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13.9: Best Practices for Faculty Who Teach Online

Editorial

Too often new online practitioners are unaware of prior theory and research in either education in general or distance education in particular. This lack of a tie to what has gone before can make it difficult to identify the reasons *why* a practice works and to move beyond a focus on “what worked for me” to “what will work for all of us.” This month’s DEOSNEWS offers a reflection on the appropriateness of applying theory- and research-based principles for good practice first developed in 1987 for the face-to-face higher education setting to the online environment.

Best Practices for Faculty Who Teach Online

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Abstract

Online faculty members need to work smarter when they teach online. By applying the seven principles for good practice as defined by Chickering and Gamson in 1987, faculty can make their online teaching experience effective for themselves and their students.

This article will explain the seven principles and provide examples of how the principles are implemented by online faculty.

Introduction

Distance education has become a major source of new business and income. Many colleges and universities are finding that distance education is an important new product and are placing not only courses, but also entire programs online (Gubernick & Ebeling, 1997). In order for these schools to compete, they need accreditation. Accreditation agencies want data that shows learners are receiving a high-quality education in both a traditional learning environment as well as in a distance education environment (Dasher-Alston & Patton, 1998; Pond, 2002; Willis, 1995; Yeung, 2002). Faculty influence how individuals learn in both traditional and distance settings. Who sets the standard for how faculty members influence learners in these settings? Who determines the guidelines for quality in education?

In March 1987, the *AAHE Bulletin* published “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education.” Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson created the principles with help from higher education colleagues, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), and the Education Commission of the States, supported by funding from the Johnson Foundation. The principles reflected findings from research on undergraduate education performed over many years (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996). These principles are considered by many to “establish fundamental guidelines for quality higher education and to provide the building blocks of success by faculty, students,

administrators, and staff' (Winona State University, 1999. p 1). As such, researchers have already used the seven principles as a foundation for looking at distance education and online courses.

The Center for Research on Learning and Technology at Indiana University used Chickering and Gamson's seven principles to evaluate four online courses offered at another major university. The purpose of their study was to provide feedback to the other university regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the online courses they reviewed, using the seven principles as their primary evaluation criteria (Graham, Cagiltay, Craner, Lim & Duffy, 2000). The Institute for Higher Education Policy prepared a report highlighting the benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education. The group preparing the report reviewed the literature on the topic and found Chickering and Gamson's seven principles were key to many of their benchmarks for successful implementation of distance education (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000).

Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson developed the seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education along with scholars who had conducted research on the impact of the college experience, and on issues in higher education related to the organization, economics, and policy. They based their initial ideas on a set of principles that were being used by the Council on Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) (Chickering & Gamson, 1999). In a brainstorming session with the other scholars, Chickering and Gamson were able to define the principles that were published in the March 1987 issue of the *AAHE Bulletin* (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

According to Chickering and Gamson (1987, p. 3), The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education are:

1. Good practice encourages student-faculty contact.
2. Good practice encourages cooperation among students.
3. Good practice encourages active learning.
4. Good practice gives prompt feedback.
5. Good practice emphasizes time on task.
6. Good practice communicates high expectations.
7. Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

These principles have become a springboard for further research and adaptation in the area of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1999).

Good practice encourages student-faculty contact.

The fact that learners benefit from interaction with faculty may be obvious, but this good practice is not always followed. According to Sturnick and Connors (1995), most colleges say they promote interactivity between faculty and learners, but the reality of tight budgets, large classes of learners, and a heavy use of graduate or teaching assistants limit the amount and quality of this type of contact. The relationship between interaction and learning is well documented in the literature. Colvin (1998) recognized interaction as an integral part of learning and suggested that faculty maximize their interactions with learners to help facilitate learning. Sorcinelli's (1991) review of research on effective

teaching identified student-faculty interaction as one of the key faculty characteristics for positive learner evaluations.

Faculty can promote student-faculty contact online by building a communication mechanism into the course and by encouraging its use by students. Keeping communication within the learning management system allows the faculty member and student to keep focused on the course and the content. Examples of built in communication include public threaded discussion areas and virtual office hours.

Threaded discussion may be used for general Q&A sessions or the instructor can use it as an instructional tool. There is an opportunity to post questions that tie into the learning objective for the week. Students will be allowed to make an initial posting, and respond to their peers during the course of the week. The instructor has the capability of monitoring the conversations and interjecting when necessary. The class may use the chat feature of the learning management system to conduct virtual office hours.

Good practice encourages cooperation among students.

A cooperative learning environment is one where learners work together, in pairs or groups, to achieve a learning outcome or objective. According to Hatfield and Hatfield (1995), there are benefits to learners engaged in cooperative learning. They have found that learners care more about learning because there are others relying on them. Learners also retain more because they are working in both a social and intellectual context as they work on an activity. They enjoy the cooperative interaction with classmates versus the

competitive interaction that existed for so long in education (Hatfield, Hatfield & Collie, 1996).

Many course designers build cooperative learning into online courses because it is a key skill that students use in the working world. Workers telecommute, conference call, and work in virtual teams to help keep costs low. Learning to work collaboratively is a life skill that many students enjoy practicing while in school. Faculty members can encourage cooperative learning by providing team projects.

An initial exercise for a team project could be the development of a charter. The charter incorporates the rules and regulations of the team. The team must come to consensus as to what is to be included in the charter. It is important that roles, responsibilities, and deadlines are addressed. This charter becomes the binding agreement among team members.

Good practice encourages active learning.

“Learners learn what learners do” (Ledford & Sleeman, 2000, p.10). Learners must be active participants in order to construct, build, and devise concepts for learning (Driscoll, 2000; Kearsley, 2001; Ledford & Sleeman, 2000; Perry, 2002). Weimer (1993) states that students learn more, have better retention, can apply their knowledge more effectively, and continue to learn when they are actively engaged in the process of learning.

Silberman (1996, p. ix) states, “There is a whole lot more to teaching than telling!”

When students are active in learning, they are using their brains to study ideas and solve

problems. Silberman (1996) also states that student learning is facilitated by hearing it, seeing it, asking questions about it, discussing it, and most of all doing it.

By the nature of the course content, many online courses promote active learning.

Desktop application courses require students to actively participate in learning since the students work with the computer and software to build skills based on the application they need to learn. Other computer courses, including programming and networking, provide a similar opportunity to build hands-on skills through active online learning.

Good practice gives prompt feedback.

Benson, Mattson and Adler (1995) define feedback as any procedure used to inform a learner of the degree of appropriateness or correctness of a response to an instructional stimulus. Feedback comes in many forms. Hattie and Jaeger (1998) state that positive feedback focused on the assignment has a positive effect on a learner in terms of attitude and achievement. Black and William (1998) reported in their research findings a direct and positive correlation between frequency of feedback and learning. Feedback is essential to the learning process. Timely feedback can help a student better achieve learning goals (Hatfield, Hatfield & Collie, 1996).

Faculty can provide online students with prompt feedback by implementing a response policy that works for everyone. Not all feedback has to provide the correct answers or be in the form of a graded assignment. Sometimes an acknowledgement to a student that a question or assignment was received is enough to make the student feel comfortable. In

accelerated courses, prompt grading and feedback is critical to student success. There is nothing more frustrating to a student than to submit a couple of weeks worth of assignments only to find out three weeks later that they were all completed incorrectly and that s/he is in jeopardy of failing the course.

Good practice emphasizes time on task.

Time on task can be one of the most difficult of the seven principles to exemplify. Adult learners, unlike their just-out-of-high-school counterparts, have many more demands on their time: full-time jobs, family, financial obligations, etc. all take from time on task.

One of the biggest challenges faculty face is keeping an online learner focused enough to make education and learning a priority with so many other things demanding attention.

Fisher and Ford (1998) stated that spending time on task does not guarantee a learner's success. Further, they suggest that learners must spend time and effort on guided instruction related to course outcomes and objectives in order to be successful.

Faculty can assist with this process by writing a detailed syllabus with learning objectives, assessments, and due dates, allowing the learner to manage time more effectively (Sorcinelli, 1991). In addition, it may be beneficial to provide a rubric of the value of each component of the assessment. For example, if a research paper is worth 20% of the grade, how will the instructor evaluate the paper to see if the student has successfully completed the required tasks? Instructors need to provide specific details as to what is required (e.g., proper writing style is 10% of the grade).

Good practice communicates high expectations.

Chickering and Gamson (1991) state, “expect more and you will get it.” High expectations are important for everyone, including those who prepare well and those who do not. High expectations are for the procrastinators and for the motivated. Faculty who expect more from their learners find that learner performance becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy because learners expect more from themselves and will make the extra effort to succeed (Chickering & Gamson, 1991).

Grading rubrics can be a wonderful tool to communicate expectations for assignments and assessments. Faculty can provide a rubric to students so that the students can ask clarification questions. Many students appreciate the guidance and will do a better job because they can focus on what the expected requirements are.

Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Lidman, Smith, and Purce (1995) state that good practice requires faculty to create a learning environment where all learners have the opportunity to learn in a way that is most effective for them. Learners bring different experiences with them to a course; they need the opportunity to show their talents, discuss their experiences, and learn in ways that are best for them (Chickering & Gamson, 1991).

Faculty members can tap into student talent by providing a threaded discussion each week where students can showcase their individual strengths. Students learn from the experiences of others, which can help put material in context, making it more applicable. Another option would be to include an icebreaker at the beginning of the course. One

suggestion would be to allow the team to break into groups and discuss their learning styles. The instructor could administer a learning style inventory to the students. This will provide the class an opportunity to discuss similarities and differences. It is also beneficial for the instructor; the instructor may have to adjust his or her style in order to meet the needs of the class.

Conclusion

Faculty members are encouraged to try different ideas that are based on the seven principles for good practice. Ask the students what is working and what is not. Let them come up with ways to make their learning experience meaningful. The more interaction faculty members have with students, the better students will feel about their learning experiences.

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