DISTANCE LEARNING IN COMMUNICATION: BLENDED OR ON-LINE? DEVELOPING AN ON-LINE ADVANCED COMMUNICATION COURSE

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ABSTRACT

To meet the needs of a growing national and international student body for a Regulatory Affairs program, we developed an on-line advanced communication course. An on-campus version of the course had been offered once or twice a year for at least six years, but many students from other locations were asking to substitute a local communication course, since most of the other courses in the program were now offered on-line.

This presentation will discuss the rationale for course development, how we retained important internal controls, and how certain success factors were built into the new course.

INTRODUCTION

Our campus is beginning to develop some to business majors; the on-line class is limited to people in blended courses for upper division students and offers a few on-line courses. All courses must be approved by curriculum committees regardless of format, even if the course is an on-line version of an existing class. The Regulatory Affairs program, a joint program between the College of Business Administration and the College of Health and Human Services, has become an on-line program over the years as it grew and more students were from other cities, states, and countries. The communication class was the last one to go on-line, as I had serious doubts about internal controls (verifying who was writing the papers), including a timed exam, and having students give presentations.

This presentation will discuss the rationale for course development, how we retained important internal controls, and how certain success factors were built into the new course. Evaluations were uniformly positive at the end of the first semester; we are revising the long paper assignment to clarify it, and developing systems to reduce the work load, which was much greater than anticipated for a class of only twenty.

WHY THE GRADUATE COURSE WAS THE FIRSTCOMMUNICATION COURSE TO GO ON-LINE

Teaching lower division communication classes on-line is problematic unless very good internal controls are in place. The motivation to have someone else write the papers is high when the course is a barrier to entry into upper division. As a result, many of these lower division courses are hybrid or blended courses, which have a number of units on-line, but more than one face-to-face session for in-class case exams and some document review. At this point, we have no plans to make the core sophomore course an on-line one.

Upper division and graduate courses seem to have less pressure to succeed at any cost, so our first entry into on-line development in the business communication area was the graduate writing and speaking class. In 1999, 14 students were in the Regulatory Affairs program; all lived in the county. By 2006, of the 63 students in the program, three-fourths were located elsewhere. Regular sections of the course are offered the Regulatory Affairs program.

HOW TWO IMPORTANT ASSIGNMENTS WERE RETAINED

TIMED WRITTEN CASE EXAM

We were able to retain the in-class case exam component by having a timed writing posted on the given date. Timed writing gives students practice in thinking on the job, proofreading under time pressure, and writing for a professional audience. The exam was made available for more than a day to allow for different schedules and time zones; once a student opened the exam, the resulting memo or letter was sent and the students could not access it again. Thus students could not open and read the exam, go do some research or get advice, and then come back and take the exam later. A time clock counted down (and apparently was somewhat distracting), and extra time was reported with the "answer" sent.

The only drawback of this system was that the memos generated were not sent in very professional or attractive format, so had to be evaluated only on content, not presentation. Programming to allow for a better format, we are told, would be very expensive.

"IN-CLASS" ORAL PRESENTATION

The final presentation was handled by a combination of visual review (students submit a PowerPoint presentation on the due date) and later teleconference, in which students walked the instructor and a small peer group of reviewers through their slides.

The peer group and the instructor and facilitator asked questions and made comments; the peer group also

submitted peer evaluations using a detailed oral presentation rubric (Attachment 1).

SELECTED COURSE LOGISTICS

In the ten-week course, each unit begins on Monday and ends Sunday. Students are encouraged to read text and linked readings over the weekend, then answer posted discussion questions on the Discussion Board several times during the week. Every week, we completed one unit. Attachment 3 shows the schedule.

One advantage of on-line courses for the usually busy professionals in the Regulatory Affairs program is that they can set their own study schedules rather than being required to work on a class at a particular day or time. Having a set schedule of due dates is important, however, as this helps the class move along and helps students build on earlier assignments with more advanced, later assignments.

Unlike some programs that tend to overcrowd on-line classes and require excessive numbers of work hours, especially responding to emailed comments and questions, this course was set up to provide a previous student as a facilitator if the enrollment grew over 10-12 students. A technical trouble-shooter also works with the course to answer students' software and hardware questions.

SUCCESS FACTORS IN OUR FAVOR

1. Students are working professionals who are improving their writing and presentation skills, not undergraduates with little work experience.
2. Assignments build on one another to help students improve in specific ways.
3. Course design limits some on-line course pitfalls, such as having to be "on" and available 24/7; perfunctory responses on Discussion Boards just to build individual response stats; and poor work caused by letting the work go until the last week or so.

STUDENTS' PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

In the first class of 21 people, all were employed in biotech, pharmaceutical, or medical device companies. Job titles included pharmacist, Regulatory Affairs managers, Quality Compliance, Validation, Clinical Safety Specialist, Regulatory Intelligence, International RA, Medical Writer, and Validation Engineer.

ASSIGNMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

As the list below shows, both short and long documents were produced, and some assignments built on one another.

Short Paper #1: Executive Summary of an FDA Guidance
Short Paper #2: Elevator Speech
Course Paper: Rationale Statement (attachment 2), Draft,

Final paper
Two choices for topic: professional journal article or thesis proposal
Visual Support Project (includes peer evaluation)
Teleconferences
Case Exam: Written Communication in Response to Work Situation

Exercises
- Evaluate Your Prior Writing
- Email response to a Sensitive Work Situation
Discussion Boards
- Your Goals for the Course (not graded)
- Elevator Speech—How Did it Go?
- Reflection—What Will You Do Differently Now?

The longest paper required an early Rationale Statement that provided an introduction to the thesis proposal or journal article. This introductory material let the reader know the topic and context for the proposed paper. Usually about two to three pages long, it includes: "a description of the topic or issue that you wish to investigate, an indication of why the topic is worth studying, a description of the sub-topics you would review, your research plan (for a publishable article) or methodology (for a thesis proposal), an annotated bibliography for at least 4 sources."

An interim draft of the long paper was required to keep students on track and to avoid having long papers written at the last minute.

The Elevator Speech, once used, was the subject of a discussion board. The initial discussion board was used again for reflection at the end of the course.

DISCUSSION BOARD RULES AND LIMITATIONS

To make the discussion board most useful, students are asked to respond several times during the week, not all at the beginning or the end. They must also make a substantial contribution, not just agree with the previous posting. These instructions are part of the section telling students how to use the boards:

Your postings should advance the group's negotiation of ideas and meanings about the material; that is, your contributions should go beyond a "ditto." Some ways you can further the discussion include:

- o expressing opinions or observations. These should be offered in depth and supported by more than personal opinion.
- o making a connection between the current discussion and previous discussions, a personal experience, or concepts from the readings,
- o commenting on or asking for clarification of another student's statement,
- o synthesizing other students' responses,
- o or posing a substantive question aimed at furthering the group's understanding.

CONCLUSION

While not the same as an on-campus course, the on-line class provides practice and evaluation in both writing and speaking, and enables us to have more quality control than allowing students to substitute a wide variety of local courses. We can cover professionally related topics and formats rather than more general writing course assignments often found in the substitute courses.

We retained an in-class exam (as a timed writing in the eighth week) and a presentation, since the problem area in the on-campus course was usually the visuals, not the speaking ability, of the students.

In a perfect world, we would rather see our students and get to know them, but the course we designed is a worthy replacement for this contact, given the dispersed student body in the program. We are looking forward to developing new assignments and further enhancing the students' experience in distance learning.

Attachment 1: Peer Review Form: Visual Support and Teleconference Rubric

Performance Area	Meet/Exceeds Standards	Approaching Standards	Less than Adequate	Limited
Planning	Visuals have clear and compelling structure that shows how presentation will develop.	Visuals have adequate structure to show how presentation will develop.	Visuals do not use blueprint slide, or use generic titles such as Agenda.	Visuals do not show use of course readings and principles.
Development	Visuals enhance presentation by having sufficient but not excessive information.	Visuals support presentation but may be formulaic.	Visuals have too many points, or too many words, or too-small font.	Visuals limit understanding of topic because of little detail.
Graphics	Visuals are enhanced with clip art or other relevant graphics.	Visuals have generic clip art or graphics.	Graphics do not accurately represent topic; no graphics.	Poorly chosen or executed graphics; errors in graphics.
Font	Chosen font is clear.	Font is readable.	Font is difficult to read.	Font is not readable.
Bullets	Bullet choice fits topic	Bullets are defaults only.	Bullets rarely used.	No bullets; poor use of bullets.
Proofreading	No spelling, grammar, or mechanics errors.	Visuals are relatively free of errors in spelling, grammar, mechanics.	Visuals have several errors in spelling, grammar, mechanics.	Visuals have serious and persistent errors in spelling, grammar, mechanics.
Teleconference Presenting Skills	Energy in voice, all slides not read word for word, teleconf added info to slides, smooth slides changes, timing ok	Read slides with expression or added info, smooth slides changes, timing ok or adjusted well	Read slides with some expression, some added info, fairly smooth slide changes, timing ok or quickly moved through last slides	Reading without much expression, hard to follow changes, slides read when time over

Attachment 2: The Rationale Statement

The Rationale Statement provides an introduction to your thesis proposal or journal article. This introductory material lets the reader know the topic and context for your paper. While there is no prescribed length, the Rationale Statement should be concise, generally about two to three pages long. It should include:

- a description of the topic or issue that you wish to investigate,
- an indication of why the topic is worth studying,
- a description of the sub-topics you would review,.
- your research plan (for a publishable article) or methodology (for a thesis proposal)
- an annotated bibliography for at least 4 sources.

Attachment 3: Course Schedule

Week 1   Basics and Strategies for Business Communication
Week 2   Audience Analysis
Week 3   Types of Communication: Informational Documents
Week 4   Types of Communication: Persuasive Communication
Week 5   Types of Communication: Writing for Non-Technical Audiences
Week 6   Types of Communication: Presentations and Visuals
Week 7   Types of Communication: Email and Electronic Communication
Week 8   Barriers to Effective Communication
Week 9   Cultural Considerations in Communication
Week 10   Reflection