

In Your Face in Cyberspace - New Paradigm for Online Learning
DMS MA Project
Post-Production Evaluation

Evolution of Project Concept

I knew I wanted to develop a project that was meaningful and that dealt with an aspect of higher education. I had been working in the higher education field for ten years when I started the program, and I wanted to capitalize on my current experience.

I first got the idea to focus on distance education after a group project in Critical Approaches to Digital Media Class. Our group focused on technology in education. Although, my part of the project focused on digital media in K-12 education, what I learned about distance education from our presentation got me interested in that subject. After that class, I knew distance education would be the topic for my final project.

During this same time I got involved with the Telecommunications Cooperative of Colorado (TELECOOP), a distance education consortium of distance educators in Colorado. I attended monthly meetings and participated in their annual Distance Learning conferences. This association contributed to my growing interest in distance education.

I began to research distance education for projects in other DMS courses. My final project in Technical Foundations for Digital Media was about distance education and I created a “Distance Education Documentary” as part of my Web Building and Site Management class.

I decided to develop a project that explored the topic of distance education within an online distance education environment. The concept was to create a class that modeled “best practices” for distance learning. The other goal was to exploit the power of the Internet by developing the course web site using “free” course tools, independent of a particular institution.

Challenges Faced & Solutions Developed

One of my first challenges was to decide what area of distance education to focus on within the online course. The subject of distance education is vast and there is a plethora of resources and literature about the subject. I consulted similar classes and books on the subject, which helped me narrow down my topics.

I also needed to make decisions on how to organize an online class. I had to choose between creating modules, sessions, lessons, etc. I chose a hypertext format for my primary content delivery.

Developing the class without a commercially developed course management system (Blackboard, WebCT) was my first challenge. I researched what options were available within different systems and compared different features and designs.

Graphic design is not my strength so it was a challenge to develop a design template for the course. I located a number of online courses to get design tips for my site. I also looked at ways different online courses organized the navigation areas of the course site.

I wanted my course to have comparable features offered by online course management software. Locating and evaluating tools that were free and not affiliated with any particular institution was another challenge that took a lot of time.

Taking such a long time to develop and finalize the course web site was definitely an obstacle for the project. This caused problems due to the changing and evolving nature of distance education, especially in the online environment. For example, many of the links on the course web site within the earlier lessons were outdated from the time I first created them, to the time I was ready to “teach” the class.

One of my textbooks issued a new edition during the time I was developing the content for the course. I also located additional, and possibly more appropriate and updated textbooks that I didn’t end up using because it would have required major revisions to the content of the course.

Production Process

This project entailed a lot of research and writing. One of my first tasks was to decide on what elements would be included in the course. I decided to organize the course web site into individual lessons. Each lesson includes a hypertext lecture, self-assessment quiz, assignments, readings summary slideshow, and discussion questions.

I used Adobe Photoshop to optimize and resize images used in the course. I used Photoshop to create dividers within some of the pages. I also created a collage for the main course banner using a variety of “free” images that I thought epitomized distance education.

The overall site was created using Dreamweaver. Once the main banner was designed, I created a complementary color scheme. After the design phase was complete, I developed a Dreamweaver template for the site. I used templates bundled with Flash MX to create the self-assessment quizzes and readings slideshows.

The final production phase was the design of the communication area, primarily the discussion board. I created a banner for the discussion board and matched the course color scheme within the discussion area so it would look more integrated into the main site. I organized the forum areas so the discussion area would be easy for students to navigate.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Project as a Whole

Weaknesses:

The primary weakness of the project is that it is very difficult to evaluate success without the final step, actually teaching the class with “real” students. How did the group and team projects work? Did students have any problems with the discussion board or accessing some of the archived Web casts? Was there a lot of interaction through Instant Messenger, email, and the discussion board? Did students complete the course, or was there a high dropout rate? The ultimate success cannot be determined without actually teaching the class.

Strengths:

One of the primary strengths of this project is that I did a good job of incorporating proven examples of web-based teaching strategies that can be shared with others. The course is a good model of an effective online class that I can show others who may be considering teaching a class online.

The discussion board I used for the class helped facilitate the project goal of an “in your face” online class. The discussion board has built in tools that encouraged teacher/student and student/student interactions. For example, participants could see if another class member was currently logged into instant messenger through the discussion board tools. Hopefully this type of tool would encourage “real time” conversations among students and the instructor.

The discussion board also helped create that sense of an online community through the profiles area. Students can view profile information about member posts while reading the posts.

Another strength of the project is that I can apply information I learned from researching distance education to my current position as an instructional designer. I have already applied some of the research from this course into presentations and consultations with faculty.

Finally, I think this project created a good example of how to take advantage of resources already available on the web and successfully integrate them into the course

curriculum. The Web casts were a great resource because the topics covered related directly to the subject of distance learning. Students not only learned more about a topic covered in the course, they also had the opportunity to participate and experience another distance education delivery medium.

What I learned

I learned a lot of useful information about the subject of distance and online education. I improved my web development skills through the creation of the course web site. I learned that creating a quality online course that incorporates best practices for online learning is very time consuming. I learned how to take advantage of resources and tools available on the web and apply them to my project. I learned some useful tools and alternatives for integrating communication in an online class – instant messenger chats, web cam chats, and a new discussion forum.

What went wrong

The online distance-learning environment changed significantly from the time of my initial proposal to the final completion of the course web site. Some of the examples of excellent distance education programs I noted in my project proposal have now failed. External economic and environmental factors contributed to these changes, especially the crash of the dot.coms and 9-11.

During the time of my original proposal, online education was very hot and many new players were developing new distance learning ventures. Online education is still hot, but the number of players has been significantly reduced due to economic and social changes in the last two years.

Most of the things that went wrong revolved around the communication area. I didn't finalize the communication area of the class until near the end of the project. This decision created more work on the back-end. I had to wait to finalize the course orientation and I wasted valuable time evaluating and researching course discussion boards.

Evaluating some of these free communication tools was cumbersome because the "free" tools often included pop-up ads which were very distracting and frustrating. I considered using Cold Fusion for the discussion board but had very limited experience building Cold Fusion applications. In addition, this conflicted with the premise to use "free" tools available via the Internet.

Originally I had planned to use Blackboard's communication features for the class communication area. This would have been the easiest option because I am very familiar with Blackboard's discussion tools - I conduct workshops on how to use the Blackboard tools. However, we decided that one purpose of the project is to use a communication tool that may be available to a wider audience and not dependent on the availability of a particular course management system (CMS).

I had to change the Instant Messenger tool from Net Meeting to Yahoo IM because Yahoo could be integrated more seamlessly into the discussion board.

What went right

I think I was able to successfully create the type of online course that was outlined in my proposal. The "free" Internet resources really complimented the goals of the course web site to create a highly interactive course with a variety of media.

Although taking so long to complete the project was one of the major challenges, it also proved to be an advantage. Taking longer gave me the opportunity to meet more educators and experts involved in distance learning that I was able to use as a resource for my course. My guest speakers would not have been available if I had completed the course during my original timeframe.

One of the primary goals of this project was to create an online course with lots of opportunities for interaction. The discussion board I finally chose was an excellent choice because it helped me accomplish this goal. The additional communication tools that came bundled with the discussion board (announcements, private messages, member email notification, and instant messenger) helped the instructor easily communicate with students. In addition, students could see when their class members or the instructor were logged into IM, which would encourage "real-time" communication.

Conclusions

If I had to do my project all over again, one thing I would do differently is decide on the communication tools first. Communication was a critical component of this course and waiting until the final months to finally choose the discussion board caused a lot of additional work.

I would also narrow down my audience and topic. I would limit the topic to online education or e-learning, instead of the broad topic of distance education, I would have

designed the course as a training course targeted specifically for instructors new to e-learning.

If this were a “real” class, I would solicit feedback from experienced distance education experts. I would also recruit additional guest speakers to present their material before participating in course discussions.

Overall, I am very happy with the outcome of the project. I think I successfully fulfilled the goals outlined in my project proposal.