Strategically Structuring Online Courses for Customer Service

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Introduction

Research on the effectiveness of online classes versus traditional courses remains inconclusive, but the fact remains that distance learning programs are a big part of the education market. To be successful, innovative professors must continue to enhance the quality of their online delivery in an effort to achieve the same educational outcomes acquired in a traditional classroom. Just like the brick and mortar courses, success depends on the quality and dedication of the person delivering the course. It is important to remember that this research is designed to develop a customer-service based, distance education course without lowering the quality of the course. In fact, the value added aspects of customer service will enhance the quality of a course in most circumstances.

Distance education is defined as “a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place” (The Commission on Colleges, 2010, para. 1). For our purposes, the phrases “distance education” and “online education” are used interchangeably. Distance education is, indeed, not a new phenomenon to higher education; it continues to evolve in its mode of delivery.

Technology advances during the 20th century have precipitated new advances in the delivery of distance education. Correspondence courses made their début during the 19th century, paving the way for the adoption of delivering courses via radio broadcast in the 1930s, followed by the advent of educational television programming in the 1950s. Other new technologies emerged over the past few decades: closed-circuit television, video recordings, satellite transmission, and interactive television – all contributing to the expansion of distance education. In the 1990s, the introduction of personal computers, CD-ROM technology, and the
Internet further enhanced the ability of educators to effectively deliver online education directly to their intended audience - the student. Today, the growth rate of web-based, online learning in higher education is proliferating.

In 2008, the Babson Survey Research Group published a study entitled “Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States, 2008.” The study was commissioned by the Sloan Consortium which is “committed to help learning organizations continually improve quality, scale and breadth of their online programs according to their own distinct missions, so that education will become a part of everyday life, accessible and affordable for anyone, anywhere, at any time, in a wide variety of disciplines”. The study’s major findings included:

- Over 3.9 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2007 term (a 12 percent increase reported from the previous year).
- This 12 percent growth rate for online enrollment far exceeds the 1.2 percent growth of the overall higher education student population.
- Over 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students were taking at least one online course in the fall 2007 term.
- Widespread agreement that higher fuel costs will lead to more students selecting online courses.
- Institutions that offer programs to serve working adults are the most positive about the potential for overall enrollment growth being driven by rising unemployment.

As reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education in December, 2008, the National Center for Education Statistics issued initial survey results from its “Distance Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2006-2007” report and declared ”a majority of colleges in the United States (65 percent) offer college-level, credit-granting distance education courses”. Earlier in
2008, a Zogby International survey was cited in an *Inside Higher Education* article where a business professor stated “… graduates of online degree programs often have greater degrees of self-discipline than students who go the traditional route, regardless of which institution they attended”. Furthermore, “because online-degree-seeking students are typically busy adult learners with job and family responsibilities, their ability to balance all of that and ultimately earn a degree is a testament to an inner drive and perseverance”.

The 2008 results from “National Survey of Student Engagement” indicated that online learners were more likely than classroom-based learners to:

- Be older, transfer, and first-generation students.
- Participate in course activities that challenged them intellectually.
- Participate in discussions that enhanced their understanding of different cultures.
- Discuss topics of importance to their major.

Students are shopping for courses that meet their schedules and circumstances. More and more learners are requiring flexibility in program structure to accommodate their other responsibilities such as full-time jobs, family needs, or economic restrictions. With these constraints, students shop for courses that best accommodate their schedules and learning styles, re-tool themselves for new careers, and enhance their existing skills and abilities.

An online professor cannot look for the traditional “glaze” in a student’s eyes as he/she might in a traditional classroom. Therefore, several key elements must be included with the academic coursework to ensure retention of students and successful completion of the online course. These elements include instruction, communication, organization, structure, and follow-up.
Instruction is more than just facilitating the course. It is inclusive from start to finish. This includes making sure that the student understands requirements from the very beginning. The syllabus is critical, and distance education guidelines must have additional information not required for a traditional classroom. First of all, use of the delivery technology must be clear. This includes a good training program and a conscientious professor. The syllabus should contain detailed instructions for use of the technology and contact information for immediate help. A help desk or computer lab that offers flexible hours is the best solution.

To ensure that students understand the technology and course requirements, the first assignment should be an easy, non-threatening assignment. Since the discussion board and assignments modules are the key to an online course, a small assignment in each would be a good place to start. Requiring students to introduce themselves in the public discussion board and soliciting a reply from fellow students will ensure mastery of the discussion module. An essay outlining course expectations with some form of attachment in the private assignments module ensures the professor that a student can properly submit course requirements.

Communication is paramount for retention and course completion. The professor must accept responsibility for students by communicating in detail at every stage. Instructional information should be organized and concise. Professors should use the syllabus, chat room, electronic whiteboard, discussion board, and email to make requirements crystal clear. Once the class is underway, the little things make students feel like part of the class. Send email updates often, and be timely with feedback and grades. Additionally, a friendly greeting makes email traffic more effective.

Organization is a vital part of the course for non-traditional students. Most course participants have work and family issues in addition to online classes and need guidelines that
reduce wasted time. Spell out requirements in detail in the syllabus, and summarize requirements in one place to ensure that everything is understood. Course delivery software (Blackboard, eCollege, etc.) should be organized for easy access to requirements. A tab for Announcements, Assignments, Discussion Board, Exams/Quizzes, Lectures, Documents, Group Project, Links, Library, Grades, e-mail & Electronic Communication is one suggestion for course organization. Most delivery software will allow the instructor to organize courses for convenience.

**Structure** is the most critical element. The goal is to obtain the same course outcomes as a traditional course. The **Discussion Board** is the class discussion vehicle and should be treated as such. Ensure this is used for critical thinking and not just conversation. Several topics each week from the text or subject matter will make this area valuable to the overall course. The good news is that students must participate. There is no hiding in the back of the room.

**Assignments** should be structured to provide the instructor with confidence that each learning outcome is satisfied. This should include a research project and practical exercises. Utilize PowerPoint and Excel to assign creative assignments, exercises, and presentations. Keep in mind that students are not participating in a face-to-face class each week. Therefore, assignments should be designed to leave no doubt that the concept was mastered. This is a great location for lecture capture software or interactive chats.

To be successful, the instructor must use all elements in unison. **Group Projects** and **Exams/Quizzes** should be used to support goal attainment. The key is a creative, innovative facilitator operating with the same enthusiasm that would be displayed in the classroom. Other modules such as Lectures, Documents, Group Project, Links, Library, Grades, e-mail & **Electronic Communication** are all tools for support to be used at the professor’s discretion.
Electronic Communication is critical to successful online instruction. For the purpose of this research, electronic communication is designed as the tools available for communication with students. This includes chats, lecture capture software, whiteboards, email, and other communication devices. Software such as Wimba or Tegrity can be utilized to improve quality and enhance the online experience.

The last element, follow-up, is perhaps the most important. The single biggest complaint from online students is that professors do not provide timely feedback for assignments, quizzes, and exams. The electronic system allows for automated feedback for quizzes and exams in many instances, and the assignments module provides access to feedback tools. Use them to keep students informed. Additionally, post grades immediately so students knows where they stand and what they need to improve.

Professors must want to be good online instructors. One cannot assume that because a professor is good in the classroom, he/she will be a good online instructor. Distance education is not for all students, and it is not for all professors. Online learners are typically adult learners, and even if not, it is good practice to design a course as if dealing with a typical adult learner. According to Vella (2000), there are four assumptions that a professor can make about adult learners: 1) they arrive with the capacity to accomplish the work involved in learning, 2) they learn when actively engaged, 3) new content can be introduced through learning tasks, and 4) learning tasks promote accountability. In distance education, it is important that courses are designed with this in mind and that learning tasks are built into each course delivered.

Vella (2000) describes a learning task as “an open question put to learners who have all the resources they need to respond”. Learning tasks utilize content such as ideas, feelings, and skills as resources that are solid and substantive to address open-ended questions. These
resources are presented in traditional methods such as a lecture, video, PowerPoint presentation, model, lecture capture software, etc. Students are then required to take action in some manner to ensure absorbance of the knowledge.

There is a huge difference in a learning task and a teaching task. A teaching task is the result of a lecture where the student absorbs knowledge from observation. In a learning task, the student is an active participant. In a teaching task, the professor might lecture on Vroom’s Expectancy Model in great detail, wowing the students with his or her knowledge and insight concerning the model. In a learning task, the professor would involve the students by imparting knowledge, then requesting the students to apply the model in a business setting in a hands-on exercise requiring analysis and presentation of the application, pros, cons, and practical use of the model.

Vella (2000) describes seven (7) steps of planning that constitute the design of a learning task. These steps should be included in the design of any distance learning course:

1. Who: Who are your participants, leaders, and how many will participate?
2. Why: Why are you delivering this course?
3. When: The time you will deliver this course plus constraints on time.
4. Where: Where will the course be delivered? Most of the time it will be online, but not always.
5. What: What is the content of the course?
6. What for: What are your learning outcomes for this course?
7. How: What are the learning tasks and materials required for this course?
Each course must be designed with multiple learning tasks that result in learning outcomes. These will be tied to the objectives of the course and listed in the syllabus and required by the College/University.

**Four Types of Learning Tasks**

There are four types of learning tasks that should be built into a distance education course (Vella, 2000):

1. **Inductive Work**: This task is related to life and connects learners to what they already know by applying models or theories to life situations.
2. **Input**: Students explore new input such as concepts, skills, and attitude that constitute the content of the course.
3. **Implementation**: This causes the student to do something with the input such as apply it to a real life setting or analysis.
4. **Integration**: By using application models integrating the input into situation in a multi-task method.

By utilizing the seven steps of planning in course preparation, the four types of learning tasks are included in courses and ensure the student of a quality experience when completing his/her online course. One method of ensuring that students receive the full benefit of the learning tasks designed in a course is to utilize powerful verbs as described by Vella (2000). By including specific verbs instead of generic verbs, students are compelled to accomplish the task rather than participate in the task. Never use “learn” or “understand” when the task is to design and use the models taught in the course. In 1956, Benjamin Bloom categorized verbs into three categories: 1) cognitive, 2) affective, and 3) psychomotor (Piskurich, 1993). These verbs are great for use in designing your learning tasks.

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Professors can use verbs to ensure that the learning task accomplishes what it was designed to accomplish. Tough verbs that demand action such as edit, design, select, write, etc., are super indicators that the task is being accomplished. Productive verbs such as select, develop, diagram, illustrate, etc., are indicators that learning is taking place. The professor should not forget respective verbs that fit the “who” as in who are your learners. Push the veteran learners with challenging tough verbs while understanding that newer learners need a few gentle verbs to instill a comfort level as they adapt to this unique form of course delivery.

Vella (2000) describes the CIPP concept (Context, Input, Process, & Product) that lies over the seven steps in planning to aid in the design of your learning tasks. Context relates to the “who”, “why”, “when”, and “where” as the chosen verbs reinforce content. In this area, the instructor ensures the learner has the physical capabilities to complete the tasks. The input refers to the “what” and the “what for” and ensures that the learner has the logistical capabilities to complete the tasks. Process relates to the “how” and ensures a logical sequence to complete the tasks. And finally, the product uses the seven step planning process to tie the “learning tasks” with the “learning outcomes”.

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<th>Blooms Set of Verbs</th>
<th>Affective Verbs</th>
<th>Psychomotor Verbs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive Verbs</td>
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<td>Relate</td>
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Traditional education is designed around the lecture and, therefore, will meet some resistance when causing students to “change” from what is expected. It is expected that courses meet the tough, academic rigor of a classroom delivered course. Vella (2000) describes a checklist of principles and practices that will help with the seven steps in planning and reinforce course delivery to ensure academic success.

1. How is the learning task supporting the content of the course?

2. Have you invited reflection through case studies, stories, videos, clips or objects?

3. Have you integrated deductive theory into inductive real-life scenarios?

4. Did you fully prepare for this course?

5. Did you design the learning tasks as challenging enough to create the necessary energy?


**Checklist of Principles and Practices**

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| Realign | Take care, Write |
| Affix | Prepare |
| Put | Dramatize |
| Comply with | Build |
| Control | Choose |
| Listen to | Manipulate |
| Accept | Redesign |
| Celebrate | Rearrange |
| Reframe | Employ |

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6. Did you title each learning task?

7. Did you design warm-up learning task to slowly indoctrinate them to your teaching style?

8. Is your learning tasks designed to meet the student’s expectations and invite feedback and offer evaluation indicators?

9. Is there synthesis and closure to each learning task?

10. Are you using thanks, paraphrasing, and echoing in the leading of tasks?

11. Did you allow the proper amount of time to complete each task?

12. Did you design in the use of charts, graphs, and other aids to demonstrate relations and connections?

13. Do you work for inclusion of everyone in the class?

14. How do you assure autonomy when students are working toward their learning?

15. Do you describe and track impact?

In addition to Vella’s (2000) practices and principles, the professor must ensure that learning tasks lead to learning outcomes.

**Designing an Online Course by Considering the Student’s Learning Style**

Students, especially adult students, have different methodologies for absorbing information. There are three distinct types of learning styles: 1) Visual, 2) Auditory, and 3) Kinesthetic. Courses developed for any college/university should attempt to meet the requirements of all three if at all possible.

The three learning styles can be stimulated in a classroom setting by three approaches to instruction. These include: 1) dependent or professor centered, 2) independent or participant
centered, and 3) interdependent or peer centered. The goal is to utilize all three methods of instructions while also encompassing all three learning styles when at all possible.

Visual learners learn through observation of the procedure usually through a lecture or demonstration that has no hands-on participation. In the classroom, this is a PowerPoint presentation or a demonstration. Students are able to view the professor and gauge body language of emphasis to glean highlights from the material. In distance education, this is accomplished through video presentations sent to the student or transmitted over the Internet. Additionally, this is accomplished by utilizing charts, graphs, and applied sites on the World Wide Web.

Auditory learners learn through hearing the lecture and gauging tone and emphasis of the lecture or demonstration. In a distance learning setting, this can be accomplished by lecture capture software (Wimba, Tegrity), voice over PowerPoint presentations, and interactive web sites. This approach could also be accomplished by having the student listen to a taped/live seminar or conduct an interview.

Kinesthetic learners need to be hands-on to learn. In the classroom, this is accomplished by projects and exercises. In a distance learning setting, the same can be true. Projects (both group and individual) can be utilized to get the student involved. Interactive web sites and software is utilized as one tool for project delivery. Additionally, the white board and chat room can be powerful tools. This approach could also be accomplished by having the student listen to a taped/live seminar or conduct an interview.

Presenter-centered learning relies on the professor as the source for all information. The student does not participate actively. In a distance education environment, this can be accomplished by lecture captured software, audio/video lectures, voice over PowerPoint, online
written lectures, or various other methods of delivering the necessary course material. While an important part of delivering information, this method does little for the kinesthetic learner, and the professor should be cautious not to rely solely on this method for his/her class.

Participant-centered learning is where the learner is independently interacting with information such as reading, writing, reflecting, etc. Research, essays, examinations, projects, tasks, and other stimulants can cause the student to think and act independently. This critical thinking element can benefit all three styles of learners if planned and executed properly.

Peer-to-peer learning is where learning occurs due to the interaction of learners, and learners help each other in the learning process. In a distance learning environment, professors can use the group project coupled with requirements for graphs, charts, analysis, interaction, and critical thinking. Tools such as the whiteboard and chat room are extremely helpful in this approach. If properly executed, this approach stimulates the kinesthetic learner and can benefit the other two styles. Care must be taken to establish clear goals and requirements to avoid diminished participation by some group members. A 360-degree appraisal where group members rate each other will aid in this process.

The following matrix will enhance the process of course design. In the below listed matrix “Approach to Instruction/Learning” is across the top and “Learning Style” is down the side. While some of the activities require innovation and creativity, all can be accomplished through the Internet with proper technology and training. The key is to get students involved in the learning experience.

Professors should include as many tasks as possible in their online course.

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## Dependent Learning Styles

- PowerPoint/Slides
- Handouts
- Movie/Video
- Visualizer
- Maps / Models

## Independent Learning Styles

- Visualization Exercises
- Movie / Video
- Draw / Paint / Create
- Exhibit
- Play Acting

## Interdependent Learning Styles

- Case Study
- Demonstration
- Models / Theories
- Games
- Fill-in-the-blank exercises

### Visual Learners
- Lecture (OL)
- Jingles / Songs
- Recordings
- Sounds
- Q & A
- Panel (OL)

### Auditory Learners
- Recordings
- Perspective Statements
- Presentations
- Q & A
- Debate
- Brainstorming
- Role Play
- Case Study
- Group Presentation
- Attend a concert or seminar

### Kinesthetic Learners
- Conduct
- Demonstration
- Field Trip (OL)
- Model / Set
- Handouts
- Draw / Paint / Create
- Exhibit
- Note Taking
- Attend a concert or seminar
- Role Play
- Group project
- Cultural Exhibit
- Group activities
- Demonstration (Hands-on) or (Internet)


## Conclusion

There is not enough room in this article to cover all aspects of a good online course. However, the tips provided will improve delivery tremendously. Retention and completion is the responsibility of everyone at the college or university. If the course is designed correctly, the instructor can do her or his part without lowering her or his academic standards. Online courses should be slightly more rigorous than traditional courses to ensure that the outcomes are the same.

Two areas of concern that bear emphasis are lecture capture software and security. Lecture capture software has moved distance education into a new realm of quality. Software prepared for presentation at the 2010 Great Lakes Conference on Teaching and Learning, May 23 -25, 2010, Mount Pleasant Michigan USA.
programs such as Wimba allow professors to deliver courses in a real-time setting or record presentations for later consumption.

A 2007 Datamonitor report entitled “Understanding the Competitive Landscape for Education Technology Solutions” listed the following about lecture capture solutions:

- The ability to review lectures on their own time and to catch-up on missed work has the potential to make higher education significantly more accessible for non-traditional students, who often face significant hurdles to successfully complete a program of study due to multiple and competing priorities.

- Students are unlikely to sit down and essentially “attend” an entire recorded lecture. Rather, students are more prone to seek out discrete sections of the lecture that cover the topic in which they are interested.

- Students use lecture capturing software to prepare for exams, to review instructions and to clarify concepts. In addition, Tegrity reduces cumbersome note-taking and helps students obtain better grades.

A recurring challenge to all higher education institutions that provide distance education programs is to ensure that “the student who registers in a distance education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the program and receives the academic credit.” This specific language was incorporated into the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. One of the requirements of every online course should be a proctored final exam. Student identification needs to be verified at the point of registration for the exam, and a proctoring database is maintained by the University Registrar’s office. Other solutions must be explored to determine if there are more efficient processes to meet these yet-to-be fully defined requirements. Solutions range from the sophisticated use of biometrics (scanned fingerprints,
variations in keystroke patterns, microphones, 360-degree cameras, etc.) to proctors from afar
viewing several students at various locales, to students answering detailed personal “challenge”
questions. A lecture capture system might also be a complementary solution.

Effective teaching and engagement are of paramount importance in distance education.
Instructors must encourage faculty-student contact, develop reciprocity and cooperation among
students, use active learning techniques, give prompt feedback, emphasize time on task,
communicate high expectations, and respect diverse talents and ways of learning. Faculty must
be thoroughly trained and be provided with an internal distance education portal page containing
various resources, tutorials, articles, guides, etc., related to online education. Distance education
will continue to evolve in the future. Additional academic programs will go online as the market
warrants it. Distance education can no longer be considered a new phenomenon as it is now
thoroughly integrated into the everyday academic life of the college/university.
References


