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Reviewing three years of online teaching experience by a university course lecturer

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This paper demonstrates an online teaching experience at an English Speaking Caribbean University. A blended mode of delivery was utilised to help meet the needs of a diverse student population of full time, part time and evening students. Theoretical frameworks espoused by Johnson-Curiskii (2006) and Betts (2009) underpinned the concepts utilised in the study. Johnson-Curiskii attributes incorporating online teaching to good planning and teaching and an ability to generate discussion and interaction. Betts recognises intrinsic factors regarding professional satisfaction and extrinsic factors related to institutional support. During this teaching experience there was a reinforcement of classroom discussion and interaction. There were new approaches to 'old curricula'. Courses had increased communication to and from students. The delivery mode encouraged the practice of meeting prompt deadlines and the ready introduction of topical and global events. In light of the requirements for the course delivery, use of technology competence and access were challenges. Faculty need more institutional support to effectively use this new teaching/learning modality. The study recommends several future research initiatives pertaining to student and faculty readiness, inherent enabling and disabling factors, relationships between participation and success and the impact on group learning.

Keywords: blended, interaction, online teaching, planning, reinforcement

Introduction

This paper relates the experience of online teaching in three courses offered in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Extension during the three academic years from 2007 to 2010. Keengue and Kidd (2010) noted the increase in the number of online programmes offered over the past decade, confirming the widely held view that the online mode of instruction has become very popular. They suggested that as student enrolment and the number of courses continue to rise, institutions will need faculty who are able to address existing challenges and participate in developing and teaching online courses. A review of this experience at the St. Augustine campus is timely in order to provide information and strategies for future development.

History and Context

At the campus there has been a continuous increase in student population since early 2000 driven by the institution's 2002-2007 Strategic Plan which focussed on access. As early as 2006/2007 the institution met an expected annual average growth rate of 8.5% among different offerings of undergraduate programmes. Part time offerings and a new Evening University system contributed to this growth. Both facilities present the opportunity for online teaching. Additionally, the advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Computer Mediated Technologies (CMT) have created tremendous opportunities for faculty to expand the educational process beyond the traditional classroom to include geographically dispersed audiences via online (Keengue and Kidd). Today's university student potentially has increased technological acumen thereby contributing another enabling factor for online teaching. An easily arrived at preliminary conclusion is the fact that opportunities for online teaching abound at the St. Augustine campus of the University of the West Indies.

Since 1999, university staff have been able to obtain assistance for online teaching. The Instructional Development Unit (IDU) introduced the software Top Class, and then WebCT as part of the use of technology movement on the campus. Both applications have since been replaced by Moodle which has been branded myeLearning. From the inception of myeLearning, I have attended a range of in-service training opportunities to become familiar with techniques of delivery and use of the software. I, therefore, became convinced of several reasons to engage an online offering.

Firstly, the expanded curricula which programmes offer attract a geographically diverse group of students. Very often these learners cannot present themselves for face to face instruction at prescribed times. Some students belong to part time and evening categories without the benefit of special timetable arrangements. Then, there is the institutional challenge of timetabling regular day programmes to meet the needs of an expanded offering of majors and minors. In these circumstances timetable scheduling clashes inevitably occur. Some students find great difficulty attending the face to face sessions so that online offerings become appropriate. Further, there is also a grouping of students who are availing themselves of free tertiary education and they sometimes do not make adequate commitment to attend face to face sessions. These students seem not to value their involvement as they do not directly pay for the training. Yet, these students wish to have instruction. Finally, there is a small percentage of students with physical and mental challenges (various syndromes, dyslexia, partial blindness, limited mobility and ailments of that nature). However, these students are able to avail themselves of the technological support which accompanies online teaching.

The purpose of this paper is to review the experiences of online teaching in three courses during the academic years 2007/2008 and 2009/2010. These course are: AGEX 2001: The Operation and Management of Extension Programmes (average class size 110), AGEX 3003: Gender Issues in Agriculture (average class

size 65) and AGEX 3001: Island Food Systems (average class size 35). The first two were offered in Semester 1 of the academic year, the latter in Semester 2. These courses are briefly described hereunder.

AGEX 2001: The operation and management of extension programmes (4 Credits)

This course is offered to second and third year students reading Bachelor of Science degrees in a range of disciplines related to science and agriculture. The majority of students select this course as an elective in their respective programmes. Approximately 20% of the students must read this course as a core requirement. AGEX 2001 provides the learner with opportunities and experiences that facilitate an understanding of how outreach programmes are conducted within the guidelines of Extension philosophy and practice. It provides an overview of how learners may place a strategy and method to extend knowledge to potential clients regarding selected knowledge points.

AGEX 2001 is designed to initiate important community activity with regard to an existing state of affairs which needs improvement. There are very few professions and occupations in today's world, which do not require an Extension/ Outreach function in order to interface with people and to help people help themselves. The course introduces community development, community change, community outreach, continuing and adult education methods. It demonstrates how education can change behaviour, attitude, knowledge and skills. It introduces students to a range of programming options which are suitable for Extension work. It seeks to develop appropriate skills in programme development. It facilitates an understanding of the requirements for programme development and elements of adult learning which would promote programme development. Students are expected to develop a programme in order to apply their newly acquired understandings of what constitutes an Extension programme.

AGEX 3003: Gender issues in agriculture (3 Credits)

This course is intended for second and third year students, as well as postgraduate students in their qualifying year from the Faculties of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, Science and Agriculture. Students reading minors in Gender Studies may choose this offering as an elective. Approximately 20% of the students must read this course as a core course requirement. Visiting and exchange students from other universities and institutions sometimes select this course in their repertoire of courses in the exchange programme. Prior knowledge of the Agricultural curriculum at the University is not essential. Students reading this course may qualify in many different majors and minors throughout the campus. All effort is made to accommodate a "related discipline perspective" in the course offering. Students are expected to experience field agricultural operations in order to understand the gender issues which confront farming and agricultural systems.

AGEX 3001: Island food systems (3 Credits)

This course had its origin in a major international project among universities in selected developing countries to develop curricula which were suitable for islands. Island states have particular food systems which need to be understood in the context of what livelihood activities occur, what sustainable activities exist and the equity issues in a fiercely competitive environment. Islands are relatively isolated even when they exist collectively in archipelagos. There are usually limited domestic markets and fragile export marketing arrangements for any of their agricultural products. There is a lack of transportation infrastructure and for many the vagaries of climate and types of natural disasters such as volcanoes and earthquakes. Global warming presents even further challenges (SPORE 81, July, 1999).

The course Island Food Systems is designed to provide students with learning experiences which articulate a process of collection of appropriate island development issues in the context of Sustainability, Livelihood, Equity and Governance (SLEG). On completion of this course students should be able to: describe the Hunter Gatherer concept; explain the meaning of Island Livelihood, Governance, Sustainability and Equity; identify elements of an Island Food System; determine the consequences for Food Security and Food Sovereignty among island states; explore food systems and the consequences for Health, Land and Water use in islands. Students review Food Culture, Governance, Livelihood and Food Security issues in the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Prince Edward Island, Canada and islands of the Caribbean. This course is intended for second and third year students, as well as postgraduate students in their qualifying year from the Faculties of Social Sciences, Humanities and Education, Science and Agriculture. All students choose this course as an elective, except for a small percentage of students who are qualifying for postgraduate study.

Online course attendance ranges from 65-100%. Smaller classes tend to have more participation opportunities. Attendance in this course is better than the overall average 60% for face to face delivery. All offerings engage the student in group interaction in order to enhance learning. Students are required to conduct reasonable research on introduced topics. Student engagement contributes to 40% coursework mark. These engagements include field visits, debates, role playing, interaction with institutions that may employ students, group discussions and a demonstration of creative thinking. A final written examination contributes to the remaining 60% complement of marks.

The courses show a normal distribution of test scores with a relatively low failure rate. Students undertake an institutional evaluation which generally show an overall average of 3.9, on an ascending scale of 1-5. I have conducted my own evaluation on many aspects of the course delivery and method of instruction. Evaluations of delivery and method of instruction have received above average positive evaluation. Any negative evaluations are reviewed in order to plan for the next offering in the following academic year.

Approach to Course Inclusion of Online Teaching

Besides a full timetabled schedule for face to face interaction all courses are presented online from the start of the semester. I closely follow any required protocols of the university's online teaching process. The process requires participation, reviews the offering supplied by the teacher, and then populates the course to all students who are officially registered. At each offering there is a small student population who may be temporarily debarred from using the system due to financial issues. When their issues are cleared up they join the online sessions.

At the first online encounter students are presented with relevant schedules and other course information. . Through the online medium, students access course outlines showing the thirteen week schedule, a calendar of events and any other critically important information. The teacher presents additional material as the semester progresses. These types of material are: PowerPoint presentations of lectures after they are held, instructions for further research by students, a continuous dialogue of news items pertaining to schedule changes and recent information about topics covered, relevant audiovisual material and an opportunity for feedback regarding instruction and delivery. I developed chat rooms for discussion of special topics, field trips and on-going group activities. I also monitor visits made to the site by students. There was an attempt by the third offering of the courses to reward those students who contributed regularly to online interaction. This attempt increased contribution to the sites. There are some features in myeLearning with which I did not feel adequately trained to use including Wikis, Podcast, Workshop, Hot Potato Quiz and Journal.

The approach that I used is blended learning as the students are exposed to an appropriate mix of e-learning and face to face instruction. According to Huang and McDonell (2009) such hybrid learning embraces the idea that the combination of both learning environments may be more of an optimum learning opportunity. Blended learning also takes advantage of both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities. There is the face to face interaction on the one hand as well as opportunity for learners to interact with the material at times they find appropriate. When courses are blended there is a greater chance for better learning outcomes. In their experiment, Huang and Mc Donell (2009) discovered that the majority of classroom participants recognised that the process of reading and writing (through online instruction) appeared to translate to more meaningful discussions in the traditional classroom.

Concepts in Online Teaching

Online teaching and learning is still viewed as an evolving craft. Yet, there is a large scale adoption of this methodology at the tertiary level of training and more recently at the secondary and informal levels of training. Sieu Chin and Williams (2006) think that there is no grand unifying theory of online learning. The authors see strength in the capacity of the methodology to harness the power of various ICTs which in turn may cater for individual learning needs. Keebler

(2009) concurs with these views and reiterates the capacity of the methodology to establish synchronous and asynchronous dialogue. The entire environment must provide means for students to collaborate openly, to share ideas, to reflect, and to explore alternative perspectives. An online strategy therefore takes into account a variety of pedagogical factors such as being collaborative and interactive, being feedback oriented, problem based, process oriented, learner centred and flexible.

Because of relative newness, there are other views which become important in arriving at an appropriate theoretical position; St. Clair (2009) concluded that online students are looking for an alternative rather than a replication of traditional classes. The author thinks that the commonly held views about online technology requirements are not universally valid for all online courses. Therefore, he thinks that university policy and online class organisation need to change to meet the varied needs of instructors and students.

Another view of importance is that of Ratiff (2009). He thinks that there is a misconception that today's college students, having grown up in a world immersed in technology including computers, electronic media, cell phones and other gadgets, would always have the acumen to use technology, as required in online teaching in an academic environment. Consequently, higher education must access the skills of incoming students to perform in a technology–rich learning environment.

Further, Johnson-Curiskiis (2009) advances three key beliefs about online teaching and learning. Firstly, online teaching and learning is not better or worse on campus than face to face teaching and learning. They are just different. This belief is reflected in the author's experience with the online environment. As a different teaching approach the author was able to incorporate a new perspective to curricula. The online delivery approach differently engaged students in terms of interaction and feedback. It reinforced face to face classroom discussion and readily brought topical events and submissions from anywhere in the world to the teaching environment. Several self-motivated students prepared special audio visual materials which could be shared in the online classroom and which had a shelf life for teaching beyond the immediate academic year.

Johnson-Curiskiis also proposes that good course planning and good teaching are congruent. He believes that good planning begins with clear course objectives and specific learning outcomes. Indeed, the experiences of online teaching did not provide a panacea for what constitutes good teaching and planning. Rather, the blended approach challenged me to plan even more precisely and correctly. There was no room for lapses in the planning process. Students had to respond by meeting deadlines and scheduled appointments. Those students who used the system merely to obtain classroom material did not display improved learning outcomes.

Blended learning presented special opportunities for timely and continuous communication with students during the semester. These opportunities were carefully synchronised beyond the more casual encounters that occurred in the face to face environment. My usual, relentless efforts to carefully design instruction and learning outcomes proved invaluable for my online courses. The

students were repeatedly reading and writing and as a consequence they had greater opportunity to internalise the information and have more thoughtful and meaningful discussions. In addition, there was the concept of making chat and online discussions an integral part of the learning environment. I had numerous opportunities to encourage feedback and discussion from students, especially those who do not easily contribute in the face to face situation. It was easier for the latter to express their views into the online environment.

Teaching gender issues specially benefitted from this phenomenon. Often students are sensitive to presenting controversial ideas in a face to face exchange about gender. The online environment appeared to minimise their inhibitions. Thus, there were ample chances for students to discuss field visits. These field visits were really large learning spaces and often the limited face to face classroom time did not permit extensive discussion. The online environment encouraged the student to discuss and learn from these events long after they occurred. Often students would place online digital pictures for scrutiny, discussion and feedback.

Betts (2009) identified intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for faculty participation in teaching online. I have the belief that intrinsically, faculty would like to reach new audiences, develop new ideas and use new technologies as these goals provide much intellectual challenge, self satisfaction and overall job satisfaction. Extrinsically, there is an interest in professional recognition and awards, reduced course/workload, institutional time off and stipend reward. Personally, I have achieved much self satisfaction and job satisfaction. It was pleasing to reach classroom audiences which were absent from the classroom although they were registered students. For me there was also intellectual challenge especially when students readily sought new information through accessing various technologies and then presented it for scrutiny.

However, the matter of adequate recognition is non-existent. Workloads have increased and the required extra commitment by the ordinary lecturer while going unnoticed is also constrained by regularly heavy workloads and responsibilities at the University. Sometimes even information technology skills requirements and access to software and hardware support are lacking. These are disabling factors which may deter faculty from long term use of this potentially useful method of instruction and learning.

The Way Forward

Developing and conducting online courses at the University have been a successful teaching and learning experience. I have used a blended approach which appeared suitable for the type of learners in my courses. There are several observations which bear testimony for perspectives and positions which I currently hold. For instance, using a blended approach demonstrated the capacity to harness the power of various information and communication technologies, Sieu Chin and Williams (2009). Online chat and discussion are an integral part of the learning experience, Johnson-Curiskii (2006). Course planning and good teaching are equally essential

with this methodology. Support for faculty's efforts is important especially when the institutional environment requires of them responsibility for large portfolios.

This review underscores the need for further study of online teaching methodologies at the University. Immediate research should investigate the following: the readiness of students and staff to continue with this methodology; inherent enabling and disabling factors for blended learning; relationships between participation and success at course assessment; impact on course grades; participation in blended learning and achievement of learning outcomes; determination of an ideal blend of online and face-to-face instruction; improving group learning through online teaching.

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