

TEACHING AN INTERNET COURSE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY DAVID PENNER

During the spring of 1995, I taught a graduate seminar entitled “Leadership and Vision,” which focused on discerning future trends. One of the textbooks was Joel Barker’s *Paradigms: The Business of Discovering the Future*. This was not the first time I had taught the course, but always before I had used a traditional classroom.

I love classroom teaching—the give and take of the discussion, the drama, the stimulation. On the other hand, I hate to teach the same thing twice. So I regularly change reading assignments, lectures, discussions, and textbooks. However, I had never tried teaching

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without a classroom. But why not—a course about the future using something new! Since a number of our graduate students hold full-time jobs and do not live on campus, I decided that I could best accommodate their needs in terms of time and location by teaching the course on the Internet.

I set out to re-create in the electronic setting the same learning excitement

provided by a conventional seminar’s stimulating group discussion and interaction. First, I wrote the syllabus using HTML (hypertext markup language) to make it usable on the World Wide Web. I designed the “discussion” around specific questions that would stimulate e-mail responses and interaction among the students. Some replies would be sent directly to me, others to the whole class.

The students were at first a bit apprehensive about the experiment. After all, they were successful survivors of many traditional classes. (I admit to having felt some uncertainty also!) Those who were not regular users of e-mail were slower in getting started. Some encountered technical problems such as finding a suitable software package, acquiring e-mail access, defining the class mailing list, or simply increasing their typing speed and accuracy. On the opening day of class, 15 students from Massachusetts, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan were “packed into the classroom.”

As it turned out, the class was a lot of fun. Student responses indicated a high level of involvement and learning. Some participants, particularly at first, asked tentatively, “Is anyone out there listening to me?” But the vast majority offered thoughtful, relevant, and helpful responses. We quickly learned that short answers were better than long ones; this helped to focus our discussion. The use of e-mail abbreviated the rambling monologues characteristic of the traditional classroom where stu-

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The author uses his computer to prepare materials for his class on the Internet.

dents (and sometimes teachers) begin talking with the hope that something profound will eventually come out!

Halfway through the course, I realized that assignments and discussion plans needed adjustment. Rather than trying to develop one large discussion group, we broke off into smaller units of three or four each. These groups focused on specific topics and then reported to the larger group. This reduced the tremendous volume of e-mail and made the discussions more personal. Since I was a member of every group, I could “listen in” on all the discussions. Still, it took a great deal of time to read each answer or reaction, which allowed very little opportunity to react and respond.

Here are some conclusions I have reached in reflecting on this experience:

- I would spread the course over four or five months instead of packing everything into two months. This would allow discussions to develop, and provide students with more time to respond.
- I would try to find more ways to stimulate thought—perhaps through short “lectures” or by directing students to other resources on the Internet.

Although this class was largely conducted through e-mail, in the future I will rely much more heavily on the other services of the Internet, particularly the World Wide Web sites. ✍

Dr. Penner’s course outline is linked to his homepage on the World Wide Web:

<http://andrews.edu/~penner>.

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A STUDENT REACTS

By Mark Thogmartin

Imagine that you have just finished cleaning up the kitchen after supper. The kids are outside riding their bicycles with some neighborhood

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children, and your husband or wife has gone for a walk with a friend. “I think I’ll go to class now,” you tell yourself as you sit down at the computer. After booting up your trusty PC, you sign on to your e-mail service and download 20 or so messages, most of which are from fellow graduate-level classmates in the “Leadership and Vision” course you are taking at Andrews University.

The first message you read is from Dr. David Penner, the “instructor” of the course. (He cautioned us to use this term loosely, since our interaction together would be the key instructional element of the class.) In his message, he reminds you of an assignment that is due tomorrow and offers some feedback relating to your e-mail submission from the previous week. You continue to read the other mail. Janeric challenges Patrick’s observation about Joel Barker’s definition of leadership in his book *Paradigms: The Business of Discovering the Future*, one of the required readings for the course. Israel has submitted a leadership theory for the class to read, and Jeanette has posted another riddle for the group to consider as a part of a continuing discussion about riddles and paradigm shifts. Naomi recommends a great reference she has found, and so it goes. You fire off a few responses of your own, then settle down on the sofa to read a few chapters of Stephen Covey’s *Principle-Centered Leadership*, the other required text for the course.

The advantages of such an arrangement are obvious. Other than the necessary deadlines for assignments, when

you “attend class” is up to you. And traveling to and from the university is not a concern. Several of us completed the course from hundreds of miles away without setting foot on campus. Because our discussions were in writing, we had time to ponder ideas before we reacted to them, and to revise our thoughts before sending them into cyberspace. Everything could be printed out or saved electronically. I have one floppy disk that contains the entire “transcript” of the class!

Some students did, however, report difficulties with the format. For those who were not proficient with electronic communication, the learning curve was steep but surmountable. Others missed the face-to-face give-and-take of the traditional classroom, where voice intonation and body language add meaning and clarity to student interaction. The sheer amount of electronic reading was, at times, almost overwhelming. Dr. Penner told us that once, after several days of down-time, he had almost 250 messages. This made it impossible for him to personally respond to every message or assignment—another problem named by several participants.

But, in the end, not one student regretted taking part in this “wonderful adventure,” as Dr. Penner described it. All said they would recommend a similar course to others, with the caution that enrollees become somewhat proficient at e-mail communication before signing on. Because I am completing a degree at Andrews from several hundred miles away, I eagerly look forward to taking part in other distance-learning opportunities. Dr. Penner’s experiment has given us a taste of the future. We all agree with our classmate Carol who said, “It was a serendipitous experience of a lifetime and increased our enthusiasm, knowledge, and experience—thanks to everyone.” ✍

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