

PINNACLES AND PITFALLS OF WEB-BASED COURSES

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of educators is to provide the pinnacle of education for their learners, i.e. meaningful and satisfying learning experiences that truly prepare learners for further academic work or for accomplishment in professional life. But the means of achieving such success in web-based distance learning is not yet well defined. Using a case study, this paper describes the use of three critical elements to identify four common pitfalls in a web-based course and the development of strategies for avoiding or minimizing these pitfalls.

ANALYSIS OF ONLEARNING EXPERIENCE

A graduate course called Introduction to Instructional Systems was chosen as the unit of analysis. All eighteen students in the course had taken at least one online course during the previous year. The instructor had taught using video-conferencing and onsite courses with some web-supplements, but this was her first experience teaching completely online. The course itself had been taught online once in the past year by a different instructor and to a smaller student group. During the semester the instructor recorded a log of problems and solutions. At the conclusion of the course, a framework guided by Powers and Guan's (2000) three critical elements that must be addressed in online courses was used to organize the data. These elements are the abilities of learners to 1) become involved with course information, 2) manage course information, and 3) process course information. Using this perspective, three pitfalls emerged from the data that seem likely to occur in online learning unless strategies are employed to avoid or minimize them. In addition, a fourth pitfall was identified that related to how much effort students put into overcoming the other three pitfalls.

PITFALLS AND STRATEGIES FOR AVOIDING OR MINIMIZING

Pitfall #1. The first pitfall concerns the learner's ability to become involved with course information. In the course studied, online students were most confused during the first two weeks of the semester about what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. These confusions went beyond technical problems to include understanding the goals and objectives of the course, schedule of readings, activities, and assignments, and assessment procedures. Onsite learners sitting in a classroom may also experience confusion, but onsite instructors are able to read nonverbal behaviors and to respond immediately to uncertainty by going over course materials and procedures. In addition, onsite students may feel more comfortable initiating questions, at least in the beginning of a course. The distance learner is often reluctant to raise issues of confusion, perhaps believing he or she is the only one experiencing such distress.

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In response to these initial confusions, the online instructor guided students to sections of the syllabus that answered specific questions, and inserted calendar dates into the schedule of weeks. In addition to a complete, clearly formatted syllabus, the instructor developed a “course procedures document.” This document helped learners figure out what to expect in the online environment and gave directions for accomplishing specific web-based activities. It included such topics as when the discussion boards would be opened and closed each week, types and lengths of discussion board postings, how to submit assignments, netiquette, e-mail uses and procedures, etc. Further, the instructor added a discussion forum called the Online Office for students to post questions of general interest. Along with the instructor, other students were also encouraged to help answer the questions if they could. The instructor also responded to questions there. Another related strategy that could be used is a FAQ section. Both the online office and the FAQ sections encourage students to make public their confusions and receive answers to help them move forward in the course. Both procedural and academic concerns can be addressed in such sections.

Another strategy the instructor employed for helping students become involved with course information was by moving (bumping) files in the course documents, assignments, and discussion forums to the last position in the list as each week’s work was completed. This enabled students to easily find the current documents or boards. And finally, the instructor used the announcement board as necessary to alert students to changes in schedule, activities, assignments, or documents. E-mail was reserved for individual messages, and this helped the instructor also manage the amount of e-mail response she needed to make.

Pitfall #2. The second pitfall relates to the learners ability to manage course information. It is easy for online learners to fall behind in course participation. They may be lurking on the discussion boards, but the instructor has no way to ascertain their presence, unlike the onsite instructor who can see who is attending class, even if students don’t contribute to the discussion. In the course studied, the instructor sent individual e-mails when learners failed to participate on a discussion board in the time-frame provided or did not submit an assignment. This inquiry was positively stated as one of concern for the student and included a request to let the instructor know if there was a problem and if she could provide help in some way. In every instance the students replied quickly and positively to the instructor, participating or submitting work even though late and quickly catching up with the rest of the class.

Another strategy for helping students manage information was developed in reaction to student concerns about workload distribution. Since the course had only been taught once to six students, the instructor reviewed and adjusted workload requirements and restructured some activities. Most courses haven’t been taught online long enough to know exactly how much content, activities, and assignments are both necessary and reasonable.

Pitfall #3. The third pitfall is related to the learner's ability to process course information. Online learners seem to experience more anxiety, at least initially, about meeting instructor expectations and in performing at the level of other students. Learners lack nonverbal and verbal clues that occur in an onsite classroom, and so are even more interested in instructor feedback and other students' actions and reactions to assignments and during activities. As the semester progressed in the course under analysis, students frequently expressed appreciation to the instructor for her prompt feedback on assignments and her feedback on discussion board activities. They also mentioned often that they enjoyed the group assignments and the chance to get to know fellow class-mates more directly. Telephone contact also helped to alleviate activity, with six students calling the instructor either during telephone office hours or by special appointment.

Pitfall #4. The fourth pitfall underlies the motivation of learners to cope with the three critical elements discussed above. This pitfall concerns the isolation that online learners can easily develop. The need for a sense of community in online learning has been identified and discussed at length by Boettcher and Conrad (1999). According to them, learners who do not feel part of the learning community may become lurkers at best or drop outs at worst. In the course studied, the instructor encouraged students to post biographies and pictures and facilitated learning activities during the first two weeks that required students to post discussion board entries describing their work settings and professional goals. In addition, the instructor opened an online "Student Lounge" where students could share information related and unrelated to the course and just "hang out." Also, the instructor was careful to personalize all e-mail messages and postings to specific students on the discussion boards. Finally, the instructor took full advantage of the course design to pair students or form small groups for the majority of the activities after the first two weeks.

In conclusion, Powers and Guan's critical elements proved useful in identifying specific pitfalls in online courses that may keep learners from reaching the pinnacle of a successful educational experience. Strategies for avoiding or minimizing these pitfalls were created based on course design features, distance learning literature, and the instructor's own teaching experiences with other forms of distance learning.

REFERENCES

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