High-Tech Classrooms Need Highly Competent Instructors

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The 21st century classroom requires instructors with more advanced skills and competencies to deliver materials in a way that engages students both traditional and non-traditional. Traditional students have come to expect the incorporation of technology into their classrooms because they have grown up with it and can see its usefulness, while non-traditional students may need additional resources online in order to reinforce new concepts. By employing Web 2.0 technologies, like online video and discussion boards, into both the online and traditional on-campus classrooms, instructors can address both isolation and different learning styles, as well as address issues relating to problems with understanding concepts being taught and respond positively to feedback provided by both the students and administrators. In addition, utilizing Web 2.0 technology in the online classroom can reduce the isolation that many students feel in these classrooms by ensuring students can communicate with other students as well as the instructor.

Keywords: online education, teaching strategies, teaching tools, online instruction, in-class instruction, Web 2.0

Introduction

In years prior, instructors at higher education institutions across the globe could simply stand in the front of the classroom and lecture. Students were expected to grasp the material and were tested on the information acquired on a regular basis. Today, however, the college classroom has gone high-tech, with the infusion of video, dynamic assignments, and better assessments that truly measure where a student's skills and weaknesses are (Dyrud, 2012). Despite this, the traditional method of teaching through lecture remains. According to Kuyini (2011), an increase in technology in the classroom should be matched not only by changes in the types of assignments and assessments instructors provide to their students, but in teacher competence as well.

Despite training and frequent reinforcement by administrators, there exist many instructors who believe that they can teach online courses the same way they might instruct a class on campus (Barrett, 2010). Greater than 88% of administrators reported being in favor of online classes, but argued that traditional classes were better suited to meet the needs of both non-traditional and foreign students attending college (Gaytan, 2009). Research shows that high learning curves exist in the online classes and in online learning that results in many students expressing fear of taking online classes (Tu, 2012). If high learning curves exist with the software or platforms being implemented at higher education institutions, this can be a barrier for instructors who wish to motivate and inspire their students. Low enrollment in online classes at a campus may signify to prospective students that online offerings at the college are not working (Lee & Choi, 2010; Schulte, Dennis, Eskey, Taylor, & Zeng, 2012).

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There exist three barriers that instructors need to overcome in order to not only be competent, but effective at instruction. While these barriers exist in the online classroom, they exist in the traditional classroom as well, and instructors who teach in the classroom will benefit from overcoming these. Teacher competence is of interest not only to instructors, but to administrators (Kuyini, 2011). Instructors must go further than lectures. They need to build relationships with their students and inspire them. By doing this, student performance will increase, and prospective students will see that the online departments at these institutions are successful and may be more likely to attend (Lease & Brown, 2009; Lee & Choi, 2010).

Isolation

The first barrier that exists is between the students and the instructor, as well as between students themselves. Perhaps no greater problem exists with online courses than the issue of isolation (Sher, 2009). In prior years, online education was limited to emails between the instructor and the student, with little, if any, interaction between students (Hashim, 2011). However, with social media, blogs, and interactive discussion boards, students can reduce the amount of anxiety they may feel that stems from isolation and better connect with their peers (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012). Isolated students do not just exist online, however; there are countless students in traditional classes who choose not to reach out to their instructors due to fear or because they are not exactly sure where their weaknesses lie (Heiman, 2010). This stresses the importance of regular conferences with students and frequent evaluations to determine where the student is in relation to the material (Fabry, 2012).

Class Size

Difficulties exist in reducing isolation both on and off campus because of changes in administration and the way courses are set up and filled. Often, more students that the instructor can handle are placed into an individual classroom, making the instructor's ability to meet with individual students difficult (Elena-Pérez, 2012). Likewise, the way the organization sets up courses, especially online, results in courses that are almost completely automated. This means that computers automatically assign a grade, and the instructor has little understanding of what difficulties the students are facing on quizzes and other assignments that can be graded automatically (Contreras & Gollin, 2009; Piña, 2010). Due to this, individual students cannot be effectively evaluated by the instructor.

Web 2.0 Technologies

One of the greatest tools that instructors have at their fingertips exists in the form of online technology. Instructors can connect with their students in both online and traditional classrooms using Web 2.0 technologies. Web 2.0 technologies are defined as online resources that allow for user-generated content and greater interaction (Gaytan, 2009). In terms of online classrooms, Web 2.0 technologies have caught on and are increasing in its presence as a tool that instructors rely on to convey information to their students. However, Web 2.0 technology is only a tool. It cannot replace the role of the instructor, nor should it (Kujath, 2011; Wei-Ling, 2010). While there are many instructors who limit their engagement with their students to an online video lecture each week, researchers like Cain and Policastri (2011) and Dyrud (2012) focus on utilizing a more interactive approach to learning. By using sites like Facebook and Twitter to engage with students, instructors can better connect students with a changing world (Dyrud, 2012; Fodeman, 2009).

While Web 2.0 technologies do not address the issue of class size, they do address isolation in general. Instructors need to engage their students on a regular basis, both in class and out of class (Constantinides &

Zinck Stagno, 2011). While it was acceptable for instructors to post office hours and simply have students drop in as needed, many students, particularly English as a second language (ESL) students, may be apprehensive about approaching their instructors for extra help. Struggling students need extra support, and Web 2.0 is one way by which instructors can help them (Kurkela, 2011).

Different Learning Styles

Understanding That Students Learn Differently

One of the largest developments in recent years is the theory that students learn differently. These learning styles are categorized as audial, visual, and kinesthetic. Lecturing in a classroom typically reaches only one of these learning styles. A student who learns visually may not be best suited for a traditional classroom where the instructor lectures and provides no visual support, while a student who responds well to auditory learning may not do as well in an online classroom where he/she is self-directed or where the course relies heavily on visual aids. Kinesthetic learners do best by performing tasks; this may take the form of writing or performing physical tasks that demonstrate the lesson being instructed (Dunn & Honigsfeld, 2009).

While auditory learners may thrive in the traditional classroom, the online classroom may pose challenges (Brookfield, 2010). A competent instructor who is aware of these challenges can tailor assignments best suited for auditory learners by recording their own lectures and providing podcasts, or utilizing online video sites, such as YouTube, to help students hear the material being taught (Everhart, 2009). This may provide the aid auditory students need to thrive in the online classroom (Kurtz & Sponder, 2010).

Online classrooms may best benefit visual learners who are able to view materials online and understand them. Students with auditory disabilities may also perform well online, since much of the material provided to them is in the form of reading (Coombs, 2010). Instructors reaching out to visual learners may upload videos that reinforce the material being read. Coupled with images, slideshows, and charts, visual learners may be able to perform at their peak level (Halbert, Kriebel, Cuzzolino, Coughlin, & Fresa-Dillon, 2011).

Of all the learners that are seen in both the traditional and online classrooms, kinesthetic learners are typically at a disadvantage. Kinesthetic learners desire to be more hands-on and perform the task, rather than listen to a lecture or watch a slideshow presentation (Harrell & Bower, 2011). Instructors who want to ensure kinesthetic learners are included in their classrooms may want to consider activities that have the student performing the tasks that are being discussed, either as part of a lecture, or online (Boeglin-Quintana & Donovan, 2013).

Using a Variety of Assignments to Challenge Students

While kinesthetic learners best benefit by doing, it needs to be emphasized that simply assigning readings and questions relating to the readings for homework is not as effective as assigning a variety of assignments that will challenge students in both the online and traditional classrooms (Boeglin-Quintana & Donovan, 2013). Having students seek out real-world examples of the lecture topic is one way instructors can move away from the traditional question and answer homeworks that are normally assigned. Having students respond to online videos or upload videos of their own is another. Instructors in the 21st century classroom need to be far more creative than in decades prior in not only engaging students, but keeping assignments interesting and dynamic (Dray, Lowenthal, Miszkiewicz, Ruiz-Primo, & Marczynski, 2011).

Effective Evaluation and Training

Feedback is a critical component of any classroom. Traditionally, feedback was provided at the end of the semester in the form of a survey that determined the worth of the instructor, the class, the materials, or all the three (Bentley, Selassie, & Shegunsh, 2012). Unfortunately, many of these evaluations are never reviewed; in many cases, instructors never see the results. As a consequence, instructors are left in the dark about what is working in their classroom and what is not, and cannot make changes to benefit students in the following semesters.

Online Classes Often Suffer From a Lack of Feedback

In the online classroom, there is little feedback from the students to the instructor (Bentley et al., 2012). This may stem from fear; students do not want to criticize their instructors due to concern over repercussions. Instructors who desire to change their classrooms will encourage feedback from students and ensure them that any suggestions, comments, or concerns will not negatively or positively impact their grade (Fabry, 2012). Instructors who are able may resort to utilizing action research or applied research throughout the semester, researching assignments and activities that have worked in similar classrooms and using them in their own, and changing them as needed based on the feedback from students.

Administrators Need to Follow up With Instructors Who Are Struggling

Not all instructors are capable of teaching online. Some instructors teach online simply because it allows them to teach more classes without devoting a chunk of time to remaining on campus (Faulk, 2010). Other instructors may teach online to supplement their full-time jobs. Regardless of the reason, higher education institutions need competent and qualified instructors who are able to accept feedback about their classes, not just at the end of the term, but throughout the semester as needed (Guder & Malliaris, 2010). Administrators who desire to have students who are satisfied with their educational experience will follow up with any concerns that students have about their instructor, the class, or the way the class is being taught (Kuyini, 2011).

Training for Instructors Who Need It

Instructors who desire to teach online classes may not be up to date on current technology, policies, and proper etiquette in teaching these classes (Faulk, 2010). Administrators have expressed concern regarding the lack of training in online classes (Gaytan, 2009). Likewise, someone who possesses a terminal degree in his/her field may not have had the proper education courses designed to prepare them for teaching (Faulk, 2010). Instructors who have recently been hired at an organization to teach on-campus classes or online classes may have concerns or questions about the platforms the school is using or the correct way to enter grades and attendance (Nagel, Maniam, & Leavell, 2011). By holding training courses at the beginning of each semester, instructors can learn valuable tools from other seasoned instructors about what works in the classroom and what does not, as well as address any questions instructors may have (Ladhani, Chhatwal, Vyas, Iqbal, Tan, & Diserens, 2011).

Conclusion

The 21st century higher education institutions need instructors who are ready to meet the demands of a generation of students who have grown accustomed to having technology ingrained in every aspect of their lives (Peterson, 2009). By utilizing tools available, such as Web 2.0 technologies, instructors can not only engage students of different learning styles, but address the issue of isolation, as explored by Sher (2009). In

addition, by receiving appropriate feedback that addresses concerns or problems that exist both in the online and traditional classrooms, instructors can show their students that they are legitimately involved with helping their students learn and reach their maximum potential (Tunks, 2012).

In the future, instructors and administrators can expect to see even more technology added to the classroom in the form of visual or kinesthetic aids that can help students apply the knowledge they are gaining to real-world examples (Speece, 2012). As more technology is ingrained in the lives of the students at these organizations, instructors will be expected to not only deliver the content required, but in an engaging way that ensures that all students under their charge feel welcome and included (Mitchell, 2009).

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