

Reducing the Online Instructor's Workload

Tips on designing and administering online courses can save faculty valuable time while producing high-quality content

By **Rick Sheridan**

Teaching an online course can be exciting, yet time-consuming to the point of infringing on an instructor's other responsibilities and personal time. Faculty typically put many hours into designing and administering an online course, especially the first semester it is offered. I've heard many horror stories about the massive time faculty spent designing a new class only to practically start over when they discovered the need for a few changes in the content or format. Fortunately, there are ways to cut back on the time put into developing and teaching online courses. After teaching both an online and a hybrid course, I have discovered several ways to deliver high-quality content while reducing the typical workload requirements.

My first online teaching experience was with a hybrid class at California State University, Chico (CSUC), a social science course called Introduction to the Information Highway that I taught in 1999. The class met once a week, and the students used my Web site to complete some of the required work. I have also taught an entirely online Internet Healthcare Research class through the College of Marin Extension for the past five years. This class allows students to start at any time and work through the four modules at their own pace. The course also has performance objectives, case studies, and a reference section. Students who complete the course receive relicensure credit from the California Board of Registered Nurses.



Pros and Cons of Online

Most instructors are already familiar with the many advantages and disadvantages of online learning, but it's worth going over a few of them here. Online courses are self-paced; students can speed up or slow down as needed. They can skip over material they already know and focus on topics they most want or need to learn. Geographical barriers are eliminated. For example, most of my Internet Healthcare Research students did not live in the area. They also appreciated the flexibility of the online

format, since many of them had day jobs and family commitments. In addition, I have found that it is easier for some people to communicate through writing. In the hybrid class at CSUC, at least one shy student preferred sending e-mails or posting materials on the discussion forum to speaking face-to-face with an instructor or another student.

Despite the obvious advantages of online education, several disadvantages stand out. Often, both students and instructor must master a technological learning curve. Some students may be at the very beginning stages of understanding how to use the Internet, and the requirements of operating the online course may frustrate or overwhelm them. With online training, students have little or no direct contact with the instructor or support personnel. This makes it more difficult for a student with questions or one who does not understand part of the training to seek and obtain help.

In some cases, online students do not have the incentives and pressures of classroom-based students; they can become lazy and unfocused. I had several students who quietly dropped out of one of my online classes and later contacted me to ask for an extension. Online drop-outs are more difficult for an instructor to notice than in a classroom situation where daily attendance and participation indicate a student's involvement.

Occasionally, bandwidth or browser limitations restrict student participation. Some students simply can't afford

a fast Internet connection, and they can get frustrated with the slow browsing experience. Finally, students sometimes complain about on-screen readability.

Managing Time for an Online Course

One way I learned to save time both for me and for students was by setting up a “What’s New” section at the beginning of the online course. In the past, I added content to whatever section seemed appropriate. Students either complained about not finding the new material or they simply did not respond adequately to the new assignments or lecture notes. Indicating what has been added at the beginning of the site makes it much easier for students to focus on the new material, and it also provides me with a quick reminder at the start of class about what needs to be covered in the discussion.

To make these courses easy to administer, I set up a discussion forum where students can post questions, comments, difficulties, and advice for other students. This encourages teamwork on some of the projects and allows students to “blow off steam” when they get frustrated. Another technique I use is to post a reference section that has more than 150 links to health-related sites, an explanation of basic and advanced Internet research techniques, a bibliography, and case studies, along with other resources. As students work through the modules, they see an occasional link to the reference section for additional information. This structure prevents the individual modules from becoming cluttered with too much general reference material while allowing me to quickly add related materials as they become available.

I have used the design structure of the Internet Healthcare Research class as a template for several other online courses. Although the content is much different, I use the same structure of four modules plus reference section. I simply add lecture notes and other resources into the template and modify the content to match the new performance



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objectives. This way, all the links and anchors work, and the course can be loaded easily to any available server.

The following tips will help those new to online education manage the time they invest in their online class:

- Automate parts of the course whenever possible. Whether you use online development tools such as WebCT or Blackboard or design the course yourself with an HTML editor such as Dreamweaver, take advantage of automation features. For example, WebCT has a variety of tools to create frequently asked question (FAQ) sections, self-correcting quizzes, and other time-saving devices.
- Create a “What’s New” section to let your students focus on new assignments or learning materials without having to review the entire course. This also minimizes the amount of e-mail questions you will receive regarding assignments. Also, with WebCT or Blackboard you may find it quicker, easier, and more effective to design the course in Dreamweaver (or another HTML program) and “pull” it into

WebCT/Blackboard. These programs often have templates that let you do a global update, which means you can update several pages throughout your site with one correction. Dreamweaver also offers more design flexibility than is currently available in WebCT or Blackboard.

- Organize a group of instructors and students on your campus who are experienced in online course design and delivery to help support faculty when they encounter technical or content difficulties with online instruction. At CSUC, an informal group called Technology in Learning—known as TILT—meets monthly to discuss online methodology.
- Be aware of the assessment workload per student when you first design course assignments. Typically, instructors spend enormous amounts of time developing a new course, and then find that they have set themselves up for huge online grading commitments. This does not always translate into higher-quality content and can result in instructor burnout. High-enrollment courses especially may need to use fewer personalized grading assignments or high-tech features. Technology does not bring economies of scale, unless the opportunities for interaction with individual students are managed effectively.¹ The instructor’s assessment workload can be reduced by substituting peer, computer, or self-assessment options. Group assignments often require less teacher assessment than do individual assignments.²
- Determine what kind of technical support you have available. Some universities, such as CSUC, have a rapid-response technical support staff that will react immediately to support issues. Other universities’ support staff are much less able or willing to respond quickly. If your university falls into the latter category, developing faculty and student contacts is very important to the success of your online course. In addition, consider having administrative or other nontechnical

departmental staff handle the administrative aspects of the course. Another option would be to encourage more experienced students to support new students and relieve the instructors of some menial tasks.

- Communicate with students early in the semester about how to best use the course, along with any expected difficulties with the technology. Let students know that it may take one to two days for you to personally respond to e-mail questions that they send. Post any new e-mail questions or general problems on the FAQ and "What's New" sections to minimize repetitive e-mail questions from others in the class. Encourage continuous feedback from students so that you can keep the course responsive to their needs and maintain high morale throughout the semester.

Conclusion

Teaching online has been an exciting and productive experience that has offered teaching options I would not have had otherwise. Following the initial investment into developing the course and after the first semester of trial-and-error, a well-designed and well-managed online course could save an instructor a quarter of the time normally devoted to teaching in a traditional classroom.

While reducing faculty workload is a worthwhile goal, of course, it is only one factor in assessing online instruction. Faculty time savings must be weighed against other considerations. It is important to develop an effective evaluation system for determining student satisfaction with the online experience and whether students learned the necessary materials at the same level as

their traditional-classroom peers. Those factors ultimately decide the success of online courses for faculty, not time saved. *e*

Endnotes

1. T. Bates, "Third Generation Distance Education: The Challenge of New Technology," *Research in Distance Education*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1991, pp. 10-15.
2. L. Maguire, "Faculty Participation in Online Distance Education: Barriers and Motivators," *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, Vol. VIII, No. I, Spring 2005.

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