2010

Student Evaluations for the Online Public Speaking Course

John J. Miller
Western Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca

Part of the Higher Education Commons, Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons, Mass Communication Commons, Other Communication Commons, and the Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol22/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Basic Communication Course Annual by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.
The topic of an online public speaking course attracts much criticism. Allen (2006) argues that online courses do not provide students with the social and intellectual interaction that is present only by physically attending a course. His concerns center on retention and matriculation of online students. Similarly, Schwartzman (2007) expresses concern about effectively reaching the nontraditional student who, due to a variety of issues, may not be able to physically attend a college/university class. Though the trend is towards acceptance, Allen and Seaman (2008) found that only 50% of responding faculty viewed an online class as legitimate. What appears to be the critics’ collective driving force are concerns over the educational quality of an online course.

Despite these criticisms, the growth of online courses is a reality that cannot be ignored, even for basic communication courses. Almost every university/college catalogue and schedule contains a vast array of online courses, from complete graduate programs all the way to introductory and remedial courses. Allen and Seaman (2008) noted that online courses continue to grow in popularity with 3.9 million students enrolled in an online course in fall 2007, which marked an increase of 12.9% from the previous year. The most recent Basic Course survey reveals a growing number of online pub-
lic speaking and hybrid communication courses (Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley, 2006). The survey found that, out of 306 responding institutions, 62 (20.8%) offered an online basic communication course with 35 courses in public speaking and 27 hybrid courses. The authors predicted these numbers to increase (p. 430). This growth, in part, results from a desire to serve underserved students who may need more flexibility that traditional classroom courses do not offer (Bikle & Carroll, 2003; Miller & Lu, 2003; Perreault, Walman, & Zhao, 2002). Clearly, online instruction appears here to stay, and despite greatly varying personal attitudes, research suggests that online classes are educationally sound.

Several studies suggest that learning outcomes and learner satisfaction are comparable between online courses and traditional classroom courses (see for example, Hauck, 2006, Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007). When comparing a graduate research methodology class, Reisetter and LaPointe (2007) found that there was no difference in learning gains for students enrolled in either the online or traditional course; however, there was a difference in how students learned and approached the class.

Despite the success of online learning, Reisetter and LaPointe (2007) maintain that there is a difference in teaching methods. Rather than assuming that instruction is the same or can simply be translated from a traditional course to an online format, they maintain that differences in format must be considered. Similarly, Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley (2006) report that, of responding schools, for those that taught a basic communication course online, the greatest challenge was
“managing mass-mediated channels to enhance personal, pedagogical, and student satisfaction (p. 430). Problems also revolved around developing teacher immediacy and student-to-student interaction. These challenges focus on developing instructional techniques specific to the unique challenges of online instruction.

While numerous studies explore course design, student interaction, student satisfaction, and several other sub-components of online learning and instruction, little agreement has been reached regarding standards of excellence in online teaching. Despite numerous books and essays available on the subject (e.g., Sanders, 2001), instructors are still challenged to discover effective methods of online instruction (if such creatures could ever be clearly identified). In essence, the concerns of critics such as Allen (2006) and Schwartzman (2007) are not adequately addressed. The role of the instructor is not clearly revealed by these studies. Consequently, the online instructor is often left only with trial and error methods.

For the last four years, I have enjoyed teaching several sections of public speaking online. Like any other instructor, I continue to learn about instruction and constantly seek to improve my course. In classrooms, instructors learn to become better instructors, in part, through practice with feedback. Student evaluations help fine tune instruction as instructors learn how to incorporate and use different instructional tools to produce student engagement and learning (McKeachie, 2006). Though student evaluations are common, “their primary purpose is often to collect data for personnel evaluation...” rather than teaching improvement (McKeachie, p. 351). While there are many examples of
student evaluations, these tools were typically developed for traditional classroom instruction. As noted by Reisetter and LaPointe (2007), the respondents in Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley (2006), and Sanders, 2001 (among many others and discussed in greater detail in the essay’s next section) classroom instruction and online instruction are distinct learning formats. To account for these differences online instructors should seek to develop student evaluation tools that reflect this method of instruction and help instructors improve their online courses rather than serving solely as data for personnel evaluations. In fact, Vanhorn, Pearson, & Child (2008) even commented about the struggles of online instructors evaluating the learning environment (p. 33). This is particularly true for the online public speaking instructor whose course goals include student performance outcomes including speech anxiety reduction, audience interaction and engagement, and various other delivery components impacted by the presence of an audience.

This essay proposes one such student evaluation for the online basic communication course. Its creation is based both on the personal experiences of the author and a summary of numerous studies. The author does not posit that this is “the” evaluation tool, but rather one example of a student evaluation designed to provide feedback specifically to improve online instruction. Readers are urged to approach this tool from their own perspectives and should, consequently, add and subtract instructional characteristics that they feel best reflects their unique class and teaching styles. Even if the reader’s institution mandates a specific student evaluation tool, the author encourages online instructors to
incorporate an evaluation tool specific to online learning for their own improvement. Prior to elaborating the details of this proposed evaluation, for the purposes of clarity, the essay describes two major differences between online courses and traditional courses and will, in turn, suggest appropriate evaluative mechanisms.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ONLINE AND CLASSROOM INSTRUCTION

Online instruction is not as simple as translating the traditional classroom to an online environment; it is a unique context and learning experience (Reisetter, 2007; Peters, 2003). Further, Vanhorn, Pearson, and Child (2008) note that online instructors have significant difficulty transforming a traditional face-to-face course to an online course. Based on an analysis of the relevant literature, two key differences appear: student centered-controlled learning and communication (including instructor-student and student-content, and student-student). Consequently, when evaluating an online course, instructors should develop evaluation tools that reflect these key differences.

Difference One: Student Centered-Controlled Learning

As previously indicated, one of the main motivations for student enrollment in online courses is flexibility. Students who are maintaining full-time careers, families, and other social/civic responsibilities utilize online courses that permit them to engage the material when
their schedules permit. Rather than scheduling around a predetermined class-time which may conflict with their other obligations, students (especially non-traditional) seek online courses where they can, in the proverbial senses, attend in their pajamas; they need the flexibility of an online course (Miller & Lu, 2003). In fact, this motivation exists not only for students but also for host institutions and instructors who offer online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

With flexibility, however, comes an increased need for personal discipline and self-motivation. Unlike a face-to-face classroom where there is a set meeting time and defined social context, the online classroom requires students to exercise their own discipline interactions with the course content. Not surprising, Howland and Moore (2002) found that successful online students tend to be constructivist learners who are both proactive and independent. Further, they state, “self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation” are “more essential for success in an online course that in the face-to-face classroom” (p. 188). Similarly, Drennan, Kennedy, and Pisarski (2005) found that students with an “internal locus of control” had higher course satisfactions (p. 337). The learner is fundamentally responsible for the learning (Howland & Moore). Rather than relying on instructors to provide the necessary information and structure the class and the social context of the course, online courses tend to rely on students to engage the material more directly and independently.

Additionally, just as any individual may view a Web-Page in their own manner, including the order of links selected or skipped, students have the same capability in all but the most extremely controlled online environ-
ment. Unlike the classroom, where instructors are in control of the progression of course material by controlling the lecture/discussion/question order (and so forth), students in the online environment are free to click their way through the course in their own preferred manner. They can just as easily complete a course assessment (test/quiz) prior to participating in the discussion as they can participate in a discussion prior to the course assessment. Course structure and organization is as much determined by the student as it is determined by the instructor. Even though the instructor can set release and due dates, the nature of the Internet allows students to move around the webpage in their own manner with relatively limited control of the instructor. The instructor may provide a scheduled progression, but students are still freely able to click through the course page to earlier assignments, external links, discussion questions and similar constructs. As an online instructor may wish to have students progress in a controlled order, the student is ultimately capable of moving around the course page; the instructor cannot simply control the order of the student’s viewing.

While this concept may be a bit unnerving, this flexibility and self-control can have numerous benefits. Through most of the last three decades, educational philosophers have argued that education, particularly higher education, should be more student-focused and driven. Rather than a model of “one style fits all,” education should be student centered. Postman (1995) and Palmer (1998) both argue that education needs should focus on the individual. As students come with varying backgrounds, experiences, and needs, good instruction
should utilize these unique experiences to help students gain new understanding and knowledge.

Online courses offer this potential. Rather than focusing on the computer as a tool, online environments, as Watts (2003) argues, “were created to help students make connections with information, with each other, with faculty, and with both local and global communities” (p. 101). In one sense, the online environment can empower students to learn the material and make connections to past experiences and future needs. Frymier, Shulman, and Houser (1996), though not specific to online learning, argue that learner empowerment “may foster student feelings of responsibility, personal meaningfulness, ownership, self-efficacy, and intrinsic motivation to learn” (p. 183). If the successful online student is characterized as a student who has “self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation,” and the online format permits students to control their learning, successful online courses should reflect characteristics of empowering instruction that encourages students to take responsibility for constructing their own learning.

When applied to public speaking online, the student centered-controlled difference takes on some unique issues. For example, to complete public speaking online, in one course format students must present a variety of speeches before live audiences, video tape the speech, and send the speech to be critiqued (there are other formats available such as requiring the student to come to campus where this illustration may not apply). Additionally, as students learn how to give presentations, as in the traditional classroom, practice-oriented activities are essential. The online format places these items in the control of the student, since the student must set up
the speaking situation. Since many online students are non-traditional students working full-time, the online course can encourage students to utilize their work place and community as the basis of meeting their speaking requirements. When students give presentations at work and similar settings, assignments can be modified to permit the use of “real” speaking situations rather than construed classroom speeches. Additionally, students are in a unique setting where they can video-tape themselves and critique themselves with fewer time restraints that typically preclude these types of assignments in a classroom. Further, discussions can be tailored to permit students to utilize their experiences as the basis of learning. By developing and adapting class activities, discussions, and/or assignments to the unique online context, students can take control of their own learning.

Consequently, online environments should support students’ self-management of learning, self-monitoring of their learning, and motivation to engage in learning. These three components reflect both the characteristics of successful online students and the unique nature of student centered/controlled learning. To evaluate whether such characteristics were achieved, instructors might consider asking students to rate the following items (these characteristics were developed as a result of the previous discussion and are also developed directly from the described supporting literature):

**Self-Management**

1. the course page was “user friendly” with a uniform look and easy to follow layout
2. the textbook was accessible
3. inclusion of speech videos encouraged discussion of strengths/weaknesses
4. instruction resources were understandable
5. instructor provided connections to additional resources
6. instructor encouraged students to tailor assignments to specific student-oriented situations to give realistic speeches
7. instructor offered flexible due dates (when appropriate)

**Self-Monitoring**

8. students were encouraged to view their own performances and offer self-criticism
9. discussions encouraged students to reflect and share their public speaking experiences with other students
10. speaking assignments were challenging
11. students received detailed feedback that helped the student understand speaking concepts and improve their own presentations
12. student received feedback that was specific to their needs

**Motivation**

13. student participation in class assignments was important to course success
14. course assisted student with developing personal speaking goals
15. course helped students achieve personal speaking goals
16. course presented useful information for future speaking situations
17. course provided opportunities for collaborative learning by encouraging the sharing of speeches and the speech construction process

**Difference Two: Communication**

As significant as student controlled/centered learning is in an online instructional environment, the differences in instructor-student and student-instructor communication are equally important to the success of an online course. Perhaps the most obvious difference is the change of mode in instructional communication. Rather than relying on the face-to-face communication characteristic of the traditional classroom, online communication relies on the ambiguity of text based communication where fine communication nuances may not be as evident. In an online environment, communication is physically distant, there are reduced communication cues, the communication is mediated, and there is a perception of lacking social presence (Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007). Students are expected to complete instructional tasks and learn material without explicit oral instruction; they must rely completely on written communication (Howland & Moore, 2002). In a face-to-face classroom, students are free to immediately ask questions, interrupt directions, and receive the benefit of other students asking questions. Such concepts are not immediate in an online course. Students must send
written messages to the instructor, which other students may never see. Even when online instructors include a streaming video of a lecture, the student is not able to ask immediate questions and must rely on a delayed textual exchange to seek the necessary information.

When a student encounters online instruction, they are not sitting with other students and, in fact, there is not more than text to interact with. The instructor is often present only in writing with no picture to help generate an image. The student is sitting in front of a computer by themselves attempting to engage the material. It is education in the solitary rather than through the social processes typically associated with instruction. Picciano (2002) noted that students often do not have a sense of community and may feel isolated and unable to share experiences with other students. Even though there are means to ask instructors and classmates’ questions (email, message boards, and chats) the communication is often delayed by potentially hours and even days. Students often cannot receive immediate answers to their questions.

This isolation and the reliance on written text as the basis of communication may lead to confusion and isolation. Frank McClusky, Dean of online learning at Mercy College, states, “One of the big problems in online courses is that students are more disoriented than (on-campus) students. They don’t know what to expect” (cited in Distance Education Report, 2003). This must be like trying to put together a child’s toy the night before a birthday with limited instruction and knowledge. Students may have some levels of anxiety towards course expectations and criteria. Consequently, detailed
and explicit communication that helps create a sense of presence is essential in online learning environments. Conrad (2002) found that students reported various levels of anxiety or fear when first approaching an online class. Unlike the traditional classroom, students cannot read an instructor’s nonverbal communication or benefit from other students’ questions or the relief of other students expressing similar concerns. Consequently, the social connections that help to reassure students in the traditional classroom are not available in online classes, particularly at the start of course.

Instructor communication should help overcome this anxiety/fear and possible confusion. Conrad (2002) found that students wanted instructors to post messages before the class began and wanted a mixture of personal and instructional information in a conversational tone (p. 212). Accordingly, students want to “witness” the instructor’s presence in the class to indicate that the course actually had begun and to provide course-related details (p. 215). Instructor communication is the source to welcome students and help decrease the uncertainty associated with a new course. Similarly, Dennen, Darbi, and Smith (2007) found that students want instructors to maintain frequency of contact (consistent feedback), have a regular presence in the class, and make expectations clear (p. 77). Further, Reisetter, and LaPointe (2007) found that effective instructor interaction with students should contain specific comments and suggestions, provide clear directions for improvement, be concise, and timely. Importantly, not all messages (especially discussion board postings) need to be responded to by the instructor. Howland and Moore
(2002) found that students prefer quality over quantity and do not expect all postings to be answered.

Related to online communication issues is the organization of course content. While numerous books and studies (eg. Sanders, 2001; Januszewski & Molenda, 2008) have regularly discussed the importance of course design, it stands repeating. If students have anxiety towards course expectations and standards, and if students prefer to see the presence of the instructor in the course, course designs need to be engaging, organized, and consistent. Accordingly, students should be able to easily navigate the webpage with clear (and working) links to additional content or previous content (to assist with connecting to other subjects/concepts). Course pages should be consistent for students to easily locate similarly related information.

A unique question for online public speaking courses is that students, like our colleagues, often wonder how public speaking online takes place. They are often concerned about the nature of assignments, course expectations, and still have the issues associated with speech anxiety. Consequently, the communication in an online course is just as, if not more so, vital to the success of the student as it is in a classroom. With the format changed to written text, instructors should develop concise and clear communication interactions with students on a regular basis to help increase student learning and decrease public speaking anxiety, facilitate the development of speaking skills, and help develop a sense of presence for the student. When evaluating an online course, instructors should consider the following items:
Effective Instructor Communication

1. instructor welcomed students and provided a detailed explanation of how public speaking online occurs.
2. course pages were easy to navigate and helped student learn at their own pace
3. instructor communication was welcoming and conversational
4. course expectations were clearly described
5. speaking assignments were clearly described with necessary detail for students to understand assignment expectations
6. the text for the course was detailed and understandable
7. instructor sent a confirmation of receipt for receiving assignments
8. instructor initiated and participated in frequent instructor-student communication
9. instructor provided feedback about student progress
10. instructor feedback offered specific suggestions for student improvement
11. discussion board posts encouraged additional consideration and exploration of topics
12. instructor responded in a timely manner to student messages and assignments
13. instructor responded with clear and concise messages suitable to a text format
CONCLUSION

The differences of student controlled/centered learning and communication between online courses and traditional (on ground) courses create numerous challenges for instructors and students. As there is no one magic formula for the traditional course, there is no one formula for the online course. Instructors need to develop their own communication styles that reflect the particular needs of online students. These needs are evident through the unique differences associated with this mode of instruction and stem from self-management, self-monitoring, and motivation needs for student success and the uncertainty and isolation that exist in online courses and the written text format for instructor-student interaction.

As instructors seek to improve classroom instruction, they should likewise seek to improve online instruction through the realization and acceptance that online instruction is not simply course development, but the ongoing interactions between the student and instructor. The student evaluation has served educators well over the years to help improve classroom instruction. Likewise, student evaluations that reflect the unique characteristics of online teaching may also help improve online instruction. With its growing presence and despite its mixed acceptance, online basic communication courses are a reality. Rather than allowing frustration and concerns to prevent the development of a successful online pedagogy, online instructors should lead the way in identifying and evaluating effective online instruction. The suggested 30 areas of evaluation in
this essay should be viewed only as a guide. Evaluations should be tailored to the specific needs of the course and the mode of instruction. This author encourages online instructors to develop more specific evaluations to receive the student feedback necessary to help improve their own instruction.

REFERENCES


