"Students in Cyberspace: Launching, Revising, and Maintaining Quality in First Year Composition Online"

As online courses have become the mainstay at most colleges and universities around the country in the past 10 years, not much has been done to assure quality of design or instruction. In 2001, Savenye, Olina, and Niemczyk, in their article published in Computers and Composition, entitled “So you are going to be an online writing instructor: Issues in designing, developing and delivering an online course,” present a series of guidelines, derived from theories of instructional design that form the foundation to support effective students learning. The many steps recommended for designing and developing instructional materials fall into the broad stages of analysis, design, development and evaluation. Those of us who analyzed online courses in the early years (Along with a colleague, I designed the first online course in Utah in 1995 with a state technology grant) analyzed student needs, institutional mandates (our Governor Mike Leavitt said there would be no more “bricks and mortar,” that distance ed was the answer to the educational issue) and developed course curriculum with students in mind. Over the next decade we continually revised curriculum and approaches to teaching online and did some evaluation, but review and assessment was not the focus of what we were trying to accomplish at that time. Savenye, et al go on to recommend several considerations. I will mention a few here. (1) Developing the course web site into well-organized modules or “chunks” creating a syllaweb, or hyperlinked syllabus, providing students access to many types of resources directly from the syllabus. (2) Organizing—organization is critical as students in a fully online course need as much upfront clarification as possible as they have little opportunity to clarify directions for assignments face-to-face. (3) Determine how you plan to use discussion forums or threaded discussions. When we developed our first online course, group discussions were our major focus. We tried to replicate online the well theorized classroom with students working busily in groups. And, of course, (4) Develop assessments to monitor student progress, conduct formative evaluations and revisions of the course.

Similarly, Catherine Gouge, from West Virginia University in an article entitled “Writing Technologies and the Technologies of Writing: Designing a Web-Based Writing Course,” published in Kairos, Vol 11, Issue 2, Spring 2007, states goals for her online courses that would support the course goals for her composition course. With the course goals in mind, she built courses which would offer the following to students:

1. **A web-based discourse community which is supportive, professional, and engaging;**
2. **Diversified content to appeal to differences in student learning styles;**
3. **Many and varied opportunities for students to receive frequent and meaningful feedback (from both the instructor and their peers) to encourage learning and retention;**
4. **Technological support for all students, especially those who are less familiar with email, chat rooms, and other web-based tools; and**
5. **A combination of technologies that would, as seamlessly as possible, give students opportunities to meet the basic course goals.**

At Salt Lake Community College, our Distance Education Department developed Online Quality Standards for online courses. They discussed these standards with the distance education advisory committee comprised of both faculty and administrators or staff from each of the academic schools and service areas of the college. I serve on this committee and have either served on it or similar distance ed committees for the past 12 years. The standards were then sent on to the faculty senate for approval. Next, the committee designed a review process which is going on right now. The freshman English courses at our institution are part of the review pilot. In my presentation I will discuss the process of developing the Online Quality Standards and the role of the Distance Education Department, major emphases of the Online Quality Standards, detail the review process and relate the outcome of the pilot and future reviews. In addition, I will discuss what we do in the English Department that goes beyond what Distance Ed is doing.

The Online Quality Standards and the review process are for online courses taught by full-time faculty. Most part-time faculty teach from a template designed by full-time faculty. As courses were migrated to our new WebCT Vista management system (now Blackboard), they went through a review process. The instructor chose two faculty to review their course (one from their department and one from another school), those faculty were given access to the online course they were reviewing and they filled out the online course review form and made recommendations for improvement. Reviewers were paid $250 for each course they reviewed. Originally the Distance Ed committee recommended that reviewers be paid $500 per course.

The Distance Ed dept developed a draft document of standards and brought it to the Distance Ed Committee for comments, revision, and approval. There was quite a bit of discussion for several months both in person and via email. After the standards were approved by the committee, they were sent to the faculty senate where they were met with more discussion, questions, revision and final approval. The AVP allocated $50 per hour for the initial pilot. Distance Ed faculty trained themselves to be reviewers and conducted the initial pilot. They tracked their time and five hours was determined to be the average time each reviewer spent looking at each course and filling out the review form. From the initial pilot, the AVP determined that $250 per course would be allocated for each reviewer rather than $500. The review process was then taken to the Academic Leadership Council for final approval.

In addition to adhering to the review process, faculty were required to undergo extensive training in order to use the Vista system. This involved several Vista training sessions—Vista fundamentals, managing your course, communicating with students, presenting content, assessments, assignments, grade book, and for those who planned to manage a template for part-time faculty to use--Template training. Each training sessions lasted several hours.

To assist with the movement of courses to Blackboard Vista, Distance Ed hired several instructional designers to work with departments and individual faculty. Even for those who have taught online for years, the movement to a new management system such as Vista was complex and the instructional designers were extremely helpful.

The triangle in the Distance Ed model, describes a model that was developed by Distance Ed to provide institutional quality standards that may be used to guide the development and improvement of online courses and to illustrate best practices elements for online courses in greater detail and provide a context for the Course Review Checklist and any Evaluation processes.

The center circle in the model represents the core elements of an online course. These include course content, course communication, assessment and assignments, layout and navigation, and learner management. Each element is critical in determining the quality of an online course.

The outer triangle in the model represents the institutional environment that supports each online course. The elements of the institutional environment that can affect the successfulness of an online course include: learner support, faculty support and program support.

Using these core elements as a guide, Distance Ed developed review questions and brought them to our committee for discussion, additions, and overall review. This process lasted several months with significant input from faculty.

Some of the questions on the online review form are "the course goals and objectives are clearly stated," "Learning objectives are clearly stated for each project," "Students have been given a clear statement of course requirements in advance," "The course includes opportunities for peer and/or self-assessment," "Appropriate course tools have been used to facilitate interactivity and interaction," and "The course encourages a sense of "Community" among students."

As you can see, the questions are quite extensive and cover many aspects of an online course from design and course syllabus to discussions.

In addition to this new review process, another process our English Department is involved in is that we have two Online Course Coordinators who we hold forums every month with part time faculty who teach online and we have done so for about 8 years—ever since part-time faculty have taught online courses. These forums have had an impact on the quality of online freshman English courses at our institution. When we first met several years ago, we would all sit down in front of a computer and discuss how we would present the course material developed by the department. We held closely to the curriculum and by doing so were able to meet the needs of the department for some consistency in our online courses and also involve part-time faculty in the day to day decision making as to how the curriculum would be presented. Part-time faculty felt empowered and we were able to adhere to the curriculum.

A few years ago, using the WPA Outcomes Statement as a guide, English Dept faculty at SLCC who were interested in meeting to discuss programmatic goals, developed overarching goals for the freshman composition sequence at SLCC that we still utilize for our courses.

In addition to Online Course Coordinators, we voted in three faculty member a few years ago to oversee the work of English 1010, 2010 and 2100 and gave them the title of course leaders. English 1010 and 2010 are our freshman core composition courses. English 2100 is Technical Writing.

The English 1010/2010/2100 Course Leaders carry out the curriculum development, assessment, and maintenance of the two major courses in the composition sequence. The Course Leaders collaborate with 1010, 2010 and 2100 committees to generate ideas and to get feedback, and have the responsibility to carry out the writing, production, distribution, and revision of the curriculum documents. The Course Leaders make arrangements for yearly assessment of the courses, in collaboration with the committee. They arrange for the design and the carrying out of textbook and/or curricular pilots. They report to the Department Chair and to the department and communicate with the department at monthly department meetings and part-time faculty (through the Department Chair), with Developmental Writing faculty, and with faculty interested in developing learning communities. One of their major responsibilities is to hold forums with part-time faculty 2-3 times/semester and meet with new part-time faculty at the beginning of each new semester.

1. They serve for a term of 3 years, renewable by dept. vote.

2. They are compensated by either a stipend or reassigned time

In addition to fully online courses, we also offer both online and hybrid sections of freshman composition at our college and have done so for the past 12 years. We have been continually working to develop quality hybrid courses. Our hybrid courses are taught once a week in person and the rest of the week is online. We recently adopted departmental online course standards which guide our hybrid courses. Those standards include

Our hybrid courses are mostly taught by full-time faculty, but some part time faculty who also teach online and attend our monthly online instructor forums, also teach hybrid courses.

There are advantages to hybrid courses as opposed to fully online courses. First of all, students see the instructor and other students once a week. They know their classmates and those they are working with in groups and if they have questions about the course they are addressed in class. Online students can be lost for weeks and the instructor doesn't know they are confused. One advantage of hybrid rather than traditional classes is that students have to discuss course materials. In a traditional classroom where only a few students participate, many students may not contribute to the discussion or even read the assigned readings for class. When they have to respond to one another online, they have to read and participate. One disadvantage is that since they only meet once a week in person, some students may get behind because they do not see the instructor twice a week to be continually reminded of assignments.

Where we are with the Distance Ed assessment of online courses—

At our last Distance Ed meeting a couple of weeks ago, our Distance Ed director provided a brief report designating 10 areas of quality instruction and design that a significant number of courses did not meet, such as “Course goals and objectives are clearly stated” and “The syllabus includes ………………. Other documents have been produced by Distance Ed in the past year such as the “Overall Distance Ed Student Evaluation Results” form that indicates results of online student evaluations. Students generally state that the course content was good and that course goals and objectives were clearly stated.

In addition, there was discussion among faculty on the committee about the frustration they feel after they have reviewed a course and then have no feedback from the instructor about the comments they have provided. They provided anecdotal instances of courses running without making any changes when they felt there were significant areas that needed improvement. So where does this leave us? Our next step is to include another step in the process asking instructors to follow up with a report back to reviewers indicating changes they made and recommendations they do not agree with due to the nature of the their field or for pedagogical reasons. Originally we did not include this step in the process because responsibility for curriculum falls on faculty and departments and we felt department and division chairs should make the final decisions about the quality of their courses. Distance Ed does not want to take on this responsibility and as faculty we don’t want them to. We hope with further discussion among faculty and department chairs that the quality of online courses will continue to improve.