

## Sabbatical Leave Report - Fall 2018

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***“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”***

*—Benjamin Franklin*

My sabbatical leave from El Camino College in the Fall of 2018 gave me the opportunity to enroll in two distance education graduate level courses at California State University, East Bay. The purpose of enrolling in these courses was to gain a deeper understanding of how technology tools can be utilized to engage students through active learning, and to explore the best practices for promoting student success in virtual classrooms. Participation in my first distance education courses for academic credit has given me greater perspective, both as an online student, and as a relatively new distance education instructor.

I successfully completed the following 3.0 unit graduate courses: OTL 601: Introduction to Online Teaching and Learning and OTL 602: Teaching Models for Online Instruction. These courses are cross-listed in both the Masters of Arts in Education and the Online Teaching and Learning Certificate programs at California State University, East Bay.

- **Introduction to Online Teaching and Learning** focused on the design and delivery of education in a virtual classroom to diverse students using asynchronous and

synchronous methods. Consideration was given to alternative learning strategies, retention challenges, accessibility issues, copyrights, fair use of materials, and differences between traditional course settings and the digital classroom.

- **Teaching Models for Online Instruction** applied knowledge of how students learn and educational psychology to the online environment. The course explored ways to foster a deeper level of understanding in distance education students and to help them attain higher levels of cognitive processes on Bloom's Revised Taxonomy. The course most notably focused on instructional design; curriculum development; multiple intelligences and learning styles; learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner interactions; advantages and limitations of modern technology tools; learning outcomes; and alternative assessment strategies.

Both of these graduate courses demonstrated active learning via their course requirements, while providing evidence from academic research as to the educational strategies that have proven most successful in online classrooms. Active participation was required in multiple discussion forum threads each week. Participants were asked to demonstrate graduate level writing and critical thinking while reflecting upon information presented digitally in course modules and via academic journal articles. In addition, students were required to respond to the experiences and commentary of other student peers. Both courses also required the completion of group projects. This allowed students who are (or will be) online instructors to gain an understanding of the value of students learning from each other, as well as the unique challenges of

asynchronous collaborative learning within a course management system. Numerous individual assignments were utilized, which necessitated synthesizing and applying knowledge learned to our individual disciplines and professions. In my case, that meant considering my own Economics courses, the diverse types of students that I teach, and how I can improve student success and retention through more active learning. Achieving such goals will involve intelligent instructional design that is highly student-centered using group discussions and collaborative assignments/activities. Furthermore, it will require giving greater attention to the reality that students vary in intelligence combinations and learning styles, and diversifying instruction to a greater extent than I have in the past.

Important lessons from these courses that helped me gain a better understanding of my role as an online instructor and how I can more ably assist students, include the following:

## **Envisioning My Role as an Online Instructor**

While there are many responsibilities and duties of an online instructor, my primary roles include that of (1) instructional designer, (2) class facilitator, and (3) learning community participant.

## **Instructional Design**

Evidence from pedagogical research on successful instructional design cites three vital factors: (1) demonstrate what is about to be learned and (2) practice what is

learned (3) using real-world problems. The technology of a course management system such as Canvas offers ideal tools with which to achieve these ideal goals of instructional design for my courses.

An ideal distance education course design utilizes various modern technology tools, as well as employ interactive instructional strategies to help online students achieve course goals. Weekly announcements and assigned modules can be used to demonstrate what is to be learned and guide students through the learning process. Students can practice applying knowledge, reflect upon course material, as well as interact with and learn from their peers in guided class discussions. Students can also collaborate together on real-world problem-solving projects in small-group workspaces, chatrooms, discussion forums, and via the Canvas messaging system.

### **Class Facilitator**

Evidence from research suggests that student engagement and active learning can be achieved by promoting interaction and cooperation among students. Students who may be shy and reserved in a traditional classroom may be less inhibited and more engaged in the “faceless” online classroom. As class facilitator, my role is to stimulate communal discourse using discussion question prompts that align with course objectives. Discussions and student collaborative assignments promote the sharing of diverse perspectives and provide opportunities for students to apply tools of economic analysis to current economic and social problems. Many researchers have documented

statistical evidence of a relationship between building community in online courses and achievement of student learning outcomes.

### **Class Participant**

Distance education courses often strip away the personality of an instructor so that students feel as if they are taking a course from a computer. As a participant in the learning community, my role as instructor is to inject some of my personality into the course (such as in video recordings), model well-reasoned responses in the discussion forum, and establish a welcoming and encouraging social presence in the course. By successfully building community through active instructor participation, students are likely to be more actively engaged in their own learning.

### **Challenges**

#### **Retention**

A challenge pertinent to online classrooms is keeping retention high and minimizing the extent to which students fall behind, given the amount of self-directed learning required. Given that students may find an impersonal online course to be an isolating experience, it is imperative that the instructor develop course elements that facilitate student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions to promote a welcoming digital classroom and actively involve students in the learning process. To combat the ease with which students may exit an online classroom with one "click", course material is best presented in relatively short segments and utilize varied instructional strategies. By clearly communicating course expectations, assigning new modules and tasks weekly, providing clearly posted deadlines, and engaging students

through active learning, instructors can assist students in achieving success in distance education courses.

### **Multiple Intelligences & Diverse Learning Styles**

Students possess varying multiple combinations of intelligences and process information in different ways. In recognition of this, I hope to increasingly vary instructional tools and assign activities that enable students to engage with the course material in personalized ways. Hopefully, my students can be empowered to choose readings and discussion/project topics in economics that are of particular interest to them. Course modules can be used to present material in multiple ways via text, audio, video, pictures, interactive learning activities, and graphs to accommodate verbal, visual, and auditory learning styles. Completing these graduate courses inspired me to think about new ways to help diverse students learn.

### **Instructional Strategies & Learning Objectives**

Instructional strategies provide students with a support structure, or “scaffolding”, so that they can gain proficiency over course material that would be difficult to achieve independently. Once concepts or skills are mastered by students, the scaffolding can then be removed. In order for instructional strategies to be effective, they must be well-aligned with the lesson objectives. If the strategies are misaligned, students may perform poorly on assessments and quickly become demoralized. Lower student success and course retention rates are likely to result.

## **Conclusion**

By embracing the technologies of this new millennium to a greater extent, I can better provide my students with more innovative (and hopefully exciting) learning opportunities. Completing these digital courses at California State University, East Bay has inspired me to reflect on new ways to enhance learning for my online students and help them achieve higher orders of cognitive learning. To better succeed creating an active online classroom, I hope to spend even more time in the role of a facilitator (a “guide on the side”), as opposed to a lecturer (a “sage on the stage”).