

Getting Ready to Teach Online: A Malaysian Experience

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Abstract

Online discussion in a forum plays a crucial role in the delivery of distance-learning materials. We should not use the learning management system as depository of contents, but as a platform for active exchange of ideas and collective reflections in order to generate new knowledge. This paper looks into online training of lecturers using "e-tivities" to promote online discussions. The training lasted ten weeks and the participants learned the key skills needed to host online discussions and function as e-instructors. This paper also deals with the various aspects of content development for distance-learning modules and the problems encountered.

Introduction

Many private colleges in Malaysia are working towards online education. The basic question is, are the faculty members ready to teach online? Being a good lecturer in a face-to-face classroom environment does not mean that one will be a good e-instructor (online lecturer). When a college ventures into online distance learning there are many things to consider. Among them are training the faculty members and getting the learning materials ready in distance-learning mode. This paper will discuss these two aspects experienced in a private college in Malaysia.

Since there is no need to "reinvent the wheel," some distance-learning content-providers do not give any form of learning materials, as these are easily available in the Internet. On the other hand, some faculty members opt to develop and deliver a complete set of course materials on their own. In this college learning guides—learning materials written in line with the textbook—are used. Our students will have to read the learning guides together with the textbook to get a complete understanding of a topic and perform some learning activities. When producing the learning materials one has to be careful to avoid a standby approach, where traditional course materials are re-worked slightly and then offered as distance-learning materials (Schieman, Teare & McLaren, 1992).

In this college, lecturers were paid to write the learning materials. Hence, the issue of completing these tasks gratis did not arise (Care & Scanlan, 2001). However, we faced many problems getting the lecturers to meet the deadlines.

I believe that the thorny issue of content-writing for distance-learning programs must be addressed carefully. First and foremost, the college must recognize that developing learning materials is creative academic work and, therefore, must be included in the criteria for promotion. Currently, the intellectual property and ownership of the materials is with the college. Many writers were not happy with this arrangement.

Care and Scanlan (2001) are careful to opine that a college policy regarding intellectual property must be handled tactfully so as to encourage more faculty members to write.

Besides preparing learning materials, some academic staff had to attend online training sessions for ten weeks. This is in line with Gold's (2001) claim that lecturers must have actual experience with online learning before they can be expected to be online lecturers. In this online training lecturers learned how to collaborate, reflect and discuss in an online forum. This allows the normal classroom teaching to be replaced by an online forum; the cognitivist style of teaching to be replaced by the constructivist style; and the verbal delivery mode to be replaced by the non-verbal typing mode. In a constructivist learning environment, the lecturer acts as a facilitator who encourages students to discover principles for themselves and to construct knowledge based on their existing knowledge, usually in exploration and collaboration with others. According to McKenna and Laycock (2004) constructivist learning should support knowledge construction through interaction and collaboration. Zhuge and Li (2004) concurred and added that constructivist learning should motivate the students by enabling a more active and exploratory learning process.

The learning experience gained in the online forum was tremendous. The lecturers learned how to design e-tivities (online activities) that will help to integrate their understanding of multiple perspectives through discussion and reflection. The training provided them with the ability to customize learning materials through e-tivities that will help to facilitate the students' ability to construct knowledge. How the e-instructors perform in the online discussion has a major impact on the students' learning and their satisfaction (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003). Moreover, the use of authentic experiences goes a long way in determining the success of online learning. Lecturers were told to put in first-hand experiences when designing their e-tivities (Herrington, Oliver & Reeves, 2003).

It is imperative that faculty members recognize the divergence between face-to-face synchronous classroom teaching and online asynchronous teaching. Without proper pedagogical training and online experience, lecturers may simply replicate their best existing classroom experiences onto the online medium. We need faculty support for any educational technological reform to be successful. One of the most important reasons for the lack of faculty support is lack of faculty preparation. Lecturers must be trained in using any new technology.

Content Development for Distance Learning Modules

Two academic schools were involved in the distance learning programs—the School of Computer and Information Technology (SOCIT) and School of Business and Law (SOBAL). The faculty members of each school were selected by their respective deans to write the distance learning (DL) modules. Each DL module team consisted of a content writer(s), a content evaluator, a module leader and an editor. Before the writers began to write, they were trained by an instructional designer. Both the content evaluator and the module leader were given briefing on their roles and instructions on how to fill the checklists.

Content Writer

The content writer had to ensure that the scope of the content matched the learning objectives of the unit. In writing the unit, the writer had to ensure that the contents

were presented logically and coherently throughout the unit, and that they were appropriately sequenced. Every unit was made up of notes, examples, self-assessment questions and learning activities. It was the responsibility of the writer to ensure that the contents were free of plagiarism. Each course module was supported by learning objects in the range of five units to one learning object. The instructional designer, module leader and the software developer worked together to design the learning object, with the contents coming from the writer. (Effective learning modules rely on instructional design processes that reflect the absence of (or reduction in) face-to-face instruction (Brown & Voltz, 2005). The necessity of providing a rich learning activity, such as using learning objects, opens up opportunities for action, instead of directing students down a prescribed pathway.)

The writers were trained to write the learning objectives, introductions, summaries, and styles of delivery. They were encouraged to write as if they were lecturing in the class; to add in dialogue and a touch of humor wherever possible; and to occasionally include some probing questions, so as to encourage the students to think. This was done to promote active learning. Examples used should reflect real life situations in the local and international contexts. The writers could choose between three different types of learning activities for a unit. These include practical questions in real-life situations; guided reading references from the textbook; or relevant websites and ordinary questions covering certain sections of the unit.

Each writer was asked to write two sample units and submit them to the instructional designer at the early stage. Once the units were certified alright, then the writer proceeded to complete the rest of the units in the module. Every module was made up of 42 units and each unit covered one hour of lecture time. There are 14 weeks per semester, and in each week there are three lecturing hours (that is, three units); hence there are 42 units.

Content Evaluator

There was a content evaluator appointed for each module. The evaluator's job was to ensure that the contents were relevant to the objectives of the unit and to ensure the appropriateness and accuracy of the contents. The evaluator also was asked to ascertain (i.e., double-check) whether the contents were free from plagiarism. In the briefing to the evaluators, each of the items in the checklist was explained so that they knew exactly how to proceed. The checklist consisted of 10 items. It included, most importantly, these questions:

- Are the stated objectives comprehensible?
- Are the ideas/concepts presented logically and coherently?
- Is the content generally free from plagiarism?
- Are the students likely to have the prerequisite knowledge or skills necessary for learning the content?

Each unit was checked at least twice by the evaluator. The second reading was to ensure that the changes recommended were made by the writer. After each reading the evaluator filled the checklist to be submitted to the writer so that he knew what to alter, and why. Some suggestions to change were also recorded in the unit. However, if there was any conflict between the writer and the evaluator, the module leader was expected to step in and make the final decision.

Module Leader

The module leader acted as an anchor man. He checked the quality of the questions set to ensure that they were suitable for the students, given level of study. Furthermore, he had to ensure that the questions covered all important topics discussed in the unit and, that there was a sufficient number of questions. He also checked to see that the course syllabus was covered in all 42 units of the module, and that each unit was written in detail in accordance with the syllabus. He distributed the 42 units among the writers, and spoke with those who had problems completing the units allocated. If the writer encountered problems and could not continue to write, the module leader had to redistribute the units among the remaining writers, or seek the assistance of the school in appointing a new writer. Finally, he was to check whether the explanations and learning activities in the unit were suitable for the students, and whether the topics were arranged in proper order.

The module leaders were also briefed on how to fill the checklist. This was so the module leader could give relevant feedback to the writers, in order to improve the contents. There were eight items in the checklist which included, most importantly, these questions:

- Are learning activities included for students to learn or practice and apply newly acquired knowledge?
- Is a summary provided to consolidate learning?
- Overall, does the unit engage learners in active learning?
- Is the overview/introduction effective in directing the learner's attention to the topic at hand?

Each unit written had to go through the module leader and the content evaluator. When both parties were satisfied that the unit was in order, then it was forwarded to the instructional designer, who looked into the instructional aspects and overall quality of the unit. Finally the unit was sent to the editor.

Instructional Designer

The role of an instructional designer spanned from the beginning of the project to the end. Workshops were conducted for the unit writers, content evaluators and module leaders before the actual writing process started, spelling out in detail the instructional elements required in each unit, and checking periodically to ensure that the writers conformed to the requirements.

The instructional designer worked very closely with the module leader, writers, and software developer, to design learning objects. These learning objects were mainly developed using Flash. Discussions were held with the relevant parties to choose suitable topics to develop into learning objects and design the learning object and the contents to put in. The learning objects used were intended to motivate the students to learn through interactions with the system. They were not developed to teach the entire course.

Editor

The editor merely checked the accuracy of the language used in terms of grammar and syntax. Each unit was read twice to ensure that changes were made as recommended. It was the duty of the writer to amend grammatical errors pointed out by the editor.

However, any technical jargon used by the writers was retained. There were many disputes between the editor and the writer, and the module leader had to resolve these.

Results of Observation of Content Development

On average a module takes a year to complete. The commitment of the writer plays a significant role here. For instance, one writer who was working alone managed to finish her job in three months, while another module with four writers took more than one year to complete. However, the delay or failure to meet deadlines was not always the fault of the writer. Occasionally, it was due to the content evaluator or the module leader.

The issue of intellectual property kept some would-be writers away. However, the writers were given top priority in matters involving module revisions. If one rejected a module, it was be given to another person.

Some writers initially plagiarized diagrams from the textbook. They were advised to remove them and substitute them with their own diagrams, or to have their students refer to the textbook for diagrams. Similarly, for the contents, exercises and examples, writers were not allowed to use the 'cut and paste' technique. They were expected to write the units in their own words, using with their own experiences teaching these courses. According to Dordoy (2002) some reasons for staff cheating include not understanding the rules (40%), unconscious cheating (30%), easy access to material via the Internet (35%), and laziness or bad time management (42%).

Online Training

In an online course one can logon 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There is no necessity for face-to-face interaction. There are, of course, some deadlines to meet, but within these, the flexibility of the study schedule is unlimited. The participants were advised to logon at least two hours per day to complete all e-tivities in the course.

Before a lecturer could teach an online course, he had to undertake 10 weeks of online training. Lecturers who wrote their modules were given preference over others in the training. There were six sessions in the training:

- Session 1: Getting to know you
- Session 2: Good online host
- Session 3: Weave and summarize
- Session 4: Design questions for e-tivities
- Session 5: Host a discussion topic
- Session 6: Saying goodbye

Sessions 1 and 2 were considered 'warm-up' sessions. That is, they were used to get the participants accustomed to the online system, to know each other in the e-community, and to learn how to discuss, collaborate and reflect in a forum. The participants actually learned a lot about each other in the "Getting to know you" session, even though they are colleagues in the same school. Ironically, even though they meet each other daily, it was the online forum discussion that allowed them to discover each other. Indeed, one of the participants commented, "You never asked."

Session 2 was especially beneficial, as each participant was asked to read an online host article and give his comments on the attributes of a good online host. The participants were assessed based on their postings and participation in the discussions during Sessions 3 to 5. Every participant had to pass each session before he was allowed to proceed to the next session. Each session had a number of e-tivities that carried different marks, depending on the level of difficulty. Participants had to attempt all the e-tivities, and were assessed based on the quality and number of their responses.

They were strongly encouraged to participate in the forum regularly and to collaborate and discuss among themselves throughout the training. It was also very important that the participants knew how to motivate and encourage each other throughout. This is because in distance learning, the drop-out rate is relatively high—so if any of the participants remained silent for a while, someone was expected to send him an email of encouragement, or post a concerned message in the forum.

All the participants were advised to post their e-tivities in the forum. This is because the chat-room was reserved for informal and social chatting. They were reminded to 'sign off' with names in their responses. This way, other participants would know whose response they were reading, and how to address the person. They were told not to write 'Yes, I agree' in their responses. They were told to elaborate as to why they agreed or disagreed.

As a forum protocol, all participants were told to avoid using SMS language. They were encouraged to use good English in all their responses in the forum. This advice was given to participants: Always remember to 'speak' to others as you would expect them to speak to you. Do not touch on sensitive issues such as religion or politics. And at all times, respect other participants' views. They could criticize their opinions, but not each other.

Results

An online survey was administered to our first cohort of 14 e-instructors. After they had completed the online training, they were asked to fill a questionnaire available in the learning management system. The table below depicts the feedback from them:

Table 1: Feedback on the course

Item	Disagree	Satisfactory	Agree
The Course			
1. The course enhances my understanding of the topic.		2	12
2. I am able to apply knowledge and skills gained to my profession.		3	10
3. The course is well organized.		2	11
4. The course duration of 10 weeks is too long.	6	4	3

Generally, most of the participants agreed that the course was well organized and that they profited from it. Taking satisfactory to mean the participants do not mind, then we can infer that the duration of a 10-week project was agreeable to them. However, it

may be possible to reduce the duration if the training is conducted on a full-time basis. According to Mc Kenzie et al. (2000) the vast majority of instructors (62%) received 1 – 5 hours of training for online course delivery before teaching their first course. The second most frequently reported amount of training time identified was 21 or more hours, by 17% of the faculty. Based on these figures, it is obvious that faculty in this college received considerably more training than most could normally expect to receive.

Now, let us focus on the e-tivities used in the course. The participants' feedback is as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Feedback on e-tivities

Item	Disagree	Satisfactory	Agree
E-tivities			
1. The learning materials or notes provided are of high quality.		4	9
2. I learnt how to welcome and encourage participants.		3	10
3. I learnt the importance of key e-moderating skills such as opening, weaving and hosting discussion.		2	11
4. I have explored some key skills and topics that will help me to e-moderate knowledge construction forum.		3	10

The participants learned the key skills needed to host online discussions and to function as e-instructors. They are happy with the quality of the materials provided in the online course. It is encouraging to note that the participants met the main objective of the training, which was to prepare their own e-tivities for online courses they will conduct and online discussions they will host.

Hiltz et al. (1999) reported that when students are actively involved in collaborative learning using an online method, the outcomes can be as good as or better than those for traditional classes. On the other hand, when students are simply receiving posted materials and sending back their assignments, the results are poorer than in traditional classrooms. Ascough (2002) concurs by saying that e-instructors should understand that online education is not merely uploading teaching materials, receiving and sending emails, and posting discussion topics onto the Internet. More importantly, it provides an arena for an interactive, deep, collaborative and multidimensional thinking and learning environment.

Some verbatim reports obtained from the participants are as follows:

All the participants were first-timers in this online training course. They acknowledged the importance of time management. They also enjoyed group communication and interaction. It is important to note that if the e-trainer leaves the participants to themselves after posting the e-tivity, then he is not likely to generate an effective collaborative learning environment. This is especially so at the early stages of the training. As one participant noted:

"Online interaction is a new experience for me. I found that it helps me to reflect my thoughts, enjoy group communications and interaction and also to be disciplined and visit the forum regularly so as not to miss the discussions."

Some participants enjoyed the flexibility of the course. They were given two weeks to complete a session, and within the given time frame they had full control of how and when to finish the e-tivities in the session. All the participants were told to strictly follow the deadline set for each session. Being inactive for too long could cause major 'catch-up' problems.

Several participants enjoyed "The flexibility of the program." One participant wanted confirmation of acceptance of his postings to the forum. Probably he had forgotten that all ideas or postings are acceptable, provided he can substantiate them. In a forum discussion, one has to shake off the fear of saying the wrong thing. This weakness will hinder the participant's progress in online collaborative learning.

Some participants wanted to "Get more feedback because at times I do not know whether my ideas are acceptable." And most of the participants used the office computers to logon to this training.

Suggestions for Further Research

There are three possible areas for further research. First, we can look at how to apply the constructivist learning theory in online discussions to support face-to-face teaching. In particular, this would involve focusing on how the lecturers and students adapt to the new environment in terms of time spent in online discussions, and how they apply the theory to collaborate and construct knowledge.

Second, it is possible to blend e-learning with face-to-face teaching—which is becoming very common nowadays. Many studies have been conducted but, they have failed to address the issue of the proportion of blending of the two; the lecturers' and students' perspectives; and the learning management system support.

Third, we can explore the prospect of degrees obtained via e-learning mode from the Malaysian employers' viewpoints, and examine the criteria required for recognition of these degrees by the government.

Conclusion

Online discussion is the key element in the delivery of distance learning materials. It provides a synchronous collaborative learning environment whereby interactions between students and e-instructors is possible and profitable. We can make use of the e-tivities to engage students actively in online discussions, which often require greater reflection than do face-to-face discussions, and promote team-building and critical thinking (Mullenburg & Berge, 2002).

It may be a mistake to use the learning management system (LMS) merely for making information readily available and easily retrievable for students. We should turn the LMS into a platform to cater to the active exchange of ideas and collective reflection, in order to create deeper understanding and generate new knowledge (Drinkwater et al., 2004).

Choosing a suitable LMS to run distance-learning courses may not be easy. This is because most of the technology platforms are still in their infancy. They lack the diversity and capabilities that come with the maturity of technologies (Salmon, 2002). In this college, we use our own LMS (which is hampered by a few technical glitches, even to this day).

If getting the faculty members to write the distance-learning materials is problematic, then the college should rely on other means of getting the job done. For instance, colleges can advertise and obtain writers from outside the college, or share learning materials with other institutions. They can even refer to independent content-providers who are specialists, and request that lecturers convert their lecture notes to the distance-learning mode.

Colleges also needs to be aware that converting a face-to-face course to an online course is not simply typing lecture notes and posting them on the website. E-instructors have to discover ways to engage the students in active learning. To many, this is a major change from the way they were taught and trained to teach (Kosak et al., 2004). Faculty members need solid support from the college, from the planning stage through implementation.

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