Practical tips for successful online teaching

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This session will showcase the results of the BOB project "Breaking the Online Barriers to Learning". This project collated best practice in online teaching based on interviews with early adopters, responses from student questionnaires and examination of online units. An outcome of the project is a series of easy-to-follow "tip" sheets which lecturers can use to improve the learning experience of their students. In the session, the project and the insights gained will be described. In addition, the websites containing the tips sheets will be demonstrated.

Introduction

Until recently, online teaching has been the domain of innovators and early adopters. This has been largely because extra funding has had to be secured to support the extra time required to develop an online component or unit. With the adoption of "off the shelf" online course environments such as WebCT and Blackboard, this is now changing.

At ECU, Blackboard has been selected as the preferred online course environment. The primary reason Blackboard was chosen was because it "provides a low cost common development and delivery system that can be rapidly implemented" (Edith Cowan University, 2001). Essentially, if individual lecturers can create a word document and find a file in a directory structure, they will be able to create an online course in Blackboard. At the simplest level, staff create a document using whatever application software they prefer to use and then , using an online form, upload the document to the Blackboard course environment. No specialist IT skills are needed.

Whilst it may be true that no specialist IT skills are needed to create a course in Blackboard, the authors were not convinced that the same could be said for creating a good online teaching and learning experience. The online medium seems to require new and different skills (Salmon 1999; Goodyear, Salmon et al. 2001) and this impacts on unit and course design and delivery. The authors, knowing that ECU was about to adopt an online course environment across the institution, sought to address this gap. Innovators and early adopters of the online medium were interviewed in order to investigate how and why they were using the online environment and what lessons they had learned with the aim of sharing this knowledge with those new to online. The project was called "Breaking the Online Barriers to Learning" and one of the outcomes of the project was a series of easy to follow tip sheets.

The context

Much of the literature reports on the use of online environments with geographically dispersed students (for example Berge & Collins, 1996; Kearsley, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). This use offers obvious communication advantages over traditional distance learning modes. However, as Palloff (2000) notes, lecturers are increasingly using the WWW with students who have elected to come on campus to study, indicating that its use may also enhance face-to-face teaching.

The extensive investment by many universities in proprietary online learning environment software, such as Blackboard and WebCT, indicates that the use of online environments is regarded as beneficial for all students and not just those studying externally. For example, ECU is committed to "providing all students with the opportunity to develop a generic skill in accessing learning resources via the web"(Edith Cowan University, 2001). Since the majority of students at ECU attend on campus, the majority of lecturers will be using the online environment as an adjunct to 'face-to face' teaching. Because of this, it is clear that that most use of the online environment will probably be either as a supplement to or as an essential component of courses currently delivered face-to-face (that is the DETYA mode A or B).

The early adopters interviewed in this study were using the online environment with a number of their units. The majority of these units were delivered face-to-face, with some off-campus and some print-based independent study units. This study focussed largely but not exclusively on the use of the online environment with face-to-face students.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by both authors with five university lecturers from the Business Faculty of a large Western Australian University. These lecturers were identified by their colleagues as innovative leaders and reflective practitioners in teaching and in using online environments. Typically, these lecturers taught face-to-face 'on campus' units consisting of a one-hour lecture and a two-hour lab or workshop weekly over a 14-week semester.

Through a series of open-ended questions detailed in Table 1, the lecturers were encouraged to discuss their decisions relating to the use of the online environment with face-to-face students and their subsequent experiences of teaching the unit/s using the online components. In addition, the associated web materials, online tasks and web-based student interactions for each unit referred to in the interviews were examined, and students in two 3rd year units completed questionnaires on their use of the online environment.

During the hour-long interviews, both authors took notes and used reflective listening techniques to check their notes. These notes were compared after the interview and compiled into one document that was then verified by the interviewees. During the interviews the lecturers often referred to the same types of strategies as being helpful and gradually a series of tried and tested approaches emerged on various themes.

Table 1. The key interview questions.

1.	What is the online component of your unit?
2.	What other resources do your students have?
3.	What do you want your students to get from the online component?
4.	What feedback have you had from students?
5.	What do you feel has been the value of online?
6.	How have the online components impacted on the depth of learning?

The data from the student questionnaires is reported elsewhere (Vardi and Bunker 2001) and was used to inform the final selection of the strategies, in particular those relating to useful online materials and to encouraging online participation. These strategies were compiled into a series of nine sheets. The drafts of these sheets were sent to the interviewed early adopters and, for increased validity, to other staff in the University community with expertise in online learning for comment and appraisal. This resulted in a final set of sheets that reflected sound practice.

Findings

Several themes arose from the interview and questionnaire data and could be broadly grouped into two areas: those dealing with the design of online learning materials and those dealing with the delivery of online learning experiences.

The design issues

If online materials are to supplement and enhance learning then an understanding of both web design and instructional design is required. Lecturers need to be aware of the importance of uncluttered graphic design, and intuitive navigation aids in helping students access materials. At a deeper design level, lecturers need to consider the relationship between the various online components and the learning outcomes.

Designing around the vagaries of the technology

A significant barrier to going 'online' is the reliability of the technology. The overriding message from the lecturers interviewed was "assume it will go wrong" and have a contingency plan. Lecturers stressed the need to design online coursework that allowed students to complete the unit, no matter what the technology was doing, and the need to keep backups. Students also need to be encouraged to have contingency plans, to keep a copy of everything they submit online and to not leave assignments till the deadline – technology always seems to fail at critical times.

Maximising useability through graphic design and navigation

Most of the lecturers were familiar with the principles of good web page design and navigation. They recommended using these principles to reduce the ways the online environment could confound the learning experience and cause student frustration.
They stressed the importance of having uncluttered and legible web pages; obviously placed essential links; clear mechanisms for moving between different parts of a site; and grouping of similar materials so that finding the necessary information online was as intuitive as possible. They also suggested minimising the actual time spent on line by designing materials that could be downloaded quickly, easily and in a useful format.

Moving into the online environment gradually

The interview data supported Palloff's (2001) view that the online environment can enhance face to face teaching. The simplest use of the online environment was email as a 'back-up' communication mode for stressing important verbally-communication information. This use also ensured that absent students did not miss the information. Another strategy recommended for getting started online is to use the continuous availability of the web to make handouts and other print-based or electronic resources available to students outside of class contact times. Where lecturers published lecture slides on the web, students commented, via the questionnaire, on the value of these resources for note taking and revision.

Using the online environment to help with unit administration and student management

One of the findings of this study was that the web can be used to publish and to communicate administrative information successfully (Bunker and Vardi 2001). Lecturers universally recommended putting copies of handouts online for students to access outside the session. Using the online environment to publish learning materials in this way meant they were available for late and absent students. This reduced demands from individual students for materials, freeing lecturers for other activities.

Lecturers used both email and the web for online communication. Email was considered a useful way to communicate administrative information to students and to reinforce a message. Where the lecturer was sure that all students used their email, it was used to communicate late breaking information. Email has an advantage over a discussion board for communicating this sort of information as it arrives directly in the students' mail boxes, whereas students have to 'go' to the discussion board to find the announcements.

Lecturers also noted advantages in being available via email to students outside of the class times. However one lecturer in particular commented on being deluged by emails from students. To avoid this deluge, some lecturers found it useful to schedule time in their week for responding to students' emails and to let students know when that would be. Other lecturers encouraged students to ask their questions to the whole student group through a discussion board. This had two advantages: it was possible for another student to respond to the query before the lecturer got to it, and secondly, the lecturer's answer was visible to the whole group, making it unlikely that the same question would be asked again.

The delivery issues

The second set of issues raised by the lecturers concern skill in delivering an online learning experience. When the web is used as a place for discussion and collaborative work, new sets of skills are needed by the lecturer to facilitate the process of learning (Goodyear, Salmon et al. 2001). Moreover, students need an equivalent set of skills if they are to successfully use the online environment for learning. Of most concern to the lecturers was the reluctance by the students to use the discussion board. Student use of the board and their explanations for that use also informed these tip sheets (for details see Vardi & Bunker, 2001)

Encouraging the students to locate and use the online materials

Whilst the lecturers interviewed were self-motivated in getting online, the same was not the case for their students. To motivate students, it was necessary to specifically discuss with them how the online environment was being used in the unit and how it related to their learning processes. The lecturers had also learnt to design tasks that scaffolded student use of the online environment, for example, a first task that checked students could all find the online discussion space and send a message.

Online discussion boards are, for most students, a new medium for learning interaction to occur. Students need to know what is acceptable behaviour and what is not in an online learning context. Lecturers acknowledged the importance of planning the socialisation of the students into the new environment. Where a substantial amount of learning activity is online, lecturers recommended a special face-to-face session with the students on about the fourth week of the unit to address any problems that were arising in the use of the online environment.

Teaching students to communicate effectively online

Effective communication online requires the transfer of the principles of effective communication from other modalities. The online communication environment is clearly different from the oral and written environments. Students need to be taught strategies for checking their reading of messages and for making their own points as clearly as possible. They also need guidelines for online courtesy and to have confidence that the teacher will keep the online learning environment 'safe'.

Encouraging the students to participate in online discussions and activities

It was clear from student questionnaire data that, unless the discussion board tasks were compulsory, they were not inclined to take part. They saw little value in each other as resources and directed their energies toward the teacher. Discussion activities are student-centred activities and to be successful, students are required to take responsibility for their own learning (Brandes and Ginnis, 1986). Thus the design of appropriate tasks is central to getting students online. Salmon (2000) recommends a developmental sequence of activities that lead the student from a socialisation stage through to an information sharing and then a knowledge construction stage. In this study, discussion board activity occurred where the task was clearly structured, meaningful, relevant and suitably complex.

Developing an online lecturing persona

The shift to the 'online' environment requires the lecturer to develop new ways to interact with the student. It is as important to provide the 'expert' voice online as in the face-to-face environment and in print-based external materials. The lecturers in the study provided the expert voice online in a number of ways: for example, through summarising feedback on work submitted, through asking challenging and prompting questions, through correcting of misconceptions, and through inviting practitioners and other experts to participate in online discussions with students.

Outcomes

Nine 'BOB' (Breaking the Online Barrier) sheets covering a range of issues relating to using the online environment for teaching and learning were developed from the themes identified in the interviews. Some 'BOB' sheets cover design issues whilst others address delivery issues and online teaching skills. The sheets are aimed at the novice online and offer some tried and tested strategies and steps that will help make the transition to teaching online more manageable. Each sheet has a catchy title that lecturers can relate to their own experience. This title is followed by a brief paragraph signposting the issue and directing the lecturers' attention to the benefits for the students and themselves. A series of strategies, or in some cases steps, then follows.

Table 2. The BOB tip sheets

The nine "Breaking the Online Barrier to Learning" tip sheets

Design issues:
Getting Started Online
One way to get started online is to use the online environment to augment face-to-face teaching or print-based units.

Getting Over the Technology
Technology is not always reliable or available. Design online coursework to allow students to complete the unit no matter what.

Breaking The Design Barrier
Make it easy for students to get around your site. Help them by following some simple design principles that keep the screen uncluttered, easy to read and easy to download from.

The Administration Advantage
The online environment can help simplify administration in a variety of ways.

Delivery Issues
Getting the Students Online
Many internal students are fearful of the online learning environment and may need encouragement and specific instruction in how to engage with an online unit.

Saying it Clearly Online
Communicating electronically is different. A friendly environment is needed as well as specific skills in communicating in this medium.

Developing Online Courtesy
Developing appropriate online behaviour is essential for successful interactions. It ensures that members of the group do not offend one another and that postings are thoughtful and considerate.

Breaking Discussion Board Apathy
Students don't always use the discussion board, even though you may want them to. To encourage positive use, ensure the tasks are worthwhile.

Providing the Expert Voice
The expertise you have gained over years of teaching, research and experience is what the students feel they are paying for.

Acceptance of the sheets and ideas expressed in them was high from both the lecturer group and the online learning experts, with comments such as "great practical advice", "these are great - will be very useful" and " an excellent idea". Using the feedback from peers, we were able to improve the readability of the sheets, and rewrite any confusing sections. The sheets have now been published and are available in hard copy or from the web. Table 3 lists the nine sheets.

Conclusion

A range of useful strategies and approaches were gained through this study and have been presented as a series of sheets for the novice online lecturer. Goodyear et al. (2001) have identified a number of roles that the online teacher must perform to teach online successfully. These include process facilitator, manager administrator, designer, technologist, and content facilitator. The BOB sheets go part of the way to addressing the suite of new skills that the online teacher needs in these various roles. As Goodyear et al. (2001) note, many of these skills are not new, but take on a different aspect online. Many of the strategies in these sheets refocus the lecturer on what they already know about managing learning, designing for learning and facilitating learning. Online, as in face-to-face situations, lecturers need to plan appropriate learning experiences for tertiary level students that will motivate them to engage with the content and become self-directed in their learning.

[The sheets are available from both Edith Cowan and Curtin Universities at http://www.ecu.edu.au/lift/learn/bob/ or http://cea.curtin.edu.au/olt/index.html]

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