

Reflections from Bill

Former CBA Dean William Gunther's Thoughts on Online Instruction

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George:

You ask for me to relate my experiences with on-line this Fall, and I am pleased to do so. However, just a reminder that this is a sample of one, and great caution needs to be exercised on extrapolation to a larger set!

Let me organize my comments into three areas:

- A. Technology (WebCt)
- B. Course Suitability/Professor Suitability
- C. Student Suitability

A. Technology (WebCt)

I have not had any technical trouble with access to WebCt, or in keeping students informed. They are able to get my email messages via WebCt with no trouble, and their responses and homework submissions are easily handled via a dropbox. Grading these assignments and posting their grade is also very easy from a technical perspective. Learning how this works takes some investment of time, but it is not significant (one day). Now there is much more to WebCt than I am using and to learn this would take additional investment (such as the grade book, posting video, etc.). Essentially I post .doc and .ppt files to the Course Materials block, post assignments to the "Assignments," post discussions in the Discussion Block.

Our recent problems with COB email did not impact WebCt, and as long as you can gain access to USM's WebCt, you can continue to monitor your class.

B. Course Suitability/Professor Suitability

I think this is an issue that needs considerably more thought. I don't think I am too far off if I say that not every professor should teach online and not every student should take online classes. From what little I have read about online teaching, it is (should be) different. If your mode of operation is to be the "sage on the stage", online teaching removes the opportunity to be spontaneous with applications or cases, to use oral or behavioral skills to emphasize certain points. Essentially, every "lecture" is a reading assignment. Only if you have live discussion groups (which are not advised for "large" classes of more than 5-8 students I am told) do you get the opportunity to improvise.

So a professor who approaches online classes with the same teaching methodology used in regular classes is not likely to be as effective and he/she expects. Again, my limited research into this area notes that a significant time (e.g, hundreds of hours) investment should be made to develop a really effective online class. It should not be an independent study class using expensive technology, as I am afraid my class is or has become. I don't think we are prepared (staff constraints) to provide a minimum of one course release to establish truly online courses. Professors should be well acquainted with the issues of online learning and we should avoid assuming online courses are perfect substitutes for face-to-face presentations and that if

you are effective at one you will be effective at the other.

I think the same issue applies to classes. I can see a significant difference between a class in American Literature or European History and Chemistry. I don't want this to sound "uppity", but can economics be as efficiently or effectively taught online as say, history? Does it take more time to convert one subject to online class than other?

C. Student Suitability

Can or should all students have equal access to online classes? Or since online learning requires more independent learning, should we restrict online classes to students who have shown (GPA) the ability to assimilate knowledge and have some maturity when it comes to study habits, etc. Should we allow "open enrollment."? Again, my small class is hardly the place to draw inferences from, but it certainly appears that some students do better with online than others.

Overall, here are my conclusions in a nutshell:

1. The technology for online learning at my level appears acceptable and stable.
2. Teaching 100% online requires more advanced preparation time and an appreciation of the need for a different teaching approach than traditional classes. At the margin, it is initially as or more time consuming than a traditional 3 hour class.
3. Offering all courses online and requiring all professors to teach an online class would seem to be an optimal strategy if quality is a consideration and staffing constraints do not preclude other options.

Bill