Mapping Success: Essential Elements of an Effective Online Learning Experience

By Danielle Hathcock

An online course is like walking into a foreign land with an entire map laid out, but having no sense of the land's origin or how to navigate the terrain. How the instructor formats and interacts with the class will ultimately determine the student's travel experience. The purpose of this article is to provide an understanding of how the elements of an online course are integrated such that they form a cohesive whole that creates easy travel based upon instructor presence, appropriate feedback, and easy navigation for students.

Instructor Presence — The Mapmaker

Instructor presence is vital to create in an online course, because without it, the class becomes an impersonal experience guided only by text and the other electronic medium. Just as in a seated class, the presence of an instructor provides a sense of leadership and security for the students, a central point person that guides them in the learning experience. In an online class, one has to be conscious to create this presence, as it is not patently evident as it is in a seated class.

Instructor presence can be created in a variety of ways. The welcome announcement and faculty bio both provide an initial presence, but these are not in and of themselves enough. True instructor presence requires consistency throughout the course, and should be felt in the other areas. This can be achieved by the following: having consistent formatting, putting photos in the faculty bio and on the main introduction so that students could put a face to the instructor's name, having the instructor provide his or her own icebreaker and having students relate theirs to it, providing clear objectives for the course (and relating those to each lesson so that the expectations are clear), and having the instructor take part in the discussions. These elements give the student a sense that there is a "mapmaker," and not just a map.

Instructor Feedback — The Tour Guide

Instructor feedback is one of the most vital elements of an online course. It is interesting to note that instructor feedback is also a vital part of the aforementioned instructor presence. Feedback helps the students recognize that there is an instructor that is monitoring their progress. You can have instructor presence without feedback, but the presence would likely seem detached and impersonal. Feedback adds an interactive component that brings warmth to the experience. Put another way, if instructor presence is the sense of the "mapmaker," then instructor feedback is the "tour-guide," so to speak.

Feedback can be found in many areas. Clearly, grades are the most obvious avenue. However, there is great opportunity for feedback within the discussions. This type of feedback helps the students know that they are on track and moving in a direction that is consistent with the course objectives. Feedback also includes giving reinforcement as quickly as possible, as doing so will help ilicit the behavior that is desired. This might include having a quiz with a function that produces immediate correction. It is also important to let students know the time frame for answering emails (which really should be within 36 hours) so that students don't have to worry that their questions are just "hanging out in cyber-space."
Navigation — The Map
Lastly, a map is only as useful as it is accessible. The legend, the key, etc, all must make sense and be relevant if the map is to be useful. There are several elements one may implement in order to make navigation as easy as possible. First, have a focus to each lesson and ensure this focus is brought to attention in each element. This includes making sure that extraneous and irrelevant material is omitted, making the lesson as succinct as possible. Provide instructions below each folder, have deadlines typed in bold and in a color so they are easy to spot, have both a preview and a checklist on the lessons page, and serialize items (and ensure that this serialization is the same on every page the item is found). It is also good to have options such that the student can find the same material from more than one link (making it so that they can find their destination with more than one route). Lastly, have instructions that are qualitatively the same in each place the item is found so that there is a consistent explanation of the assignment, thereby reducing possible confusion.

Last Thoughts
Ultimately, a good online course has elements that do not singularly exist, but rather has integrated elements that are part of a fluid, dynamic experience. A good online instructor works to ensure that each element of the course builds upon the course objectives and works in conjunction with one another, rather than as separate pieces. Online courses can be impersonal and flat, or they can be vibrant and robust. The feel of the course and the experience for the student will chiefly rest on the instructor's ability to provide a succinct, clear, accessible, course with guided direction—in other words, an accessible map made by a mapmaker who serves as the tour guide.

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