AND NOW LET'S REALLY INNOVATE: THE NOTION OF PERPETUAL ONLINE COURSES

Michael J. "Mick" Fekula
The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina
mick.fekula@citadel.edu

ABSTRACT

In addition to traditional online formats, universities and other institutions have the technological capacity to offer courses continuously without any particular start or end date. The notion of a perpetual course suggests that students can enroll in a course at the time of their choosing, as opposed to waiting for the traditional published start dates. It also indicates that students could complete the course when they desire if they find the need to temporarily disenroll from the course for any reason. Instead of students enrolling in a course accompanied by a fixed group of other new students, the perpetual online course would expose the student to the best student inputs that the professor has recorded over time. This is similar to a designer incorporating the best elements of reality into a simulation through the choice of significant learning events and algorithms. This paper presents some basic considerations for perpetual online courses.

THE NOTION OF PERPETUAL ONLINE COURSES

A perpetual online course would allow a student to enroll in a course at any point in time. Such a course would provide the ultimate in scheduling flexibility for students. The need for this kind of flexibility, accompanied by universities desiring to become attractive to a larger cross-section of students (Oliver, 1999; Vik & Anderson-Cruz, 2009) is a key factor in promoting a perpetual format. Institutions and authors (Oliver, 1999; Owstow, 1997; Powell, 2003) have long recognized that online instruction has the potential to revolutionize education; however, universities have yet to make radical innovations in online course offerings. Although the technology has developed significantly and institutions have adopted the technology accordingly, the design and delivery format for these courses has not changed fundamentally since their inception. This paper proposes an innovative, if not radically new way of thinking about the delivery of online courses in a way that would greatly impact their attractiveness to busy students with multi-faceted obligations in their personal and professional lives.

The idea of offering an extensive array of perpetual courses in which students could enroll at anytime would not be possible without the development and adoption of supporting technology. Although perpetual courses have been and can be conducted without online technology, such as self-paced correspondence courses or PC Lab-based classes, universities have predominantly adopted the internet and supporting learning platforms for web-based courses and programs. The advent of online courses has allowed both synchronous and asynchronous formats, but a perpetual online course must be asynchronous and it is this capacity for asynchronous learning that makes a perpetual course possible.

In addition to accommodating perpetual courses, asynchronous learning has its own merits and is sometimes the preferred method for online courses (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Because students can logon at anytime and post their assignments within a window of allotted time, the students have more time to think about their answers in regard to what is being discussed in a given lesson. With the appropriate course structure and professor guidance, online student discussion assignments have the potential to yield a much richer and higher quality learning outcome than the traditional classroom discussion.

From the standpoint of quality instruction and learning, the main premise of perpetual online courses is that the richness and quality of online coursework can be capitalized upon when it is captured, filtered and reused in subsequent classes. Thus, a high quality learning experience can be achieved in an online perpetual class when that course is built from the best components of prior course offerings. Because it is presumed that the professor would constantly be revising and providing the highest quality content and course design, the focus of these components is not upon the instructor. Instead, these components would be based upon the highest quality inputs offered by prior students culminating in excellent interactive discussions of the course material.

Thus, not only are perpetual online courses convenient for students, they also hold the potential to be excellent learning experiences. Because the course is conducted asynchronously, discussion inputs from the best classes and students over time can be maintained in discrete lessons. When new students enroll in a course they would be exposed to the highest quality course discussions regardless of their currently enrolled classmates or date of enrollment. In effect, these discussions would be like the pre-existing components of a simulation. At the end of each lesson the

professor would retain the best inputs to the discussion and omit the worthless ones. One caveat is that courses which do not make extended use of discussions in the course design could not take advantage of this feature; however, these courses already have the advantage of being even more suited for a perpetual offering since a student's progress and learning would not be contingent upon reading and assessing the comments of other students.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR PERPETUAL ONLINE COURSES

Similar to online courses and distance education in general, the idea behind perpetual online courses is to accommodate and attract students who have restrictive schedules and periodic career interruptions. Not only would perpetual online courses accommodate dynamic daily or weekly schedules, but also the dynamic career events of various professionals. Perpetual online courses would give students the foreknowledge and comfort that they could enroll in and complete a course or program regardless of personal or professional disruptions which cause them to defer their participation in the courses. Given the need to meet the demands of these types of students, perpetual courses must be structured accordingly. Three important constituents must be considered in this process.

STUDENT CONSIDERATIONS

A perpetual online course would allow a student to begin taking a course at any time of their choosing. For example, a 16-week course which traditionally began in August or January could be started or completed during any month throughout the year because the course would not have the traditional start and end date. So, if students enrolled in March they would have the option to complete that course 16 weeks later if they experience no course interruptions caused by their personal or professional schedule. But if one of those students who began the course in March experienced a disruption, then that student could cease work on the course and rejoin it at a later date when the student's situation would better accommodate his or her participation.

Of course, for practical reasons there would need to be time limitations on this process and institutions could adopt an appropriate maximum time-frame for the completion of individual courses. In addition to administrative tracking and record keeping, students' retention of the course information over a period of time is a factor in considering maximum time-frames for course completion. Institutions using 16-week terms might require completion within a year, while those using shorter terms, such as eight weeks might require that courses be completed within 6 months.

This process would be advantageous for students with scheduling restrictions and career calendar events which limit their ability to complete a course within a traditional window. Generally this applies to non-traditional and graduate students in online education (Gaytan, 2007);

however, this process could work particularly well with undergraduate students needing prerequisite courses. The opportunity to begin taking a prerequisite course at any point in time during the calendar year could encourage a student to enroll in a program and make significant progress without waiting for particular calendar dates and course offerings to occur.

One of the issues to consider in student enrollment is the total enrollment in a perpetual course at any point in time. This means that there must be some restriction on students enrolling in courses on any given date; however, the limit might simply be delaying enrollment for only a week or two, as opposed to waiting for months to pass. The student information system could be structured to allow students to readily view enrollment openings in a given week similar to the way they can now view available seats in a traditional course. These enrollment issues are addressed further in the following sections on Professor and Institution Considerations.

PROFESSOR CONSIDERATIONS: COURSE CONDUCT, DESIGN & CONTENT

In a traditional online course offering a professor conducts lessons and interactions on a periodic basis, whether they are weekly, biweekly or other. This is generally done within the confines of one particular lesson. In a perpetual course the professor would conduct lessons and interactions with students who are engaged in various lessons throughout the course. Although this may seem objectionable to some professors, the seasoned online teaching veteran may see this as a very natural transition from the norm. Since much of the online work for professors is done up front while designing the course (Pachnowski & Jurczyk, 2003), there is less variance in the way in which online course lessons unfold afterward.

The following example helps to clarify how this perpetual enrollment course process can work. Assume that in a 16-week course with a maximum allowable enrollment of 16 students, as directed by university policy, a professor has one student currently engaged in each of the 16 weeks. Although this example is unlikely it serves to illustrate the process by which the professor conducts the course. In this case, the professor's role is to interact, assess, and provide feedback to each of the 16 students every week; however, that role takes place within 16 different lesson modules in order to accommodate each student.

This approach presumes that the instructor has experience teaching this online course numerous times before. As previously mentioned, a perpetual online course would depend upon reusing material from previous course offerings in order to make the course a highly effective learning experience. So, many seasoned online professors should find it to be a manageable process. In addition, in courses of shorter duration, such as four, six, or eight weeks, professors should find this task even more manageable. The process is analogous to preparing for and delivering two or

three different courses during the term as professors at smaller institutions might find themselves doing already.

But one professor per course is not the only possibility. In addition, professors could share duties in the same online course. In these cases a greater number of students could be enrolled in a perpetual online course when it is divided into modules with different professors instructing the various modules. The modules would be transparent to the student except for having a different professor at different points during the course. Another advantage to the module approach is that students could be receiving instruction from professors whose particular area of expertise occurs within that part of the course. Thus, from the instructor perspective we might see a three-week module in which we perpetually conduct the same set of lessons, but simply assess and provide feedback to students engaged at different points of the three-week module.

Although this approach to teaching a course might be unattractive to some professors, those of us who have taught online for many years could find this approach very attractive. Enrollment levels would not necessarily be stable, but they could be averaged out over time and professors could be compensated on a per student basis. The advantage to the professor is that the course would be continuously offered with somewhat knowable enrollment levels, which, in turn, could replace the random fluctuations that professors sometimes experience when offering additional courses during periods like summer.

Another issue concerns contact hours with students. Although accreditation issues prevent professors from adding entire courses to their full-time schedule, a reduction in average contact hours could be achieved through the assignment of fractional contact hours based upon modules within a perpetual course. Because the same modules are continuously repeated, the argument can be made that less preparation time is required.

When we combine considerations of the student's need for flexibility with the professor's role in the course, a situation that accommodates the student might be as follows. Assume that Megan Smith, who works for a CPA and is five-months pregnant, enrolls in a 16-week course in the month of February. The professor provides assessment and feedback to Megan after she completes week one of the course during February. After completing week three, Megan's supervisor tells her that one of the other assistants has quit unexpectedly and she needs to take on additional assignments due to the busy tax season. Megan realizes that she does not want to be obligated to both school and work at this point in time because she must also be concerned about prenatal care. So, Megan ceases her coursework after completion of week three. She devotes extra time to her job until April 15th, after which she rejoins the course and completes week four.

The professor who is instructing during week four conducts the lesson, assesses students, and provides feedback to those students regardless of who is enrolled in week four at that time. Megan now has 12 lesson-weeks to finish before completing this course. After completing the next eight lessons she goes into labor and delivers her child. She ceases work on her course for two weeks as she recovers and settles into her new routine. Since Megan is not working during this time she takes advantage of the opportunity to complete the remaining four weeks of the course. She rejoins the course by completing lesson 13 and over the next month continues to complete all the requirements of the course.

Now that Megan has completed the course, the professor conducting the last lesson of the course or the professor overseeing the entire course submits Megan's grade to the Registrar's office. Although this grade submission might be out of cycle with the Registrar's routine, grades could be posted by the Registrar at periodic times to accommodate system limitations or simply be treated as the removal of an incomplete grade. In either case, these issues could be addressed by the Registrar's office in the most expedient way and are discussed in more detail below.

A significant issue from the standpoint of course design and content is updating the course material; however, because the course lessons are sequential this should not pose a significant problem. For example, if a student is enrolled in week four of a course and at that point the professor selects a new textbook edition or desires to make other revisions, then those changes can be made concurrently; however, the professor would begin with week one and make the updates as each subsequent week occurs. A caveat is that a returning student could seek to accomplish a revised lesson only to find that he or she began the course with a different textbook. If numerous lessons undergo significant change, then that individual would need a new book.

However, another means to address course revisions is to open a new platform for the revised course, while maintaining the prior version for currently enrolled students. While some may argue that this adds an additional layer of complexity for the professor, it is also the case that seasoned online veterans could view this as a very natural move in which their efforts are effectively supported by the technology. It would become challenging only when there is significant change in the course content. In such cases, initially there might not be enough students in a perpetual online course for effective discussions when the topics are brand new as the result of a revision. The course would need to be offered for a number of weeks or months until the lesson discussions were effectively filtered and rebuilt by the professor. However, unless dramatic and significant changes are made to a course, it has been this author's experience that much of the course content is reusable even when revisions are necessary.

In all cases it will require willing professors to engage in the appropriate course design efforts to sustain a perpetual course. These efforts can be mitigated when professors are involved in only particular course modules. Even though the input to course design and maintenance of

a perpetual course constitutes a heavier workload than that of traditional course design, having to maintain only part of a course reduces this effort. Further, while daily preparation and teaching are significant parts of traditional courses, the preparation for a perpetual online course is front-loaded and the two approaches can be perceived as commensurate, though along different dimensions.

The method of compensation might be another significant issue for some professors. The proposed model for operating a perpetual online course should likely be based upon compensation per student, as opposed to the whole course. This approach ensures that the institution would not be paying for lessons in which there are few or even no students. The institution is unlikely to support the idea of perpetual courses if these possibilities existed. Also, per student compensation should be in the best interest of the professor because a professor would always receive the appropriate compensation for the workload, while potentially benefitting when a student does not complete a course in the allotted time frame. This presumes that the professor is compensated for the number of students enrolled in the course, as opposed to the numbers who complete the course.

Some professors might see that this approach offers the potential for a consistent and level compensation, as opposed to the ups and downs often seen in course offerings outside of the traditional semester, such as summer. In either case, professors must come to understand, as many in the online world have, that the delivery of education has changed significantly since the advent of online courses and so, too, must the processes used to conduct courses (Irlbeck, 2002; Schott, Chernish, Dooley, & Lindner, 2003).

INSTITUTION CONSIDERATIONS

Cost and convenience factors can play a major role in students' willingness to enroll in a program (Gaytan, 2007). The idea of perpetual enrollment online courses could be very attractive to students who might not otherwise enroll in a program when they must consider daily schedule and career event restrictions. Also, when students need prerequisite courses, the expedient completion of these courses will ensure enrollment in future courses at the institution. So, the institution has much to gain by considering perpetual course offerings.

In regard to the faculty, the institution has the capability to offer some degree of stability when faculty members have the opportunity to teach additional courses through the perpetual approach. The perpetual online course has the capability to stabilize enrollment numbers across a given course offering. A caveat is that it is also possible for this to result in lesson-weeks with few or no students; however, the potential still exists to average out student enrollment numbers over time while professors remain attached to the perpetual course. An advantage to the institution is that the income could be guaranteed according to the numbers of students actually being served, regardless of which lesson-weeks they are participating in at a particular time.

Perpetual online courses also give institutions the opportunity to smooth out enrollment levels across courses, as opposed to terms and semesters. Institutions would need a control system to prevent students from arbitrarily enrolling in courses at any point in time when this would cause a significant imbalance in enrollments. But the existence of perpetual online course offerings would also be the solution to this problem. Restrictions would be mitigated by giving students numerous and varied perpetual courses within which to enroll or by ensuring brief wait times to enroll in a particular course. Since a student can begin a perpetual course with the start of each new week or lesson, wait times are likely to be brief. Finally, in some colleges administrators might welcome the problem of excess enrollment. In these cases, the issue could be addressed by adding additional sections of a perpetual online course in order to keep class sizes at the desired level.

The final and perhaps greatest advantage to the institution is that the quality of the student's educational experience has the potential to be better than ever. Because of the flexibility of perpetual online courses, there should never be a point in time when the student cannot devote their fullest possible effort to a course. Students can sustain their enrollment in courses when their circumstances are best suited to effectively engage in the coursework. This opportunity also capitalizes upon the idea that the institution has the capability to offer highly effective and experienced professors to conduct the particular components of perpetual online courses for which they are best suited.

The institutional costs of adopting perpetual online courses should be minimal. Optimally, institutions should adapt existing information systems to accommodate perpetual online course enrollees; however, in most cases the immediate adoption of these courses could be accommodated. Students in perpetual online courses could be awarded grades of incomplete when they do not finish within the traditionally allotted time or when they finish outside the Registrar's normal window for processing grades. It is no doubt that some Registrars will balk at this proposal, but they, like the professors, must come to realize that the world of education has moved on (Irlbeck, 2002; Schott, Chernish, Dooley, & Lindner, 2003). Radical innovations are possible in the world of online courses and these changes must be accommodated when institutions seek to maintain a competitive edge.

Of course, the length of time that a student is allowed to sustain perpetual enrollment must be limited for practical administrative purposes, such as tuition and general recordkeeping. In order to accommodate students, a one-year time limitation to fully complete a perpetual online course is a reasonable option. A shorter time period is possible for programs whose course durations are less than the traditional semester. This limitation also accounts for the student's ability to retain information and effectively sustain enrollment in the same course after having been absent for a number of weeks or months.

DISCUSSION

There is little doubt that the forgoing proposal will be viewed as too radical for many institutions. Although much has changed since the advent of online courses, including their development into effective and accepted learning systems, there have been no radically significant innovations in the way in which online course delivery impacts students. There are innovations in technology, but radical change from the student's viewpoint is rare. The notion of perpetual online courses is radical and innovative. As with any innovation there are risks, but with risks come rewards. The first-mover in extensive perpetual online course offerings might not only achieve a decided advantage in perfecting the process, but could also attract and retain students from a large untapped market.

REFERENCES

Gaytan, J. (Summer 2007). "Visions shaping the future of online education: Understanding its historical evolution, implications, and assumptions." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, Vol. 10, No. 2. Retrieved October 31, 2009, from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer102/gaytan102.htm.

Irlbeck, S.A., (October 2002). "Leadership and distance education in higher education: A US perspective." *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 1-8. Retrieved October 30, 2009 from http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/91/571.

Oliver, R. (1999). "Exploring strategies for online teaching and learning." *Distance Education,* Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 240-255.

Owstow, R.D. (1997). "The World Wide Web: A technology to enhance teaching and learning." *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 26, pp. 27-33.

Pachnowski, L.M. & Jurczyk, J.P. (Fall 2003). "Perceptions of faculty on the effect of distance learning technology on faculty preparation time." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, Vol. 6, No. 3. Retrieved October 31, 2009, from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall63/pachnowski64.html.

Palloff, R.M., & Pratt, K. (2007). "Building learning communities: Effective strategies for the virtual classroom" (2nd ed.). San Franciso, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Powell, W. (March, 2003). Essential design elements for successful online courses. *Journal of Geoscience Education*, Vol. 51, No. 2, pp. 221-230.

Schott, M., Chernish, W., Dooley, K.E., & Lindner, J. R. (Summer 2003). "Innovations in distance learning program development and delivery." *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, Vol. 6, No. 2. Retrieved October 30, 2009 from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer62/schott62.html.

Vik, G. & Anderson-Cruz, H. (2009). "Pedagogical shift: Teaching report writing for accountants online." In J.A. Smith, J.M. Duck, E. Murff and C. Scherpereel (Eds.) *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, Vol. 36, pp. 2-7.