assignments. In providing such additional instructions the faculty member must exercise caution to avoid enabling lack of confidence, laziness or incompetence. As a class progresses the faculty can use email, classroom messages, Questions for Instructor forum, Twitter, Facebook, personal websites, course announcements and phone calls [when necessary] in order to motivate student attention and diligence. It is important to use more than one method of communication in order to ensure effective and productive contact with the student.

A general practice to further motivate attention and motivation includes empathizing with students. Freely admit that you as a faculty member are also involved with lifelong learning. Make sure the students know that they can contact you in the way most convenient to them. Also, be approachable. Respond quickly and
empathetically to student questions after carefully looking at the question and the question that might be behind
the question. Some questions may be simply based on a student having a lack of confidence. When a student
raises a general interest or otherwise important question in a personal message request permission to post the
question and answer in the Questions for Instructor forum. In the Questions for Instructor forum and/or the
regular discussion forum do not discourage appropriate student to student motivation and information.

An appropriately structured online classroom can create a better learning environment. In that discussion
forums are paramount to learning, the student must be expected to participate regularly in each module’s forum.
Having the first discussion question not due until midnight on the third day of the module week may not keep
the attention or encourage diligence among students. When the first discussion question’s initial responses are
not due until midnight on the third day the instructor is forced to have a conversation with the mirror during the
first three days of the week. Rarely will a student go back to the initial discussion question after the second day
of posting an initial response because the student wants to move to the final discussion question for the week.
Along with the above problems there are at least two other deleterious results. First, when students finally enter
the forum they find a list of posts by the instructor to be somewhat overwhelming. Second, this can easily lead
to the module week focus becoming blurry unless those multiple posts by the faculty member are perfectly
aligned with the topic. In such a structural environment the instructor must provide relatively brief, solidly
informative, creatively titled posts that are directly in line with the actual required discussion questions. The
faculty member can even summarize a non-discussion question post with encouragement to students to now
move on to the actual discussion question. Faculty can learn to adjust to any weaknesses in classroom structure
in order to gain a better place to learn.

There are several ways in which an instructor can heighten interest in the discussion forum. First, as the module
begins, the instructor can provide provocative and intriguing titles for each post, including the required ones.
Second, the instructor can provide a current events post that links to a related current event on the topic of the
module. Third, the faculty must commit to slowly developing the module week topic with each general post to
the forum. It is too easy for a faculty member to post large chunks of material in a single message. When the
student opens the post, he or she is immediately overwhelmed and either fails to read the post, fails to read the
entire post or fails to absorb anything significant from the post. Instructors can learn and apply the old adage
that brevity is the soul of wit. By focusing precisely on the topic of the post and editing its content the instructor
can move toward this goal.

It seems better to provide each post with a brief encouragement to the student in the first line that also points
the student ahead to the actual content of the post, followed by a concise but informative paragraph or two that
communicate significant aspects of the module week focus. Within the main content paragraph the instructor
can occasionally find another website or a Youtube video that elaborates on or illustrates some aspect of the
module topic [the link can be provided in that paragraph]. For the brief concluding paragraph, it is beneficial to
do one of several things. The instructor can phrase a thought provoking question that encourages the student to
move ahead to the assigned question. The instructor can phrase a thought provoking question that has a life
application stated in it. Finally, benefit for moving the discussion forward can be gained by using that closing
question to invite the student to look at another student’s post in the forum. The key to the last concise
paragraph is to creatively nudge the student further into the forum content and the thought process.

The challenges of the online classroom will continue into the future. The above suggestions are just the
beginning of meeting the educational needs of online students. Instructors that love teaching will use some of
these suggestions and continue to develop new ideas in order to benefit students.