Best Practices in Virtual Classrooms: Strategies for Program and Classroom Development

Emily Dane-Staples, St. John Fisher College
Leigh Ann Danzey-Bussell, University of West Georgia
Todd Harrison, St. John Fisher College
Heather Lawrence-Benedict, Ohio University
Ellen Staurowsky, Drexel University

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Last year’s panel entitled “Online Learning is Here to Stay” presented an overview of the changing nature of education with the increasing number of online courses and degree programs. Student enrollment in online courses continues to grow with over 6.7 million students taking a course online during Fall 2011 and 32% of college students reporting they take at least one course online (Sloan Consortium, 2013). In response to tech-savvy Millennial students, colleges have had to rethink how they operate (Carlson, 2005). Steir and Schneider (2009) encourage sport management professors and administrators to explore the feasibility of online courses as neglecting to do so could render their “program lacking in the versatility of various teaching methods” (p. 56). While the 2013 presentation explored online education at the macro level, this presentation will serve as a follow-up exploring micro-level online education regarding online classrooms and programmatic strategies. As there are many levels of online education ranging from flipped classrooms to fully online programs, this presentation focuses on specific techniques and tools that have broad applicability. Prensky (2001) coined the terms digital natives (today’s students) and digital immigrants (professors) to define the evolvement of today’s students and faculty. Digital natives are tech savvy, having grown up with technology; digital immigrants have “adopted” technology. Now, according to Prensky, we must create digital wisdom collaboratively.

In general, there are three levels of faculty, student, and technology interaction for a course: the face to face (F2F or web-enhanced), web-hybrid or blended learning, and the web-based learning that is fully online (Billings, 2008). Blended learning classes use technology (online environments, multi-media, video conferencing, etc.) between 30%-80% of the time with the remaining time being F2F. Students participating in fully online courses may meet with an instructor only once or twice, or perhaps never in real life (IRL) (Billings, 2008). It has been suggested that one reason online programs fail is that they try to operate within the same paradigm of learning and teaching that F2F programs subscribe to (Morris & Stommel, 2013). Even if an online and F2F program or course has the same goals, very different methods are required to successfully attain those goals (Morris & Stommel, 2013). These different delivery options are still in the early stages of development and meaningful assessment in sport management, which is exciting to faculty willing to take risks and share successes and failures. Each of the panelists share experience in at least two of these types of classrooms and will be sharing some of their development practices that have led to effective virtual classrooms.

In transitioning F2F education to an online environment, careful consideration and thought must be given to a variety of learning objectives, technology considerations, student learning styles and expectations, and available resources (Bennett, 2002; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Steir & Schneider, 2009). Recording lectures and uploading an exam to a classroom management system (CMS) such as WebCT or Blackboard does not constitute an online class. The necessary skills and pedagogy for teaching online differ from the traditional F2F interactions. Both faculty and student must recognize this difference and adjust their behaviors and expectations. Studies have revealed that the methods used for transitioning F2F instruction have significant impacts on student engagement and retention of materials (Bennett, 2002; Cameron & Dwyer, 2005; Gerber & Scott, 2011). For faculty, this transition requires both vertical and horizontal buy-in and support in the form of professional development, mentoring and recognition for teaching online from administrators (Gagneaux, 2010; Macy 2007; Burke, 2005).

As technology is advancing, the ability to design interactive online courses is becoming more feasible and quite frankly, expected. But with faculty development and mentoring regarding online education largely absent, it is difficult for faculty to address this new expectation. This panel will help to bridge this gap by providing strategies for designing ways that student learning objectives can be met in virtual classrooms. Depending on desired educational
outcomes, asynchronous and synchronous virtual classrooms can be created (Hrastinski, 2008). Moving asynchronous learning tasks out of a F2F classroom and into an online environment can be beneficial not only for students, but for faculty attempting to make the most out of their synchronous time with students (Bennett, Henson, & Connaughton, 2001). Content-related tasks are most easily done in an asynchronous setting, whereas planning of tasks and social support need to occur synchronously (Hrastinski, 2008; Ko & Rossen, 2010). Knowledge of this distinction becomes important in selecting where tasks are completed (F2F or online) and how student interactions are structured in specific learning episodes (Gagnon & Collay, 2001). Social support in an online environment from peers and instructors has been found to be critical in positive responses to online environments (Bennett, et. al, 2001).

Aside from content-related tasks intended to convey specific core sport management knowledge, virtual classrooms must also facilitate development of other skills. Critical thinking is one of the most important skills in the 21st century (Gerber & Scott, 2011). As key components of this are the abilities of evaluation and explanation, elements of synchronous interactions in an online environment are important (Gerber & Scott, 2011). Other skills gained from engagement in virtual classrooms include accountability, effective communication (writing), discipline (time management), multitasking and teamwork and leadership (Anderson, 2012; Ramos, 2012). Panelists will discuss the types of activities they have used online in synchronous or asynchronous manners.

Aside from adding online elements to F2F courses or transitioning a single course online, fully online degree granting programs are becoming more common in sport management as a result of trends in online education nationally. As of 2007, 83% of residential four-year colleges and two-year community colleges operated some sort of distance education program (Pina, 2008). Consideration will be given to the possibilities these types of programs offer to the field of sport management as well as potential challenges.

Drs. Dane-Staples, Danzey-Bussell, and Harrison will be sharing strategies for utilizing online resources within a traditional F2F course and teaching online courses as part of a primarily F2F degree program while Drs. Lawrence-Benedict and Staurowsky will be sharing online degree program development. One or two graduate students have also been invited to sit on this panel to share their perspectives as well.