Smash Head on Keyboard to Continue...

Two Social-Work Teachers' Experience With Cyber-Teaching

This is a true story about two social-work teachers from Walla Walla College (WWC) in College Place, Washington, who developed and taught a graduate-level, Web-based, social-policy course. Ordinarily, in real life, combining social workers (teachers and students) and technology in the same sentence is considered an oxymoron. This was not much of an exaggeration in our case, as well. We started out as techno-dummies and have done quite a lot of "head smashing" on the computer keyboard!

We thought that other teachers would like to know how we changed our way of thinking about teaching and how we learned to use technology to produce a high-quality Web-based college course.

The good news is that this story has a happy ending, but we're getting ahead of ourselves.

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Course Development for Techno-Dummies: From Tradition to Innovation

By Pamela Keele Cress and Susan B. Smith

Necessity really was the mother of invention in our case. The Master of Social Work (M.S.W.) program at Walla Walla College was designed to meet the needs of the commuting student. In the beginning, classes were held two days a week to accommodate the kind of student who typically enrolls in this program: a parent in his or her mid-30s, employed full-time and living in a rural area. As our program grew, it became apparent that it was impractical to try to have teachers commute to three different program sites. Worse yet, some of our students had to travel great distances (up to eight hours one way) to classes each week. We began to talk in faculty meetings and among ourselves about how to utilize technology to offer classes that reached students in their own communities. The dean asked for volunteers to teach the first online classes. Intrigued, we raised our hands, little knowing what we were getting into

Now, if necessity was the mother of invention, its sibling had to be blissful ignorance. Susan (the techno-pioneer) had previously developed and taught another Web-based class. She was one of four

professors who participated in Walla Walla College's pilot program for distance learning. While she had gained some insights about a few of the pitfalls to avoid in teaching online, she hardly knew where to start with course development and Web-based teaching. Pam (the early adopter of technology) was intrigued by Susan's experience online and suggested that they collaborate to develop an online course that each had taught in a face-to-face setting (though not as a team).

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Our first few discussions about what the course might be like online were pure bliss. Then reality hit. The more we brainstormed about what the social policy class might look like online, the more questions we had about WWC's on-campus information-technology infrastructure. For answers, we worked with the offices of Information Services and Distance Learning on our campus, even though there was somewhat of a language barrier. (We spoke English, they spoke URL, JPG, IP, SPAM, HTML, and RTF!) It soon became evident that we would need to use the technology that we *did* understand—E-mail, Blackboard (a commercial course delivery and management system), discussion boards, and Internet surfing.[1]

Collaboration between the teaching faculty and academic computing staff is vital for success in online education. Both parties need to understand the interrelationship between online courses and technology. As resource people, the information technology staff bring a wealth of knowledge and resources to distance education. Ours at WWC provided the training, hardware, and software that we needed for effective course development, as well as technical support for us and our students. In short, their assistance helped all of us to do less head smashing and more teaching and learning.

What If You Don't Have Any Help?

But what does the teacher do if he or she has little external support in learning to use online courseware or with trouble-shooting? Institutions that are serious about doing distance education "right" must provide both technical support AND formal training. An initial group of teachers needs to obtain training in using the software and in dealing with the many issues related to online instruction, including effective online teaching techniques, which are quite different from what works in face-to-face instruction. Armed with this training, the teachers can serve as mentors for other teachers who are just starting out. As the institution is hiring tech support people, it needs to ensure that they are knowledgeable about the selection and use of online course software, as well as general trouble-shooting and repair of equipment.

However, it may be awhile before some of our institutions achieve this level of technical support. Teachers who have to "go it alone" should start small and seek help wherever they can find it—from friends, students, church members, community experts, evening courses at local colleges, books, Web

resources (such as the Adventist Virtual Learning Network support group/listserv and CIRCLE Web site[2]), and from software manufacturers. As they gradually master the intricacies of creating and teaching an online course, they can mentor those who are just getting started. They should also share their expertise with administrators who are planning the budget for distance education.

Finding New Methods

As we learned more about the technological aspects of distance education, we became more imaginative about course development. We knew we wanted to maintain the experiential methods and skill-building aspects of the face-to-face course, but we also wasted to enhance students' technological literacy and get them to work together as teams. How could this be done online? Feeling somewhat panicky, we set aside our old lectures, handouts, and syllabi, and began to discuss our course objectives in the context of these questions: How would learning occur without a face-to-face classroom? How would we create a virtual learning community? What would be the role of the teacher? What computer skills would the students need to take this course? How could we get students to collaborate on projects? Ultimately, we experienced a methodological paradigm shift when we realized that we could not teach on the Web as we had traditionally done in the classroom. An unexpected outcome is that we can no longer teach face-to-face classes as we did before, either!

Collaboration between the teaching faculty and academic computing staff is vital for success in online education.

One advantage of our collaboration is that we share a similar teaching style. We both like to engage students in dialogue and encourage them to think reflectively about everyday experiences related to their coursework. This philosophical approach drove our course development. We applied Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning[3] by using concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualizations, and active experimentation. Each week, students were expected to engage in concrete experiences, accompanied by reflective observation, which would lead them to construct theoretical conclusions based upon their personal experiences in clinical and political arenas. As students encountered unfamiliar abstract ideas, the assignments stimulated their critical thinking regarding the contrast between their experiences and ideas and the theories found in the textbooks. This process of experience, reflection, and abstract conceptualization encourages students to continue testing their ideas through active experimentation long after the class has concluded.

Using the "subject-centered" approach as described by Palmer[4] kept our course development from over-emphasizing either the expertise of the teacher or the "bells and whistles" of the latest technology. By keeping the subject of social-policy advocacy central to the class goals, we could move away from a traditional teacher-centered role and let students interact directly with the subject matter through personal experience. We did not merely impart information about policy advocacy, we also encouraged our students to become policy advocates. We sent them looking for policy problems in their agencies and legislatures and asked them to actively apply the theoretical knowledge they were gaining from their reading.

Students were also given the means to search for information and interact with policy makers through the use of Internet resources on the course's Web site. The resources covered a broad spectrum of organizations—from advocacy groups and think tanks to state and federal legislatures. The students tracked active state and federal policy through links to the Library of Congress and state legislative bill rooms. They wrote to and spoke with agency administrators, community advocates, and Congressional staff members about their concerns. Many students were surprised to be asked to participate in and even lead out in policy change efforts.

"Will I Need a Computer to Take This Course?"

We speculated that since our students tended to be non-traditional, their computing skills would likely be limited. The class was planned with this in mind. We made several assumptions that had to be adjusted. When we listed "basic computing skills" as a requirement for the class, we assumed that this would include a familiarity with E-mail. We were therefore surprised to encounter several students who had never sent an E-mail! This fact alone was enough to tempt us to once again smash our heads on our computer keyboards! But because our course development emphasized learning processes over technological knowledge, we were able to bring these students up to the minimum skill level very quickly. Based on this experience, we concluded that students could successfully participate in the course if they knew how to use a Web browser and send E-mails with attachments (but we still have to help some students with even these basic skills!).

We learned that 15 to 20 students were about all we could handle in an online class because of the number of posts that are generated. At first, we felt compelled to respond to every post, but this seemed to stifle dialogue. We do check the discussion area regularly and have side conversations with students who may need encouragement or direction. Having discussed this issue with other teachers of online courses, we knew we might have to remove posts that "flamed" other students, but thus far, the vast majority of communications have been cordial, with real bonds being forged among class members.

The initial course was developed using the Blackboard

learning-management system. Other technological resources used in the course included: Internet links, discussion boards, chat rooms, online gradebook, E-mail attachments, and electronic journaling, as well as telephone and faxes.

Susan wrote the initial syllabus for the class and taught the first Web-based version during the winter quarter of 2002. Pam taught the course online in the spring of 2002. She made minor revisions based on Susan's experience and added an online discussion component to enhance student interaction.

Institutions that are serious about doing distance education "right" must provide both technical support AND formal training.

Course Assignments

We chose assignments that built student skills in policy advocacy in two areas: field practicum and the political arenas of state and federal policy-making. Course requirements included two completed project portfolios and a portfolio defense. Students were asked to identify, analyze, and promote change relating to a policy problem from their field practicum agencies. This agency policy case study was the basis for their first portfolio entry. The second portfolio project required student groups to track the progress of social policies in the process of becoming law.

Each week, the course introduced new skills through a series of reflective questions we had developed from course content in the face-to-face class. Students were required to reflect upon the issues and then integrate their answers into the chosen policy case study and legislative tracking assignment. They could not answer the questions without doing the assigned reading and staying engaged with the agencies and politicians in their communities. Student responses were in the form of weekly "reflective electronic journaling" (E-journaling). We tried to respond to these journals within two days of submission. A discussion forum was added to the spring 2002 version of the course, requiring students to dialogue as groups about the legislative tracking portion of this assignment. An online group report of legislative tracking activities and findings was one of the requirements for the class.

During the first week of class, we asked students to complete a VARK Learning Style Inventory,[5] a tool used to assess student learning preferences. Fleming[6] categorizes learning styles into four main areas: auditory, read/write, visual, and kinesthetic. We had used this inventory in face-to-face classes and found it to be valuable with our Web-based class as well. For instance, audio and visual resource links were included on the Blackboard Classroom site for the audio/visual learners. We scheduled phone calls to the auditory learners to assist them in their preferred learning style.

During the last week of the course, the teacher met with the online class face-to-face at one of the two M.S.W. program sites in Montana. This final class focused on portfolio defenses. Each student gave an overview and answered questions about his or her policy assessment project for the quarter. This constituted a significant portion of the final grade, so

we stressed the importance of attendance. The positive results gained from including a face-to-face component in the course led us to conclude that the hybrid course is "best practice," which is consistent with research being conducted at the University of Central Florida.[7] We plan to increase face-to-face contact with students when teaching this class again.

Teachers who have to "go it alone" should start small and seek help wherever they can find it.

Grading and Evaluation

We graded liberally, giving maximum points for the timely weekly submission of reflective E-journal assignments that integrated required readings with the students' experiences. The students were also graded on their portfolio defense at the final class. We modified the spring 2002 course by having students work together in groups, using online forum discussions to complete the legislative tracking project. This allowed the teacher to "lurk" in the discussion forums rather than having to grade the legislative part of the assignment every week. A main forum was provided for all groups to post final versions of assignments for the teacher to grade.

Each student was asked to complete a class evaluation at the end of the course. In addition, the spring 2002 students were asked to take a pre/post test evaluating their mastery of course objectives.

Student Outcomes

Sophocles said, "One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try." This proverb describes well the experience of our students. By participating in policy advocacy, they became more confident of their abilities to advocate for their clients.[8] Students' evaluations reported:

- Increased competence and confidence with the legislative process and interaction with state/federal legislators;
- A greater awareness of their ability to achieve policy change within organizations;
- Having had fun learning.

Several of our students accomplished extraordinary things! For instance, one student, who was casually researching limits to a policy within his agency on services for delinquent youth, actually "found" new money for additional youth services in his state. After writing a new comprehensive package of program services, he was asked to direct the new youth program. Another student was invited by the district attorney to join a coalition group to advocate change in state laws pertaining to elder abuse. When the class ended, she was preparing testimony for the Montana state legislature advocating a more severe penalty for this crime. One student even saved her program from an untimely demise. Due to loss of grant money, a school-based social program was slated for closure, but she formed a community advisory board and diversified funding sources (ending up with a surplus!). As a result, the program was approved for an additional year.

The Next Big Thing?

Many educators and students shy away from teaching and taking Web-based courses out of fear that they lack the necessary computer literacy. Once we got beyond the "smash head on keyboard" stage, we found that Web-based teaching experiences offered positive benefits for both developing and teaching of online courses and for our face-to-face teaching.

We have discovered exciting new ways to present course content that are not merely an imitation of the face-to-face version hidden behind the latest technology. And we have done this by using the technology at hand in creative ways. In the words of Bob Davis, founder of the Internet company Lycos, "Quit looking for the next big thing. Put the technology that's sitting on the shelves to work, and do it with clear purpose."[9]

When we set out to design an online course, our goal was to create a dynamic learning community in which students would gain competency in the subject area. Over time, we have discovered how to design a classroom for the "real world." In the process, we have learned a great deal about using technology in higher education, which makes us feel less like "techno-dummies." Although, on occasion, you may still find us smashing our heads on the keyboard!


Pamela Keele Cress


Susan B. Smith

Pamela Keele Cress, M.S.W., *is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington.* **Susan B. Smith, LIC.S.W.,** *is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Walla Walla College.*

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See: http://www.blackboard.com. For additional information on resources for online teaching, see http://www.avln.org/jae/, which contains a list of materials generated and maintained by AVLN members. Topics include distributed-education course design, distance-education organizations and publications, and a bibliography.

2. See http://circle.adventist.org and E-mail info@avln.org to join the listserv collaborate@avln.org.

3. C. Kolb, *Experiential Learning* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1984).

4. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publ., 1998).

5. N. Fleming, VARK Questionnaire (1997). Retrieved September 6, 2002, from http://www.vark-learn.com.

6. Ibid.

7. B. G. Brown, "Hybrid Couses Are Best," *Syllabus* 15:1 (2001), p. 22.

8. C. J. Rocha, "Evaluating Experiential Teaching Methods in a Policy Practice Course: The Case for Service Learning to Increase Political Participation," *Journal of Social Work Education* 36:1 (2000), pp. 53-63.

9. Bob Davis, quoted in A. Overholt, ed., "Techno Recovery?" *Fast Company* 60 (July 2002), pp. 61-72.

Distance Education Glossary

This glossary is provided for those who are new to distance education. Many of the terms listed below are used in this issue. For additional information and source material, please refer to the following site on the World Wide Web: http://www.avln.org/jae/.

Asynchronous – A type of two-way communication, often between teachers and students, or between students in an online class, which occurs with time delay, allowing participants to respond in their own time frame.

Blended learning/WebCentric – Courses that combine online and face-to-face instruction.

Cyberspace – The nebulous "place" where humans interact over computer networks. Term coined by William Gibson in *Neuromancer*.

Desktop videoconferencing – Videoconferencing that uses a personal computer equipped with a fast Internet connection (with at least a 28.8 Kbps speed modem), a microphone, and a video camera. It may incorporate two-way or multi-way video and audio and is most appropriate for use with small groups or individuals.

Distance education – An educational situation in which the instructor and students are separated by time, location, or both. Education or training courses are delivered to remote locations via **synchronous** or **asynchronous** means of instruction, including written correspondence, text, graphics, audiotape and videotape, CD-ROM, online learning (using the World Wide Web), audio- and videoconferencing, interactive TV, and facsimile (fax). Distance learning does not preclude the use of the traditional classroom. The definition of distance education includes but is broader than E-learning.

Distance learning – The desired outcome of **distance education**. The two terms are often used interchangeably.

E-learning – Covers a wide set of applications and processes, such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, **virtual classrooms**, and digital collaboration. It includes the delivery of content via Internet, **intranet/extranet (LAN/WAN)**, audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV, and CD-ROM.

Hybrid courses – Approximately half of the normal classroom hours are scheduled on campus, while students do the remainder of their work online using discussion lists, E-mail, and chat rooms.

LAN/WAN – **Local-Area Network:** A group of personal computers and/or other devices, such as printers or servers, that are located in a relatively limited area, such as an office, and can communicate and share information with one another. **Wide-Area Network**: A computer network that spans a relatively large area. Usually made up of two or more local area networks. The Internet is a WAN.

Listserv – A software program for combining and automating mailing lists and discussion groups on a computer network over the Internet. A form of one-to-many communication using E-mail.

Synchronous – A type of two-way communication that occurs with virtually no time delay, allowing participants to respond in real time.

URL – **Uniform Resource Locator**, or World Wide Web address.

Virtual classroom – The online learning space where students and instructors interact. It is the space in cyberspace where all the typical activities of a classroom take place (readings, discussions, teacher comments, assessment, and thinking). This space may be structured using online learning platform software such as WebCT or Blackboard, which incorporate features such as bulletin board, chat, whiteboard, assessment tools, and so on.

Web-enhanced courses – Face-to-face courses that include Web resources and links; they may also use E-mail and an online discussion forum.

Web-based or online courses – Courses are entirely taught on the World Wide Web; students and teacher never meet in a physical classroom.