Designing Online Courses for Educators and English Language Learners

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Abstract

The demand for online coursework continues to be at the forefront of trends in education and dominates academic discussions. The economic impact of online education is significant and dramatically contributes to changes at institutions of higher education as they reassess their goals and philosophies to meet the needs of today's student body. Across the globe, public and private institutions are tasked with designing academic programs, tools and resources to serve students who are new learners of English. A myriad of programs and online opportunities support this mode of teaching and reinforce self-directed learning strategies and online platforms. It is crucial to support exemplary curriculum, capturing and sharing cutting-edge experiences that lead to quality courses and student success. A key component of these endeavors is developing and utilizing state-of-the-art technology and coursework, while incorporating outstanding resources and methods to reach educators and students. High-quality technology infrastructure and timely support for online learning platforms is essential to ensure a level of confidence for educators.

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss design, digital content, and implementation techniques for online course development and delivery. Critical issues and practices for English Language Learners (ELLs) and educators of ELL students will be explored including strategies for aligning course content and online platforms. A demonstration of methods and lesson components along with current approaches in course design will be shared. Content area, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, will also be addressed to emphasize the importance of cross disciplinary and interdisciplinary learning that is essential for ELL students. Incorporation of Information Communications Technology (ICT) in education at all levels is tantamount to success as education is transformed for 21st century learners with high expectations for interactive instructional technologies.

2. Review of the literature

The complex and diverse needs of ELLs require educators to engage students and incorporate online methodologies and best practices that promote high levels of student achievement. Educators must develop multi-dimensional technologies to address the specific needs of these students. The pedagogical potential to enhance teaching and learning for linguistically diverse students is central to goals and objectives of online course design. At the university level, students are requesting online and blended learning. University educators are working to develop new online, asynchronous courses as well as convert face-to-face traditional courses to online and hybrid platforms. For example, in the Department of Literacy, Language and Culture at Boise State University, English as a New Language (ENL) endorsement courses are moving to a fully online platform in order to serve educators from across the state, particularly in rural settings.

Beare points out that there has been much debate over the use of computer assisted language learning (CALL) in the ENL classroom. [1] He further suggests that there are numerous ways to use computers for teaching, particularly for communicative teaching. Critical authentic experiences can be addressed when learning online that will stimulate learning and actively engage students in the process. Cognitive presence is a core concept in defining a community of inquiry [2] and essential when developing online courses for ENL students. Quality Matters is an international, inter-institutional program with quality assurance processes that are designed to certify educators in online course design and allow them to

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collaborate with peers. [3] This program was utilized to develop asynchronous online multicultural education courses for preservice teachers at Boise State University. Collaborative internet partnerships have been founded across the globe through computer mediated connections representing an interdisciplinary mix of communication, technology, education, and journalism. [4]

3. Online course development

There are numerous competitive programs and opportunities for online course development utilizing a variety of platforms. Quality Matters provides guidance and training for online course development leading to best practices. Key aspects of this program include development of modules supported by faculty centered guidance and peer review components culminating in quality assurance processes. In order to develop coursework for the ENL classroom, course and lesson objectives become central to the process. Standards for curriculum and instruction have been developed to ensure that all students are actively engaged in online learning. Rubrics for online education are essential and aid in the evaluation of the instructional design. For example, designing a course on multicultural education for educators included the essential elements of discussion boards, textbook and article reading and assignments, reflection papers, group projects, community service work and a final synthesis research paper. This course will be taught asynchronously using the Blackboard interactive program that allows students to post assignments, view grades, engage in discussion, and access embedded web links. Announcements and teacher feedback are readily accessible.

4. Implementation techniques

In order to ensure that the course is relevant, timely and based on rigorous academic standards, Quality Matters standards and procedures are based on reliable and validated research methodology. The learning objectives are connected to a course design pattern and map consisting of a sequence of learning activities that support student achievement of the learning objectives. [5] Module menus within the learning management system meticulously address each aspect of the course and determine the amount of time that students are expected to devote to each component of the lesson and accompanying activities. Rubrics are developed to relate expected outcomes of the lesson and assignments and are connected to the accompanying assessment plan. Once the course is designed, it is downloaded and goes live on the Blackboard website so that it can be accessed by students, managed and taught by professors.

5. Online course delivery

Recent developments in information and communication technology allow for classes to be taught in a variety of ways, and teachers are faced with the challenge of selecting the appropriate delivery mechanism specific for their course content and audience, and to utilize the best available tools to assist with the selected delivery mechanisms. Instructors may offer web assisted, blended, hybrid, asynchronous and synchronous online, or accelerated courses, but choosing the right mechanism depends on content, level of the class, technological availability, and technical literacy of the instructor. Technological advancements can be powerful instruments for reaching ELLs if they are used in the proper context. A study by Burns et al. [6] looking at the delivery platform for an information systems course suggested that for introductory level classes, students performed better in face-to-face classes, but for more advanced courses, student performance was not impacted by the delivery mechanism. The Course Delivery Decision Model (CDDM) [7] acknowledges the interdependence between course design and course delivery, and uses a backwards design approach that takes into account learning outcome goals to select the appropriate delivery mode.

In the STEM fields, use of online course delivery or online course tools can be important ways to improve student comprehesion and supplement instruction. Studies show that when course delivery relies soley on an online platform, student retention and performance decreases if the course is taken for elective credit or if the class is at a lower/introductory level [8,9]. It is recommended that online methodologies are incorporated to enhance student performance, but that a blended or hybrid approach is more appropriate for the introductory level in STEM diciplines. When exploring if there are ethnicity, gender, or age biases in course delivery, Wladis et al. [10] found that non-traditional students performed better online, and younger student or female student performance declined in the online environment. The study found no

performance gaps attributable to racial differences. In fact, Flowers [11] advoctes for the use of the online platform as a way to close the gap for minority participation in the STEM fields.

When designing a course for the online environment or focusing on supplementing course instruction with technological advancement to reach a targeted audience, a myriad of resources exist to enrich course design. Instructors can select a text with a paired online software package targeted to improve student comprehension. Many of these online supplemental packages incorporate strategies to focus on the material the students struggle with the most. Educators can take advantage of online tools like Kahoot or Polleverywhere that combine face-to-face instruction with online quizzes and polling to reinforce content and create a fun, real-time response mechanism for student communication. In the STEM diciplines, courses can be designed to blend face-to-face content delivery with simulated online lab software.

6. Conclusion

Designing online courses for educators and ELLs is in a dynamic state. Quality online course development is essential for students and digital design curriculum for English language competence can stimulate learning and provide productive engagement when implemented successfully. If course design is targeted toward learning outcomes and the student audience being served, instructors can use technological advancements to improve performance, enhance class participation, and reinforce course content. Acqusition of English skills is essential to many for building career and educational success, and is enriched through the incorporation of technological, student-focused advancements and methodologies. Global connections are strengthed through English language development contributing to relationships, skills and opportunities worldwide. We are confident that the outlook for online education is strong and will continue to grow in the transglobal and transcultural educational settings of the future.

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