ONLINE CL@SSROOM

IDEAS FOR EFFECTIVE ONLINE INSTRUCTION

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Is Your Online Course Layout User-Friendly?

By Lauren Linn Sears

A person will attempt to complete a task in an unfamiliar environment until frustration hits a critical level, according to user experience research. Frustrated online learners may abandon assignments or drop courses. This is why it's important to understand how the student experiences the course. One way to accomplish this is through basic user-experience assessment, which does not require an extensive background in Web design, just a willingness to take learners' perspectives into consideration when designing course elements and assignments.

User-experience assessment can help identify frustration points for online learners, and direct observation of a test user in an online course can illuminate troublesome areas and allow for optimization of the online course layout and structure.

Integrating learner feedback or complaints during a course is an organic form of ongoing user assessment. A more direct assessment is a user test, a brief and structured session in which the test facilitator issues tasks to a test user to complete in an online course.

Firsthand observation of course use allows the facilitator to identify potential pain points or confusing content. For example, if a test user struggles to identify the help section of an online course when it is labeled "Further Instructions" on a navigation menu, it may warrant a new title. Or perhaps a test user struggles with a particular test question format and states a preference for a static list of answers with check boxes rather than a drop-down option set.

Test users: one is better than none

The Nielson Norman Group, a premier usability assessment organization, suggests observing a minimum of three test users during a website assessment, but one user test can yield valuable observations and lead to impactful changes.

An optimal test user is a student from within the institution, as he or she is more likely than others to have prior experience with the learning management system (LMS) and expectations based on comparable online courses. A more practical test user might be a family member or friend with some interest in online l

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TIPS FROM THE PROS

Online Learner Engagement Is Not Always Obvious

By Rob Kelly

A great deal of research supports the notion that student engagement is correlated with student success. But it's not always easy to gauge an online learner's level of engagement because some students may be engaged in the course without posting much to the discussion board.

A recent study by Angelique Hamane and Farzin Madjidi, both of Pepperdine University, indicates that the frequency of students' visits to the discussion board—not necessarily of their posting to it—is correlated with student success.

In an interview with *Distance Education Report (Online Classroom*'s sibling publication), Hamane offered the following recommendations based on this finding:

- **Encourage students to spend time on the discussion board.** Hamane offered the following ways to do this: write exam questions that send students to the discussion board to find information that will help them answer these questions effectively; use higher-order discus-

IN THIS ISSUE

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Adding Game Elements to Your Online Course

By Rob Kelly

There's a growing body of evidence that indicates the educational benefits of game-based learning. Although some courses are likely to be more conducive to a game-based approach, it's helpful to consider how game elements might enhance the learning experience.

In an interview with *Online Classroom*, Clare Parsons, English lecturer at the University of Maryland, College Park, highlighted several game elements and explained how she uses them in her online and blended courses.

Game elements can help make courses "more engaging and immersive," Parsons says. However, they may be more suited to skills-based rather than content-heavy courses.

Parsons uses game elements in her business writing course and makes this approach explicit in the syllabus:

> I am attempting to "gamify" the more traditional blended course. For those of you who aren't familiar with the term, gamification is a process whereby a designer tries to apply the aspects of video gaming that make game playing an education in itself. I am not trying to make this course into a video game. My goal is only to apply principles that will make your experience more rewarding.
> ...
> Each week you will complete a number of tasks and assignments to familiarize yourself with many different documents and rhetorical strategies. However, since business needs are constantly changing, you will need to be an adaptable writer and a critical reader of all kinds of documents. Ideally, by the end of this course, you will approach each writing task as an exercise in information design and presentation.

Parsons uses the following game elements in this course:

- **Progressively difficult problems.** Each week, students engage in what Parsons refers to as "challenges," group-based problem-solving and preliminary writing assignments. Each week's challenge is more difficult than the previous week's; however, these are low-stakes assignments that have little effect on students' grades.
- **Emphasis on skills development.** Games emphasize rewards for improving one's skills. "When I talk about this constantly throughout the course, it motivates students. It makes them feel a bit less scared about the big final project," Parsons says.

Parsons uses a discussion section where students post the results of their challenges and provide feedback to each other. "Rather than having students rip [these assignments] apart, I ask them to analyze one and provide a brief argument about what makes that particular assignment the most successful. There's usually one group that gets the most kudos. That's the 'badge' or reward that they get beyond the grade," she says.

- **Collaboration.** "Give people the technology and big questions or problems and ask them to get together and solve; usually they're pretty good about. It's a lot more interesting than just answering questions that somebody else told

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5 >>

Fostering Personal Connections for a Better Online Learning Environment

By Rob Kelly

Before her online courses begin, Susanne Chuku, assistant professor of economics at Westfield State University, sends each of her students a personal welcome email. "I like to write their names so they know that I took the time to email them personally rather than send a single email addressed to all of them." It sets a welcoming tone in which students—typically half of them—feel comfortable enough to share additional information about themselves, including, often their struggles with the subject matter. "This is my first step in getting to know them. It's the first opportunity they have to talk to me, and I feel it lowers the barrier between the instructor and the students."

The welcome email is part of a strategy to get students to share with her, and ultimately with each other, to create a more engaging and successful learning environment. Throughout the course, Chuku takes note of the information that her students share in the course in order to strengthen the relationship and make the learning relevant.

Discussion feedback

Chuku generally does not participate in weekly discussions, but she does provide feedback at the end of the week, explaining why each student received the number of points they did. "I relate my feedback to what I know about them. ... I let them know I understand where they're coming from and maybe even find similarities between the student and me because whenever you have similarities with another person you feel more connected," Chuku says.

To that end, Chuku maintains an Excel spreadsheet to have a handy source of information about her students. She refers to the spreadsheet whenever she provides feedback (or at least in the beginning when she is still learning about her students.) This approach is manageable in Chuku's courses—her principles of macroeconomics and principles of microeconomics courses typically has 20 to 25 students each.

During the first two weeks of discussion, students typically do not engage in very meaningful ways because they have yet to develop trust. They often state that they agree with each other and typically don't share personal information with each other. Then after a while they get more comfortable with each other and with relating the content to their lives.

"I let them know I understand where they're coming from and maybe even find similarities between the student and me because whenever you have similarities with another person you feel more connected."

To help facilitate these meaningful exchanges, in her weekly feedback to individual students, Chuku encourages students to disagree with each other, reminding them to be respectful and professional.

Chuku is careful to not be too harsh in her discussion board grading and feedback so she doesn't discourage participation. "Obviously, students cannot write complete nonsense, but the discussions for me are more of an encouragement to get students to talk to each other," she says.

In addition, Chuku views the discussion board as a means of understanding her students' perspectives and to gain insights into how well they understand the content without the fear of losing a significant number of points. "If I grade them harshly, I believe they will hold back and not be as open as they otherwise would be," she says.

Check in

After each exam, Chuku calculates each student's overall grade and provides individual feedback and encouragement via email. "That particular email has really made a difference because students now ask, 'What can I do to improve my score?' or say, 'Thank you. I have done this because you recommended it, and I'm doing better now.' This really has led to better student outcomes," she says.

In her larger classes, Chuku typically writes two or three sentences in each of these check in emails and typically provides more detailed feedback in smaller classes. "I want students to know it's personalized feedback, not just feedback that I copy and paste to everyone," she says. "I check my Excel spreadsheet and try to make connections. It sounds like a lot of work, but once you get used to it, I think it's doable." @

Study Aids for Students

By John Orlando, PhD

When Turnitin asked a sample of students to comment on the feedback they receive from instructors, one theme to emerge was that faculty do not provide enough guidance on the process that students should use to prepare work. For instance, one mentioned that when given assignments to read both primary and secondary texts, he did not know the order in which to read them. Should he start with the primary texts, form an interpretation of their meaning, and then "check" his understanding through the secondary texts, or should he start by reading the secondary texts in order to learn the correct interpretation and then use that to understand the primary texts? This lack of understanding of the reading process led to problems with his product.

It is easy for faculty to fall into the trap of focusing only on the product when providing help to students. But that product is the product of a process that went into developing it, and often problems in product are a result of problems in process.

One area in particular where process undermines product is in student study habits. Many students do poorly because they simply do not know how to study. As Maryellen Weimer notes, students often study for a test by simply rereading the original material they were assigned. But this does them little good. We have all had the experience of rereading a passage multiple times when distracted and not getting anything out of it. Understanding material requires active reading.

The best method to study for an exam is to replicate what will be required during the exam—seeing questions and producing the answers to them. This means that students should prepare by asking themselves questions and seeing if they can produce answers to them. Not only does this force them to draw up knowledge in a situation similar to the exam, but when they encounter a question they cannot answer, they then need to go back into the material to find the answer. Now they are reading actively by searching for specific information, which is far more effective than the dragnet method of reading an entire text in hopes of capturing all the information in their neural net.

Study aids

You can do your students a world of good in either your face-to-face or online courses by spending some time teaching process issues in your classes. Start by polling your students on how they study. You will likely find a wide variety of methods. You can then comment on these methods, talking about why each would or would not work. Most importantly, you can talk about how you studied for exams, and why it worked. This information will be invaluable to helping your students succeed.

New online study aids make it easy to apply active-learning methods to studying and preparing for exams. Students just need a little guidance on how best to use them.

But then go one step further by showing how various free study aids will help them implement the active study methods that you recommend. New online study aids make it easy to apply active-learning methods to studying and preparing for exams. Students just need a little guidance on how best to use them.

Below are a number of good study aids. Take a look at the features of each, and consider which would be appropriate for the particular subjects that you teach. Feel free to even substitute a class on "content" for one on "process." You will likely find that the time invested in teaching how to study and other process issues will more than pay for itself in vastly improved student performance.

Cram (*www.cram.com*) is an online flash card system that can be used in two ways. Users can create their own flash cards with specific questions and answers related to their courses. They also can search more than 82 million flash cards that have been created on just about any topic you can imagine. The advantage over paper flash cards is that you can play in various game modes. For instance, one mode uses rounds that recycle the cards that you got wrong. Another asks you to match items from one column to another. A third translates the flash cards into games, such as one that plays much like the old Asteroids video games and even keeps your score, which you can compare to those of other players. Plus, there is an audio mode that will read the cards to users in any of 19 languages.

Examtime (*www.examtime.com*) is another site that "gamifies" the study process by allowing users to either create, or draw from, study material in the form of flash cards, mind maps, and quizzes. Examtime also has a somewhat more sophisticated performance-tracking system

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5 >>

<< From Page 4

than Cram does, in that it monitors areas that users are having trouble with by displaying those areas on users' mind maps and allowing users to click those areas of their mind maps that they have mastered. This gives students a real sense of where they stand in their learning or preparation for an exam.

Quizlet (*http://quizlet.com/teachers)* is a flash card, game and quiz study system in a vein similar to Cram and Examtime. One nice feature is that study materials can be organized by folders. Thus, study materials for a particular class can be grouped around subjects or specific assessments. Another advantage is that the "Quizlet for Teachers" module allows teachers to set up study materials for their courses. This allows teachers to load the materials they want students to learn. A teacher might also have the students themselves create and load study materials that become part of a permanent repository of aids for future students to use in the course.

OpenStudy (*http://openstudy.com*) takes advantage of the fundamentally social nature of the Web by allowing students to form study groups with like-minded students from around the world. While these study groups are unstructured, the mere fact that students must interact with other students on topics related to their courses forces them to reflect on those topics better than they do with a simple rereading. The system also calculates a "smartscore" for users based on criteria such as teamwork, problem-solving, and engagement, thus gamifying the collaboration itself.

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John Orlando writes, consults, and teaches faculty how to use technology to improve learning. He helped build and direct distance learning programs at the University of Vermont and Norwich University and has written more than 50 articles and delivered more than 60 workshops on teaching with technology. John is the associate director of the Center for Faculty Excellence at Northcentral University, serves on the Online Classroom editorial advisory board, and is a regular contributor to Online Classroom. @

<< From Page 1

sion prompts that require more than a yes/no response.

- **Monitor student log-ins to the discussion board.** "If students say they are having a hard time, I immediately look at reports to see who logs in [to discussions]," Hamane says.
- **Understand that student engagement is not always visible.** "There are students who are actually engaged, but we can't see it," Hamane says. However, she adds, just because some students engage in the course in ways that aren't always apparent does not mean the instructor should avoid discussion board participation requirements.

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<< From Page 2

you the answer to," Parsons says.

- **A failure-friendly environment.** The first half of Parson's business writing course involves a simulation. Students devise a business idea for a simulated company and write documents for this fictional company. This enables students to experiment with ideas and fail without any real-world consequences. "It's like flight school. You start with a flight simulator before they put you in a jet," Parsons says.

Later in the semester, the focus turns to creating business proposals for actual companies in which students have a stake. They conduct interviews and surveys, set pricing, and write documents that advocate for the business plan.

The use of elements from games has enhanced Parson's courses, due in large part to the type of courses she teaches and the nature of business. "There aren't that many rules, and they vary company to company. It's all strategy, and you've got to make it work according to your circumstances. It's a matter of being able to analyze those circumstances and work within those constraints." @

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adequate computer skills and a willingness to participate will suffice as a test user.

Plan to provide your test user with student-level access to the online course during the test or at least an approximation of the student experience. Depending on your LMS, you may be able to log in to the course as an administrator and toggle the course content to the "student view" setting before sitting the test user down at a computer. Or you may temporarily add your test user to the course as a student for the duration of the test. Remove any time-release restrictions on content prior to the test session if you plan to have your test user access it.

Develop sample tasks and directive statements

Develop a script of four to six task statements to read aloud to the test user during the session. Brainstorm sample actions that a student would complete at the start of a course or accomplish in different areas of the course, and transform these steps into directive statements. A task might include directions to locate a document, review a specific course module, or write and publish a blog post assignment.

Resist the urge to coach your test user with instructive task statements such as "find the syllabus PDF under the 'Class Schedule' link in the navigation menu." Instead, give your test user brief statements in plain language, such as the directive "locate the syllabus." Estimate ample time for each task in your test script so as not to exhaust your test user or run out of time.

Consider issuing a few short tasks at the start of the test to build your test user's confidence, and reserve one or two elaborate tasks for the end of the session.

Establish a low-pressure, think-aloud environment

A small amount of preparation will ensure that the test session runs smoothly for you and your test user. Secure access to a computer with consistent Internet access for testing purposes, preferably in a quiet room with minimal distractions. Schedule your test session to last about an hour, allowing time to greet the test user and log him or her in to the course environment. Explain that you are testing the online course and not the user's computer skills, performance, or knowledge of content. Encourage your user to "think aloud" by narrating his or her thoughts while working through the sample tasks. An Internet-savvy test user may speed through tasks, but the think-aloud process forces a user to slow down and helps you intuit his or her experience more completely.

Facilitate without interference

A smooth user test will move swiftly and end early; be prepared to multitask in order to make the most of your time. As test facilitator, you will run technical support, issue task directions, and encourage the test user to think aloud. But as course designer, your primary goal is direct observation of the user's experience and detailed notation of his or her interaction with course elements. Document troublesome points in detail, including the page location, the tools or content in use, and the task with which the user struggles.

Many user test facilitators choose to record sessions for future reference (with consent of the test user). Consider using an audio recording application on the test computer or a smartphone to capture think-aloud comments for future reference. Screen-recording tools can also create screen shots or video files of the user's activity on the computer monitor during the test.

You may be tempted to offer instruction to the user to facilitate task completion during the test. Avoid this coaching instinct, as assistance will interfere with the results. Expect small delays or detours, but plan to move to the next task if the test user becomes excessively frustrated, stuck, or over-challenged. Better to allow the user to begin a fresh task than to cause him or her to become discouraged and fatigued.

Integrate findings

The first user test will likely reveal a few quick usability fixes such as renaming content, adding just-in-time instructive text, or reorganizing content into more intuitive groupings. A single user test may yield obvious opportunities, but a series of two or three tests may distinguish content that consistently frustrates users from content that poses an occasional challenge.

Make small improvements with confidence, but massive overhauls in course layout or design may merit an additional user test to evaluate your adjustments. Also consider issuing a small survey to students a few weeks into the semester to further assess issues. Usability assessment is a reiterative process of evaluation and change that may span several semesters.

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