

**MSTU 4022**

**Telecommunications, Distance Learning and Collaborative Interchange**

*(Fall 2005)*

**Assignment 4 - Distance Learning Review**

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*This assignment analyzes a Distance Learning Website based on some established criteria to see its strong and weak points, and puts forth recommendations as to how the site can be improved*

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## Introduction

Distance Learning, as the name implies, simply means that a learner is at a distance from the tutor or instructor, and that the learner uses some form of technology to access learning materials, interact with the instructor and other learners, as well as obtain some other form of support. Although practiced for well over a century, it is only in recent times that there has been a resurgence of interest in distance learning as a potentially useful strategy for addressing educational issues. This resurgence has been rooted mainly in the evolution of new information and communications technologies, particularly the computer and internet/World Wide Web. As applying these technologies in educational settings have resulted in the improvement of pedagogical and administrative models for facilitating learning at a distance, distance learning has now become synonymous with other terminologies such as internet learning, online learning, e-learning, networked learning, virtual learning, web-based learning etc.

Increasingly, organizations and higher educational institutions are beginning to adopt online learning as the main mode of delivery especially to distance learners (Simmons 2002). It is therefore not surprising that several online learning initiatives (mainly web-based) have proliferated over the last few years, offering training and instructional content that cut across a wide variety of disciplines. Whilst some of these learning tools can be described in broad terms as satisfactory, it is quite obvious that some equally fall short of expectation. The availability of well-designed, effectively implemented, and efficiently delivered online courses is essential in order to satisfy the unique needs of growing numbers of distance learners (Daugherty and Funke, 1998; Palloff and Pratt, 2001).

Thus, several researchers have written about the need for quality standards to ensure the academic integrity of e-learning programs (Benson, 2003; Carstens and Worsfold, 2000). In line with this, Graham. C., Cagiltay. K., Byung-Ro L., Craner, J. & Duffy, T. M (2001) published "Seven Principles of Effective Teaching: A Practical Lens for Evaluating Online Courses." It was an adaptation of "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," a popular framework for evaluating teaching in traditional, face-to-face courses which was originally published in the AAHE Bulletin (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). These seven principles for evaluating online courses are:

1. Instructors should provide clear guidelines for interaction with students.

2. Instructors should facilitate meaningful cooperation among students through well-designed discussion assignments.
3. To encourage active learning, students should present course projects.
4. Instructors need to provide two types of feedback: information feedback and acknowledgment feedback.
5. Online courses need deadlines.
6. Challenging tasks, sample cases, and praise for quality work communicate high expectations.
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning; allow students to choose project topics incorporates diverse views into online courses.

Using these seven principles as a general framework the authors evaluated four online courses in an accredited program at a major U.S. university, and gained insights into several important aspects of online teaching and learning.

This article offers a brief evaluation of an online learning website, applying the principles as they are outlined by Graham *et al* (2001). I will begin by identifying the site, and then using the criteria, I will identify the site's strengths and weaknesses, and then conclude by indicating whether and how the site can be improved.

### **A Web-based Distance Learning Course**

<http://mypage.iu.edu/~twwatson/w505g.html> is a distance learning website that offers a creative writing workshop targeted at K-12 educators. It is hosted by the Indiana University, Bloomington, School of Education. The details of the course are:

Course Title: W505G: Creative Writing For Educators

Instructor: Tom Watson

Mode of Delivery: Website and Oncourse Course Management System

Instructor Contact: [twwatson@comcast.net](mailto:twwatson@comcast.net)

The goals of the course are "to provide educators the opportunity to write personal memoirs, fiction, etc. for self-enrichment and to increase their ability to write effective writing curricula for their students."

### **Review of the Site According to Guidelines by Graham *et al***

1. *Instructors Should Provide Clear Guidelines For Interaction With Students.*

According to Graham *et al* (2001), instructors of online distance learning courses always want to be accessible to their students, but are equally apprehensive about being overwhelmed with e-mail messages or bulletin board postings, which if not quickly addressed, will leave the students feeling ignored. To address this, they recommend that student expectations and faculty concerns be mediated by establishing policies describing the types of communication that should take place over different channels, and also setting clear standards for instructors' timelines for responding to messages, e.g. "I will respond to e-mails on Tuesdays and Fridays between three and five o'clock."

Tom Watson has addressed this issue in his course when he writes in the first page that "All contact will be via e-mail, electronic conferencing, and via web site. As such I will have no formal 'office hours' but will respond to specific questions from students within 24-48 hours."

2. *Instructors Should Facilitate Meaningful Cooperation Among Students Through Well-Designed Discussion Assignments.*

In line with this, the following points were recommended:

- Learners should be required to participate (and their grade should depend on participation).
- Discussion groups should remain small.
- Discussions should be focused on a task.
- Tasks should always result in a product.
- Tasks should engage learners in the content.
- Learners should receive feedback on their discussions.
- Evaluation should be based on the quality of postings (and not the length or number).
- Instructors should post expectations for discussions.

Though I don't have access to the discussion forum (which is password protected), I have reason to believe that most of the above enumerated points are implemented in the forum based on the guidelines and advice provided by the instructor. These include "students will read and respond critically to the work of other students," and that "final grades will be computed based upon the degree of mastery of the course objectives and the level of participation in the course assignments and online conferencing." Also the point that tasks should always result in a product is clearly addressed in the course.

3. *To Encourage Active Learning, Students Should Present Course Projects.*

Graham *et al* (2001) argue that students learn valuable skills when they develop and present projects, and they also learn a great deal from seeing and discussing their peers' work. Though conceding that formal synchronous presentations may not be practical online, they insist that instructors can still provide opportunities for projects to be shared and discussed asynchronously. In this way, students will learn from one another as well as from the instructor.

Tom Watson's Creative Writing course addresses this issue as far as possible with the following course objectives:

- Students will read and respond critically to the work of other students.
- Students will produce personal, creative writing in the form of journal entries.
- Students will create a lesson plan for use in their classrooms which will be shared with other students in the course.

As student grades depend on the mastery of these objectives as well as level of participation, it is highly likely that students will carry out these activities to the fullest.

4. *Instructors Need to Provide Two Types of Feedback: Information Feedback and Acknowledgment Feedback.*

Information feedback provides information or evaluation, such as an answer to a question, or an assignment grade and comments. Acknowledgement feedback confirms that some event has occurred. For example, the instructor may send an e-mail acknowledging that he or she has received a question or assignment and will respond soon.

Whilst one cannot state for sure whether or not Tom Watson provides timely information and acknowledgement feedback, his statement that the course is "designed to be highly interactive and to include regular dialogue among students and instructor," can be taken to mean that he is willing to implement this point and follow it to the letter.

5. *Online courses need deadlines.*

Though distance learning courses encourage self-paced learning, it has been observed that regularly-distributed deadlines encourage students to spend time on tasks and help students with busy schedules avoid procrastination. They also provide a context for regular contact with the instructor and peers.

The distance learning course under review emphasizes on deadlines. Statements like "Due dates are firm. Any assignment or other required activity submitted past the due date will lose 10% credit per day.." and "all writing assignments are due by Sunday at midnight (Eastern Time) of the week in which they are assigned.." all point to the fact that the instructor takes the issue of deadlines seriously.

6. *Challenging Tasks, Sample Cases, and Praise for Quality Work Communicate High Expectations.*

Graham *et al* (2001) are of the view that communicating high expectations for student performance is essential. This can be done by giving challenging assignments, providing examples or models for students to follow (along with comments explaining why the examples are good), and also, publicly praising exemplary work by calling attention to insightful or well-presented student postings.

In the distance learning course under review, there is clear evidence that the instructor expects quality work when he states in the evaluation page that the "A" grade is reserved for work that is excellent in thought, organization and style, and should demonstrate clearly developed paragraphs proceeding from a unified theme or concept. Also, for the duration of fourteen weeks that the course takes, there is an assignment due each week. These can be said to be challenging as they involve extensive readings and posting of written works. As the discussion board is inaccessible, there is no evidence pointing to the fact that the instructor offers praise for quality work. However, there is sufficient reason to believe that this is probably the case.

7. *Respect diverse talents and ways of learning; Allow Students to Choose Project Topics Incorporates Diverse Views Into Online Courses.*

The explanation for this final principle is that, as instructors give students a voice in selecting their own topics for course projects, students are encouraged to express their own diverse points of view. Instructors can provide guidelines to help students select topics relevant to the course while still allowing students to share their unique perspectives.

Certainly, Watson's course is all about getting students to create their own writing products and experiences at the end of the course. "We'll read and write personal memoirs...develop creative writing lesson plans based on what we have learned which we will share for use in our classrooms."

Thus students are at liberty (and encouraged) to choose design and develop projects based on the experiences and style.

### **Recommendations**

From the forgoing, it can be seen that the online course - Creative Writing for Educators - has addressed most of the expected characteristics of an online distance learning course. However, a few recommendations as to how this course can be further improved are:

1. Though the course is about writing and is targeted at adults, it will serve a greater purpose if audio and visual material were incorporated in the website to enhance its visual appeal and functionality.
2. Content and readings should be expanded so as to attract learners who will wish to apply their knowledge in different cultures.
3. Blackboard

### **Conclusion**

With the rise and proliferation of distance learning systems has come the need to critically examine the strengths and weaknesses of various programs. One such program - Creative Writing For Educators - has been examined using guidelines adopted from The "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," originally published in the AAHE Bulletin in 1987. On the whole, the course design in terms of content and activities are clearly in agreement with the seven principles, although discussion activities could not be analyzed. The learning strategies promote meaningful learning, encourage interaction, provide feedback, facilitate contextual learning, and provide support during the learning process. A few recommendations as to how this course, and other course fashioned in a similar way, can be improved have however been put forth.

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