A NEOPHYTE DISTANCE EDUCATOR'S EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Using a home page/email system to structure the course and a stand-alone simulation game, the educator encounters a number of problems including: students who do not know how to access the Internet, a university system that disallows email attachments, students who do not use the flextime aspect of the distance education class, and problems such as computer viruses. On the positive side, the educator develops an orderly, paperless system for most of the course, and he offers a number of reflections aimed at doing distance learning better.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a recent phenomenon in collegiate business education, and it is both coveted and damned. Those who covet it realize the huge pools of tuition that can be garnered by universities with effective distance learning programs, while those who damn it point to the lack of personalization and individuality that accompanies large distance learning programs. This paper addresses neither camp's concerns directly. Rather, it is a personal journey taken by a collegiate business educator who found himself caught up - in a micro way - in these controversies and who experimented with distance learning using a stand-alone simulation game.

BACKGROUND: WHY I GOT INVOLVED

At my university, the summer term involves a strange and potentially painful budget system. In the regular semesters, the university imposes minimum enrollment criteria of 14 for an undergraduate class, and *5* for a graduate class. As long as these minimums are met, we can roll along with no problem, but in the summer, the university uses a "pay as you go" system whereby it allocates a portion of each enrolled student's tuition to the college, and the college must use these funds to pay for summer instructors' salaries.

As one can see, the more students enrolled in a class, the more their tuition contributes toward the salary pool. Unfortunately, the history of my college of business is such that the summer pay-as-you-go rule has been pushed down to the department level. Specifically, if the department does not generate sufficient tuition to cover summer salaries, the department has to deal with the shortfall. Historically, my department has taken across-the-board cuts ranging from $500 to $1000 per summer faculty member.

DISTANCE LEARNING TO THE RESCUE?

Because of college agendas and personnel in my department, I had become interested in distance education. Also, a PhD student pleaded with me to fund his (very new) wife who was a computer science major. So, my programming needs seemed to be solved with her expertise. Also, in the past year, I had reviewed a computer simulation game, AutoSim (1995), and I even had a conversation with AutoSim's editor at our association's winter meetings and discussed the idea of a distance learning format. He informed me that I would be a pioneer if I launched one, but he was very interested in learning about my experiences. So I was on my own, so to speak.

AutoSim can be used as either a stand-alone or

a batch game, and the notion of a stand-alone simulation that students could play on their own computers seemed appealing with respect to a distance learning format. I conceived of a distance learning class in which students would buy the AutoSim manual with *its* software, do the exercises in the manual, and play several simulated periods. The students would access the exercises via a home page, download each one, complete it, and send it to me for evaluation. During simulation game play, the students would download, fill out, and send planning and decision forms to me for each play period. The whole course would be geared to a schedule of due dates across the summer term.

Setting Up the Home Page

I conceived of a course home page that would have 2 purposes: (1) to promote the course to prospective students, and (2) to house all of the exercises and decision forms that students would need to participate in the class. My GA created all of the text to go on the home page, programmed the HTML connections, ftp download sections, and supplied some cute graphics features. Toward the end of the spring semester, we had a course home page on the college web page that described the objectives of the class, informed students of the tasks they would be required to perform, and indicated the grading system.

Mis-Targeted and Then Re-Directed Marketing

The target market for this class was part-time MBA students. The MBA office had indicated that many of these souls needed nontraditional classes in the summer term, and during preregistration, I made up a flyer about the class and provided several copies to the MBA office. In addition, the MBA office provided an email broadcast list of all MBA students which was used to alert them to the course and direct them to the home page. After 3 weeks, a total of 3 MBA's had registered in the class.

Obviously, a new strategy was needed, and I shifted to undergraduates as my target market. I revised the schedule for the class by slowing it down and reducing the number of game play periods, and my GA programmed a separate course home page for undergraduates. At the end of the spring semester, we announced the distance learning class alternative to all marketing classes and issued handouts. The response was not a tidal wave, but a steady enrollment *flow* did result. At the end of the spring term, about 45 students were enrolled in "AutoSim," including one additional MBA.

Let's Get Ready to Rumble, But Where the Heck Are My Students?

As the beginning of the summer term approached, I emailed all of my AutoSim students information on how to begin the class. Massive bounce-backs! Many of my students email accounts were inactive, some had been improperly scribbled down, and some just plain did not exist. So 2 of my days were consumed with making calls to my bouncebacks to make contact with them, and I came to understand first-hand how many students vacate their apartments for the summer.

Student responses trickled in, and it became apparent that a number of class enrollees had reconsidered. In fact, about a dozen indicated that they were not going to take the class. Some had enrolled in the course as a safety valve in the event they could not register in other, required classes; some had reconsidered attending summer school, and some just failed to pay their fee bill. Final enrollment was *25* -5 graduate students and 20 undergraduates. My attrition rate approached *50%* before the semester even started!

The Joys of Getting Connected

The MBA students were a joy except for the university administrator whose email system was the university's Lotus Notes system which never did permit her to attach any of her lesson or decision form files. So, she just sent them as email letters that completely obliterated the tables. Ah, well. The undergraduates were a different world altogether. At the top end, some undergrads were completely comfortable with the system, but at the bottom end, I found some students who had never been on the Internet, never emailed, and had almost no hint of how to participate in the class. While ftp, attachments, and email were second nature to me, about one-half of the students had no clue as to what to do. The first week of the class was consumed with phone calls and email messages to individual students instructing them on how to ftp exercises from the home page, how to open and responded to the exercises, and how to attach them to email letters. As a few students had no Internet provider whatsoever, and I felt like I should get a commission from AOL or MSN considering how many times I recommended these to students. The disparity in student computer Internet/email skills was astounding. One graduate student immediately announced that he would complete the course in 2 weeks and commenced to send a barrage of completed lessons, while two undergraduate football players had to work through the Athletic Department red tape to pay for their accounts on AOL before they could begin the class. Their academic advisor (head of the academic center for athletes) was also Internet illiterate, which just complicated matters. It took them two weeks to connect with AOL.

Student errors were humorous at first and humorless later on. For example, a couple of students tried to put their answers on the home page directly which did not work at all. Another couple of students somehow copied the HTML coded file, put their answers inside of *it,* and sent the whole thing back to me.

Others downloaded the files but could not find where they were stored on their pc's, while others had no idea whatsoever as to how to use the files let alone how to send them back to me. My two football players sent me an email in the last week of class asking how to download the decision forms.

Software Blues

Another aggravation that I encountered early on was word processor software. We had programmed the ftp files in Microsoft Word 95 as it is the standard of the College, but students' personal software systems ranged across WordPerfect, Works, old versions of Microsoft Word, and even Macintosh. WordPerfect 6.0 and earlier Word versions could not read the Word *95* files, Works could not read them, and the 2 Mac students soon gave up and turned to friends' Windows computers. Two students insisted on using their Works program, and their files came to me as garbage about 90% of the time.

The university email account system absolutely did not work for attachments. I advised all university email account students to go to AOL or MSN. Eventually, all but one or two moved to a commercial provider.

Inflexible FlexTime

The whole idea behind distance learning is that the student has control of the timing of the learning. That is, the course is structured such that lessons and assignments can be taken up at the student's discretion and worked into his or her schedule. I had set up the class schedule with this notion. Specifically, due dates were set for every Tuesday and Thursday, and bonus points were awarded for early submission. Penalties were applied for late work. The bonus points were intentionally large to inspire early work. Every graduate student immediately understood and used the

bonus point system, but only a couple of the undergraduates made wise use of the bonus system. Typically for a 5-point exercise, a graduate student would earn from 3 to 7 bonus points (one per day ahead of the due date), while the typical undergraduate student just waited until the due day to do the assignment. The undergraduate mentality never grasped the concept of flexible time.

Making Email Chaos Behave

On the administrator end of distance learning the way I ran it and the way most of my students acted, Wednesday and Friday mornings were particularly challenging as these were the days I initially set aside to evaluate the assignments. Early in the semester, 25-3 5 emails came in from students in the front of the week (Tuesday) and at the end of the week (Thursday). In between, anywhere from 2 to 4 trickled in on a daily basis. In the first 2 weeks of the term, many of these were problems or questions that required immediate attention. Communication problems, software problems, ftp problems, computer problems, and just-plain-nuisance problems came in and had to be dealt with as quickly as possible. Some students sent 2 or 3 messages just to make sure that the first one did not get lost in cyberspace, and invariably some students forgot to attach their files to the message, or they attached the wrong one to it, or the file came through corrupted. I found myself in a constant back-and-forth dialogue with students to put out their fires. My Monday-Wednesday schedule plan soon broke down, and I found that it was better to just devote the early part of my mornings evaluating assignments and communicating with my students.

Since I rely heavily on email for my research, administrative duties, and personal communications, it was necessary to establish an orderly system. My mail program is Eudora: the college has a site license for Eudora Pro, and I use Eudora Lite (freeware) on my home computer.

Eudora has a very good filter mechanism whereby you can identify the email addressees of incoming mail, and the program will sense these letters and put them into a separate mailbox. With the exception of students occasionally switching Internet providers, using a parent's or a friend's account, or using work accounts, the filter system worked quite well and effectively separated my class communications from all of my other correspondence. Granted, this system did not reduce the number of incomings, but it did shuttle them off to a separate mailbox (and out of my way until I was ready to deal with them) that I could access when the time came to evaluate my students' lessons.

The Paperless System

I resolved to create and use a paperless system for my AutoSim distance education class, and I almost succeeded. With Microsoft Office 97, I had all of the tools necessary to save a forest, and I am sure that I did save a grove or two. My system was comprised of the following. First, I created an Excel spreadsheet template with all student names, assignment names, and due dates to serve as my grading form. Next, I instructed students to send in their files in Word format, and I used Microsoft Word to open and review the assignments. Last, as noted above, I used Eudora to receive and send mail.

The system worked like this. First, receive and open the letter with Eudora, read the message, and look for the attached file. Click on the attached file *(if* it had a .doc extension), and examine the completed assignment in Word. Next, copy the assignment file into an electronic file folder with the student's name on it. Move to Excel and enter in the student's grade for the assignment. Reply to the student in Eudora and send out the reply (or put it in the output queue and send all out later in the

session.) I wish that this system worked smoothly every time, but I inadvertently sabotaged it at the very beginning of the class when I instructed my students to use their initials as the extension to the attached file. I was worried that I would end up with redundant file names, and the initials extension was my attempt to maintain separate files. Unfortunately, this system thwarted the .doc extension and its association to Microsoft Word, and I ended up searching for the attached files that had been downloaded and saved into my Eudora "attach" subdirectory.

The Faceless System

It became painfully obvious that the class lacked interaction of any sort. Students were isolated from each other, and most had registered in the class via the Internet. I had met perhaps 4 of my students in person. Two were student workers in my department, one was a university employee I had met in an official capacity, and one graduate student had come to my office to enroll in the class. The rest of my students were voices on the phone or no voice at all. (Over time, about 4 other students drifted into my office for various reasons.)

It became a challenge to make a personal connection with each student. Whenever a student provided some information about his or her situation, I tried to respond to *it.* I chatted with my 2 football players about their positions and the coming season. I found out that one of my students was the girlfriend of a friend of my graduate assistant, and she and I conspired to make my GA think that I believed that she was his steady. (That went over like a lead balloon.) My longest distance student moved to a large city, and I kept up with his packing and unpacking. I kept chiding my two Works students about their need to move to Word and get with the rest of the world.

Sometimes I found replies to questions I did not recall asking and had to reread old mail to refresh my memory. (Of course, those who know me realize this is just par for my memory anyway.)

The lack of interaction among students in the class was troublesome for me, and I tried to generate some connections. I asked if they wanted to learn about each other by having each student send out a brief description to the group. One student thought this was a good idea; the rest were silent, so I did not follow through on that idea. I tried to match up students to help each other, but almost none followed through. Finally, I looked into setting up a newsgroup, and after a bit of administrative red tape, the college webmaster set one up for my class. I broadcast the newsgroup information to the students along with detailed instructions on how to access it with Netscape or Internet Explorer, plus I identified about a dozen topics that students could use to post messages. A week passed with no subscriptions, so I offered bonus points for just registering into the group. About five students registered, and one actually posted a message other than "This is a trial." All things considered, you could accurately describe my attempts at student interaction as a miserable failure.

Crippled Distance Learning

Just about the time that I felt that my system was working and most students were comfortable with the class, near disaster struck in stages. In the first stage, my commercial provider refused to let me send out messages. So, I had to alert all students to email only to my university email address. If they sent to my commercial provider, I had to cut the letter out and paste it into my university system in order to reply. This procedure was a pain, and the problem persists to this day with my (former) commercial provider. It was fortunate that I

had my university email system and that I was able to make the university account work -on my home computer. Oh, I forget to mention that my office computer did not have Windows 95, so I could only use my paperless system on my home computer.

Near disaster number two was a virus that was sent to me by one of my students. I have a virus-scanning program on my university computer as well as my personal computer at home, and both alerted me that an attached file contained the "wazu" virus. (Interesting name, don't you think?) I directed my virus killer programs to clean the infected files, and each said it did, but all attached files for all students whose emails were in the in queue were corrupted. About a dozen students' assignments were destroyed by the virus, but all had saved their files and in a day or two, all had resent the assignments. I informed my virus carrier student of his problem and told him that I would not accept any thing of his until it was absolutely clean. Unfortunately, he was unable to detect and destroy the virus on his computer, and he ended up handing in the last 5 assignments in hard copy form on the last day of class.

Distance learning should work on the road, right? Not. One of my commercial providers was the Microsoft Network (no, not the bad reply one), and supposedly one can connect with msn anywhere. We had week-long a family vacation trip planned in the middle of the semester, and despite all my good intentions, a lack of local msn phone numbers, no modem ports in hotel phones, plus traveling all conspired against me, and I was only able to respond to a handful of my students. When I logged on a week later, 62 emails were waiting for me. Two days later, I was caught up, and despite the communication glitches, probably only my department student workers knew I was out of town for that week.

Reflections: Lessons Learned by the Neophyte Distance Educator

Granted, much of my experience was self-imposed, and I readily admit that I did not enter into this experience like a Boy Scout, namely, prepared. Nonetheless, if I were to repeat this experience, here are some lessons that seem would make the whole experience work more efficiently and effectively.

- Make sure the university email system will work the way you expect it to work. As I noted, our student email system is archaic and greatly discourages sending attachments. It would be judicious to execute a few dry runs of the system before unveiling it to the masses. This was my original intention; however, there was insufficient time to run it. At the very least, a dry run would have alerted me to the abysmal university student email system.

- Have a class meeting(s) at the beginning of the semester. Granted, distance education means that students are distant from the instructor, but the importance of some sort of face-to-face meeting at the onset cannot be stressed enough. Even if the meeting has to be done with a series of small groups of your students, it will identify those students with low skills, and a tutorial can be conducted for them to bring them up to speed. In my college, we have a computer laboratory that is connected to the Internet and email services, and there is a connected classroom within the laboratory. If I had used it at the onset of the class, even with several small groups, a lot of one-on-one help communications would have been avoided.

- Educate students on flextime learning. The typical undergraduate student is apparently wedded to the concept *of* assignment due dates, and he or she does not appreciate the notion of flexible time learning systems. In that my bonus system (which if used wisely guaranteed the student of earning sufficient points to make and A grade in the class) did not work for about 90% of my undergraduates, it seems that some sort of educational 2x4 slap to the forehead is needed. Quite honestly, the most appealing aspects of this class were the facts the undergraduate students did not have to attend classes, hunt for a parking space, and could work in the comfort of their own apartments or homes. Graduate students, on the other hand, made good use of the flextime aspect of the class.

- Organize and perpetuate a communication system for students to talk to each other. Again, my negative experiences notwithstanding, there are myriad reasons why students should interact, swap ideas, and generally exchange experiences. Rather than a voluntary incentive system such as a bonus, it is probably better to require students to interact on a newsgroup or via email to all other classmates. I have since chatted with a colleague who uses a newsgroup in his class, and he informed me that he posts a weekly question that students have to answer and share with other students. This forced interaction seems to be necessary given my experience.

- A paperless system can work. I was pleasantly surprised at the efficiency of my paperless system. Had I been a bit more daring, I might have used the Microsoft Office email functions as well. It did require some adjustment to examine students' assignments on my monitor, and the task did become tedious at times, but the paperless system was quick and convenient. In fact, I actually resented the few students who gave me hard copies of their work as I had no place to conveniently store these pages.

- Endeavor to put faces on your "de" students. Despite the electronic communication medium used, it is important to get to know personal facts about your "de" students. There are a few mechanisms that come to mind as reasonable ways to accomplish this objective. One way is to have each student email to the instructor information about him/herself, while another way is to pair students and have one student learn about the partner and communicate some facts to the instructor. A third alternative is to have students introduce themselves at the mitial, face-to-face meeting if one *is* feasible.

REFERENCES

AutoSim: The Marketing Laboratory, Stuart W. James, Thomas C. Kinnear, and Michael Deighan, Interpretive Software, 1995