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Effective Strategies for Instructing Online Courses

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EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES
FOR INSTRUCTING ONLINE COURSES

by

Brandi Nicole Van Horn

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

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ABSTRACT

Effective Strategies for Instructing Online Courses

In this research project, the author compares the traditional learning environment to the online learning environment from a facilitators' perspective. Since there can be ambiguity in the instructor's role and function in an online environment, this research project represents an attempt to provide a concise, applicable list of effective strategies that instructors new to the online environment can utilize when teaching online. The strategies are based on methods and techniques utilized by instructors/researchers who have spent years in the field of higher education researching topics such as distance education, independent learning, and online education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Purpose of the Project.....	2
Chapter Summary.....	3
2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	5
Introduction.....	5
History of Online Education.....	6
Current Status of Online Learning.....	7
Case Study.....	8
Background.....	9
Results.....	10
Discussion.....	10
Definition of an Online Learning Environment Versus a Traditional Learning Environment.....	11
Teacher’s Role in a Traditional Setting Versus an Online Setting.....	12
Understanding Distance Education.....	14
Understanding the Distance Learner.....	16
The Shift from Teacher Centered Instruction to Self-Directed Learning.....	18
Elements that are Transferable.....	21
Which is More Effective.....	23
Chapter Summary.....	24
3. METHOD.....	24
Target Population.....	24
Procedures.....	24
Goals of the Applied Project.....	25
Assessment.....	25
Chapter Summary.....	26
4. RESULTS.....	27
Introduction.....	27
Effective Strategies for Instructing Online Courses.....	28
Understanding the History of Online Learning.....	30
A Call for Innovation and Shift in Mind-Set.....	31
Understanding the Roles for Both Instructor and Student.....	32

Timely Communication & Setting Clear Standards and Expectations.....	33
Fostering an Online Community.....	35
Knowing the Demographics, Dynamics, and Preferences of the Online Learner.....	36
Bibliography.....	37
Chapter Summary.....	38
 5. DISCUSSION.....	 39
Resolution of the Original Problem.....	39
Limitations to the Project.....	40
Peer Assessment.....	41
Recommendations for Further Development.....	44
Project Summary.....	44
 REFERENCES.....	 46
 APPENDICES	
A. Effective Strategies for Instructing Online Courses	
Evaluation Form.....	48

LIST OF TABLES

1. Effective Strategies Peer Assessment Results 42

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is a rapidly growing phenomenon in higher education, and for some constituents, such as faculty members, this growing trend presents a new teaching environment and new instructor responsibilities. Smith, Ferguson, and Carrie (2002, as cited in Easton, 2003) state that many faculty have never taught online and may wonder what competencies are required to distinguish online teaching from traditional classroom teaching. As with any emerging trend, there is change and resistance to change. Online learning is different from the traditional classroom environment which produces a need for a shift in the teacher's role, the student's role, and a shift in the learning/teaching dynamic. Online learning in higher education is deemed as a controversial issue. While many educators and students are excited about the new phenomenon of online learning and acknowledge the advantages it can offer, there are many individuals, such as employers, community members, and even higher education administrators and faculty, who are skeptical about online learning and do not view it as a credible way of learning. There is much research that does, in fact, support online learning to be just as credible as learning in the traditional classroom. Online learning has opened doors to many educational opportunities that otherwise would not have been available to many prospective students in higher education.

Statement of the Problem

Higher education instructors have to assume a new role and function by a different set of rules, policies and procedures in an online classroom. Current research indicates that there have been some cases where educators were placed in online teaching environments with minimal training, if any training at all. One of the myths related to online instruction is that traditional courses can be copied to online learning. The reality is that, since online and face to face instruction are different mediums, selective adaptation of effective pedagogical strategies from face to face instruction is necessary (Li & Akins, 2005). As time has progressed throughout the online movement, however, many educators and administrators have realized that teaching in an online environment can be quite different from teaching in a traditional classroom. Many colleges and universities in the United States have responded to the needs of those instructors seeking assistance in transitioning from a traditional classroom to an online environment by providing training sessions, orientations, and even providing mentors for these instructors. On the other hand, some higher education institutions have yet to address the training issue, leaving some instructors to fend for themselves in solving the mystery of how to effectively teach an online course.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this research project is to develop effective strategies for instructing online courses that instructors new to the online environment can utilize to assist them in teaching online courses more effectively. There is much research available, such as journal articles, case studies, and research papers, which address the issue of teaching online distance learning courses, the role of the online instructor, and

the various elements of online teaching. However, there is a definite need for a consolidated list of effective strategies that higher education instructors can utilize in an online environment. In this project, the author gathered and synthesized current information on online teaching practices and consolidated these findings into a concise applicable list of effective strategies.

Chapter Summary

Since there can be ambiguity in the instructor's role and function in an online environment, the author produced effective strategies that higher education instructors can utilize in the online environment. In Chapter 2, the review of literature, the author discusses the current literature available on online learning to support the development of the effective strategies.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Online education continues to grow at a fascinating rate, particularly within higher education in the United States. A consulting firm for the education field recently released a report stating that nearly 1 million students nationwide enrolled in courses that took place completely online, up from half that only 2 years earlier (Carnevale, 2005). Online education is changing higher education at a rapid pace and has evolved from an experiment to a driving force in the field of higher education. Currently, the reviews of online education seem to be mixed. Many universities have embraced the new concept while others are still quite skeptical, particularly when compared to its counterpart, the traditional learning environment. Some instructors and administrators are leery of the effectiveness of online learning and are hesitant to change and learn the new information required to run an effective online program. According to Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read (2002), resistance to online teaching has been attributed to psychological variables such as faculty lack of confidence. Others fear the demise of the university as it is known. However, regardless of whether or not everyone has jumped aboard the bandwagon of online learning, the statistics show that online education is on the move, and the expansion and growth of online programs is inevitable. “The available data suggests that, in spite of both substantive and specious concerns about the pervasive ongoing role of computers in our lives, the Internet is well infused in higher education at

the present time and portends to continue to flow into all crevices of the educational fabric” (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002, p. 9). A large majority of universities are currently offering some type of online program, whether it is a complete online degree program or a hybrid online course. With the increase in demand from prospective students for more flexibility to accommodate their busy lifestyles, universities must respond to this high demand in order to remain competitive.

History of Online Education

Online education is a rapidly growing phenomenon in higher education. Although distance learning has been around for quite some time, computer assisted learning has come with the onset of the technology boom within the United States. In 1969, the U.S. government experimented with dedicated telephone lines for data exchange by constructing the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) to connect researchers with remote computer centers to share resources (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). Technology emerged such as email as well as other communication networks such as USNET (User Net). Eventually, the internet replaced many of the technologies mentioned above, allowing for much more flexibility and availability. The first computer conferencing systems were credited to Murray Turoff in 1970. Later, online discussion boards emerged where people could post responses online via a message board. These two concepts were the major components of online learning via computer networking. “Computer conferencing systems were applied to course activity in higher education during the 1980s and remain a prominent feature of online education today. All of these variants have found their way into higher education in the public and private sectors” (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, p. 5). Online learning has gone from an

experimental concept in education to a driving force that is currently changing education delivery and learning as it is practiced. What used to be a means for scientists and government officials to communicate electronically has made its way into the classrooms of many universities and K-12 schools throughout the United States and even across the world. The once traditional face-to-face classroom environment is now being replaced or supplemented with online networks filled with chat rooms, discussion boards, lecture notes and email correspondence.

Current Status of Online Learning

Online learning is prevalent in many institutions within higher education due to the demand from students and potential students for flexibility that can not be obtained through a traditional delivery system. Harasim (1998, as quoted in Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002) states that

Nearly every institution of higher education has incorporated or intends to incorporate some aspects of online technology into its curriculum delivery system. The way in which online technology becomes operationalized, however, differs significantly among institutions. At this time, there appears to be three levels of application of computer conferencing technology in education: (a) as the primary teaching mechanism for one or more courses, (b) as an enhancement to traditional face-to-face course, and (c) as a forum for discussions and resources. (p. 9)

When online technology is considered an enhancement to the traditional learning environment, it is called a hybrid course. The hybrid course seems to be the most popular and accepted among college constituents. A consulting company called Eduventures (Ceraulo, 2005) conducted a comprehensive study of consumer attitudes towards online education in June of 2005, “the survey found the consumers had an even greater interest in ‘hybrid’ online college programs that combine online and on-campus courses, with 85 percent of those surveyed expressing interest in this model hybrid education delivery. In

addition, 56 percent of the 18 to 25-year-olds surveyed were more likely to consider a hybrid model over a full online education” (p. 3). With degrees of skepticism surrounding online education, some students and employers seem to feel more comfortable with a combination of both traditional and online learning as opposed to total online learning. Many students believe that hybrid courses are the best of both worlds (Ceraulo, 2005).

Although online learning is a rapidly growing segment of higher education, there are still skeptics hesitant to embrace online education. For instance, according to Carnevale (2005), a study conducted by two professors concluded that employers are still skeptical about the notion of earning a degree online and generally prefer applicants who hold degrees from traditional colleges and universities. However, as more research develops that supports online learning as effective, eventually some skeptics may change their perceptions of online learning.

Case Study

There has been much research done on the effectiveness of online courses. However, there is still a need for future research because, as technology changes, so will the online classroom. A snapshot of a recent online classroom can be seen through a case study of online distance learning (Easton, 2003) that took place at a large university in the southeast area of the United States. Reviewing case studies such as this helps to provide educators with insight on the current status of online learning and can also help educators avoid pitfalls of past online course situations.

Background

Since the emergence of online distance learning is fairly new to the field of higher education, the role of the online instructor can be ambiguous and largely untested (Easton, 2003). The study examined by Easton was conducted to clarify the instructor's role in online distance learning (ODL). The role of the instructor in this study was perplexing for both the faculty and the student. In some large universities, like the one where this study was conducted, the participants within a classroom environment can consist of a professor, a teaching assistant or mentor, and the students. This study utilized mentors who served as mediators between the professor and the students. The professors operated as managers, supervisors and/or facilitators, and course designers.

In light of these three distinct roles, the main questions that were posed in this study (Easton, 2003) are as follows: What is the role of the professor and mentor in online distance learning? How is the student to function in an online distance course environment? The professors' primary role was to collaborate with technical support staff, programmers, and instructional designers to design the overall course. Throughout the course, their responsibilities were to provide

oversight to ensure that feedback and comments facilitated student learning. Although attempts were made by the implementation team to document the responsibilities of the lead faculty role, several stakeholders resisted written job descriptions. As a result, there were wide discrepancies in the amount of interaction each lead faculty had with the students and mentors. (Easton, p. 91)

Results

During the study, the researchers found that the faculty who had prior experience with online courses were more confident and aware of their role and were proactive in their communication strategies. On the other hand, professors who were new to an online

environment were extremely unsure of their roles and took a reactive role in the course. For instance, one of the lead faculty stated, “To be honest, I feel like I am not much in control of the class as it is a handoff to the mentors once it starts. I did my part in the course, and I’m not sure how involved I should be now” (Easton, 2003, p. 91). As documented earlier, it is clear that the lack of role defining during the implementation process hindered the effectiveness of the faculty’s performance and the online course as a whole. Initially, there was a lot of frustration and confusion for all participants about how to function in an online course. Most of the faculty stated that teaching an online course was a lot more work than they had originally anticipated (Easton, 2003). The mentors also had more work than anticipated and were frustrated with the technology not functioning properly. The students were confused about many things such as how to maneuver in the online course, where and when to turn in papers, and their online participation was sporadic which increased the frustration for the mentors. During the following semester, which encompassed the same group of people, the frustration decreased dramatically as all group members were more familiar with the process (Easton).

Discussion

This case study proved to be consistent with prior research confirming that the skill-set needed for an online distance educator is very similar to that needed for traditional classroom instructors. However, the study also provides a new understanding of two discrete roles of the ODL instructor: (1) instructional designer and (2) interaction facilitator (Easton, 2003). Additionally, “three important themes emerged for both the mentors and lead faculty that suggest challenges for the virtual instructor: (1)

incorporating alternative course management practices; (2) addressing issues specific to virtual communications; and (3) considering new paradigms for thinking about time and space for teaching” (Easton, p. 101).

Definition of an Online Learning Environment Versus a Traditional Learning Environment

In a traditional classroom environment, the instructor and the students are face-to-face. This environment is conducive to classroom group discussion among students, in class group collaboration, and social relationship development between both students and instructors. The traditional learning environment (TLE) is typically teacher-centered. In many cases, the instructor is the dispenser of knowledge and information, and the student is the receiver (Easton, 2003). The instructor usually sets the pace, the requirements of course completion, activities, and leads discussion among students. However, with increased awareness of various learning models such as self directed learning, many teachers understand the benefits of student-centered learning and are incorporating related techniques into the traditional classroom environment. For example, a teacher might provide a student with the option of selecting a topic for a research paper as opposed to assigning the topic without student input.

The difference between a traditional learning environment and an online learning environment is the physical separation among the students and between the students and the instructor. Online learning is the most recent addition to the phenomenon of distance learning. According to the staff at the American Council on Education and Alliance (1993, as quoted in Galbraith, 2004),

distance education is described as a process that connects learners with distributed learning resources and is characterized by (a) separation of place and/or time

between instructor and learner, among learners, and/or between learners and learning resources and (b) interaction between the learner and the instructor, among learners and/or between learners and learning resources conducted through one or more media. (p. 275)

“Online learning is the latest in a long list of social technologies that have been introduced to improve distance learning by adding various augmentations, substitutions, or blending of new pedagogical approaches and technologies” (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005, p. 59). The online environment is conducive to online discussion boards, group discussions via chat rooms or discussion forums, and electronic formats of lecture notes. Although the traditional face-to-face (F2F) courses that are mainly teacher-centered remain an effective method of teaching and learning, there is a growing need for distance online courses that integrate and rely heavily on technology and offer a more student-centered form of pedagogy.

Teacher’s Role in a Traditional Setting versus an Online Setting

In the traditional learning environment, one role of the instructor is to serve as a dispenser of knowledge. Typically, the method of delivery in a traditional classroom is mainly lecture that utilizes power point presentations, overhead projectors, dry erase boards, etc. In fact, most adult education practitioners agree that lecture is one of the most frequently used methods (Galbraith, 2004). “Darkenwald and Meriam (1982, as quoted in Galbraith, 2004) reported that the lecture was the most preferred and most used instructional method in adult education” (p. 280). Similar to an online environment, the instructor is responsible for classroom management, setting objectives, selecting course materials, course content, feedback, etc.

In an online environment, the instructor's role is more of a facilitator of learning, as the students take on more responsibility for their learning due to their distance from the instructor. One model, Berge's model, offers a good explanation of a teacher's role in an online learning environment. "Berge's model outlines four roles for the facilitator of online courses: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical" (Hutton, 1999, p. 8). Both the technical and managerial aspects of teaching apply in both traditional and online learning environments. In both cases, the teacher manages the classroom environment. "The instructor must manage by setting the agenda for the classes/discussion, the objectives, the timetable, procedural rules, and decision-making norms" (Hutton, p. 8). As for the technical aspects of the classroom, the teacher makes sure the students are aware of and prepared to utilize all technologies utilized in the classroom environment. For example, in the traditional classroom, the teacher's responsibility is to make sure the students know how to work the projector or a particular computer for a power point presentation. In an online environment, the teacher needs to ensure the students know how to function online. The teacher must explain how to utilize an online chat room or how to post information on a discussion board, for instance.

The processes of Berge's pedagogical and social roles appear to be considerably different in planning for traditional courses than the managerial and technical roles (Hutton, 1999). The pedagogical process of the model forces teachers to rethink how they will actually facilitate a course, and also understand and make adjustments for new roles for both the teacher and student. In the online environment the instructor loses much of the traditional control afforded in F2F classrooms as students acquire a more active, and facilitative role (Hutton). The social component is completely different in

that the teacher now has to find a way to foster a community in an online environment.

The teacher may need to reconsider elements such as group work and student-to-student communication.

The instructor assumes a different social role; to promote human relationship, develop group cohesiveness, maintain the group as a unit, help members work together in a mutual cause, and form a supportive learning environment. These two skills, pedagogical and social are perhaps the 'new skills' most critical to becoming a successful instructor in online versus traditional classroom instruction. (Hutton, 1999, p. 8)

Understanding Distance Education

Understanding distance education as a whole is fundamental to understanding online learning due to the fact that one stems from the other. Online learning is a form of distance learning. It is imperative to clarify that there is a difference between distance education and computer-networked education (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). Distance education was around long before the computer and the internet were ever invented. Because online learning is a branch of distance education, one could examine techniques and processes related to distance learning to enhance an online program. Understanding the foundational structure of online learning could be beneficial when deciding on the best solutions for an online environment.

Self directed learning is a method utilized in both distance and traditional classrooms. Since the use of self directed learning is not the most common practice, as it relates to the traditional classroom, there can be confusion and misunderstanding about what self directed learning is and is not. For example, some people equate self directed learning with distance learning even though they are two different things. Some people view self directed learning as an educational fad while others view it as a life long

process. Many of these misconceptions have filtered into the instructional process as well. One of the major myths related to self directed learning is the concept that self-direction implies learning in isolation (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). This misconception could not be further from the truth. Even though self directed learners take responsibility for their own learning, the instructor/facilitator plays a vital role in assisting the learners in achieving their goals. Not only do self directed learners utilize their instructor throughout the learning process, but they also utilize other resource people such as librarians and even other students depending on the type of course in which the students are involved. “The success of independent learning at times depends on the partnership between the learner and people resources. The learner decides how much input is needed and seeks it as necessary” (Hawker, 2000, p. 8). Another misconception is that facilitating self-direction is an easy way out for teachers (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). On the contrary, teachers are quite involved in the learning process, conducting negotiations, compiling contracts with students, finding resources and course materials, student monitoring, and assessing the students’ success. The instructor, in this sense, is considered a facilitator of the learning process.

Understanding the Distance Learner

Knowing the demographics of the online learner is vital to the learning process in an online environment. Instructors who have knowledge of the type of students they will be instructing as well as their needs may have an advantage in the classroom. In the case of online or distance learners, they are not all alike and may require the use of varying teaching strategies and techniques. Research seems to indicate that the group of learners engaged in distance learning, such as online courses, are in no way a homogeneous

group, but they do share some demographic and situational similarities (Gibson, 1998). For example, “although the methods of approaching student ages vary from study to study, researchers agree that distance education students are, on average, older than typical undergraduate students” (Gibson, p. 10). Typically, there are more females present in distance learner courses than males. The studies cited by Gibson (1998) “have provided the basis for a widely accepted view of the distance learner as one who is (1) older than the typical undergraduate, (2) female, (3) likely to be employed full time, and (4) married” (p. 13). Some researchers in the field have used this profile as the basis for studying the relationship between specific student characteristics and student success in distance education programs.

Utilizing characteristics such as demographics to determine success in higher education can be extremely controversial. Some studies show no connection between success and certain characteristics while other studies show connections.

For example, several researchers reporting a positive relationship between success and student’s age have explained the higher levels of success for older students on the basis of increased maturity, self-discipline, life experience, and financial responsibility for their educations that are likely to characterize older students. Additionally, older students are more likely to have higher levels of education at the time of enrollment, another factor which has been correlated with success. (Gibson, 1998, p. 14)

Another characteristic of the distance learner to consider would be the motivation of the distance learner. One needs to examine the advantages of learning off-campus. Some of the reasons a student would not enroll in an on-campus class would be due to a conflict in work or family schedule or physical distance. Based on current research, it seems to be that flexibility and convenience are the most important elements motivating students to enroll in distance education such as online courses. Hezel and Dirr (1991, as quoted in

Gibson, 1998) conducted a “study of barriers to on-campus attendance [which] found that distance from campus was viewed as “very important” or “somewhat important” by 75% of the students surveyed; understandably, this factor was more of a problem for students in rural areas” (p. 17). The factors that contribute to the preferences listed above seem to be work, family responsibilities, and daily schedules.

Understanding who distance learners are can definitely be a tool in learning to effectively educate this group of people. For instance, knowing demographics such as age, family, and work commitments can help instructors and program planners offer the flexibility needed to accommodate this group. Knowing the dynamics of the students based on the current research available and also getting to know them in the classroom environment could help foster a sense of community that may not have otherwise been possible.

The Shift from Teacher Centered Instruction to Self Directed Learning

When an instructor is teaching a distance learning course, there needs to be a shift from the teacher-centered traditional classroom mindset to a student-centered mindset (Hawker, 2000). Within distance education, such as online learning, students are required to assume more responsibility than in a traditional classroom environment. The main reason for the increased responsibility during distance learning seems to be the dynamic of distance. The instructor is not as available to ensure and monitor student progression as in a traditional learning environment.

A traditional teaching environment is typically where the instructor is in total control of the learning process and the students are recipients of knowledge and information from the instructor. “A teacher-centered educator would define the primary

purpose of education as the transmission of knowledge, including skills, understandings, attitudes and values. According to Knowles (1989, as cited in Hawker, 2000), the implicit objective of teacher-centered education is the production of competitive and knowledgeable but dependent people through norm-referred testing and grading. Within this concept, the student is dependent upon the teacher, also known as teacher-dependent. There seem to be many assumptions about learners and the learning process within a teacher-centered model. “Not surprisingly, assumptions implicit in a teacher-dependent environment include the following: the student cannot be trusted to pursue her own learning, presentation equals learning, the aim of education is to accumulate brick upon brick of factual knowledge, the truth is known, creative citizens develop from passive learners, evaluation is education and education is evaluation” (Hawker, 2000, p. 4). If students are not trusted to pursue their own knowledge, then dependence upon the instructor is ultimately the result. Furthermore, the assumption that presentation is knowledge can negatively affect student learning. From what is known about the cognitive process of learning, it has been established that there are multiple intelligences by which all students learn. Therefore, presenting information in one fashion or another does not necessarily mean that all of the students have grasped a concept. One could also argue that the accumulation of knowledge is only the beginning phase of the learning process. Learning can be viewed as a rich and fulfilling ongoing process of critical thinking, analysis, problem solving, the application of gained knowledge, and reflection. Under the traditional system of teacher-centered learning, “many students thus act passively, want to be taught, do not trust their own knowledge or acknowledge its

existence, and instead focus solely on retaining what is ‘taught’ and passing exams” (Hawker, p. 5).

It is also important to note that not all traditional classrooms fall under the teacher-centered model. There are some traditional classrooms where the teaching/learning dynamic is very much student-centered. Many instructors have recognized the importance of flexibility and student-centered learning. Within the traditional classroom, many instructors do, in fact, involve students in processes such as, selection of course material, creating evaluation criterion, and individual student pacing. However, this concept is not extremely common in the traditional classroom (Hawker, 2000). When considering how self-directed learning is closely tied to distance education, many educators are forced to change their traditional concepts and frame of mind to be more reflective of a distance learning approach.

Self directed learning is just of opposite of the teacher-dependent model (Hawker, 2000). It results in learner independence. In a self directed learning environment, students have control over elements such as the content utilized in the course, the pacing of assignments, how student learning will be assessed, and even the methodology in which the course is taught. This enables the students to tailor the course toward the individuals’ interests and learning styles. Just as traditional learning environments have assumptions tied to them, so does self-directed learning. Some of these assumptions are that much significant learning is acquired through doing and that self-initiated learning involving the whole person, feelings as well as intellect are the most pervasive and lasting (Hawker).

According to LefCourt (1976, as cited in Hawker, 2000), research signifies that when people perceive the locus of control to reside within themselves, they are more creative and productive. Maslow (1970, as cited in Hawker, 2000) also states that the more students feel their unique potential is being utilized, the greater their achievement. For reasons such as these, instructors may choose to make a shift from learner dependence to learner independence in their classrooms. Although “becoming a successful independent learner takes years of training, practice and experience” (Hawker, 2000, p. 8), there are many things one can do in order to make the transition a success. For starters, a shift in the mind set of both the instructor and the student would be in order. Teachers can then become facilitators of learning and more of a resource to students than dispensers of knowledge.

Resource people require a very different set of skills, attitudes and values from those of traditional classroom teachers, and so a process of retraining of teachers would be required to put the system [of independent learning] into operation. Learners too need to be retrained to take responsibility for their own learning and acquire independent learning skills. (Hawker, p. 9)

Additionally, leaders and administrators can be trained to further their understanding and ability to foster a self directed learning environment. There must be support from upper level administration in order for this concept to be a success. It is also important to note that, according to Knowles (1989, as quoted in Hawker, 2000),

barriers can be broken down through systematic planning and implementation. In addition to retraining, teachers can assess students’ knowledge, understanding, experience, background, learning attitudes and values, and level of learning ability or skill in planning and carrying out independent learning projects. They can provide skill development exercises that help the learner move to a higher level of ability in independent learning. (p. 9)

Instructors can involve students in processes related to the classroom such as and planning, goal formulation, assessment criteria and the like. This not only gains by-in from the students but gives them confidence in their decision making ability and gives them the ability to engage in learning that is relevant and interesting to them. It is also essential that teachers encourage and support self directed learning practices and utilize such models. This support and encouragement is instrumental, as some individuals could be uneasy with some aspects of self directed learning because they may be used to more traditional teaching methods.

Elements that are Transferable

Many of the elements utilized in the traditional classroom are transferable to an online environment, to a large extent. For example, there is still student interaction in an online environment; however, the instructor has to set boundaries and encourage more of a community environment. The instructor can also utilize the lecture method commonly utilized in the traditional classroom by posting lecture notes and requiring students to comment on the notes via a discussion forum, for instance.

The traditional method of lecture can be adapted to nearly any distance delivery mode. Critical to success is for [the] teacher and learner to take full advantage of the technology to enhance what is normally done face to face in a classroom, allowing for the presentation of key information in an asynchronous manner. (Galbraith, 2004, p. 280)

In the author's opinion, student interaction can still occur by requiring the students to meet outside of the online environment, if feasible, or communicate via email and/or telephone to accomplish group work. These methods enable students to learn from one another just as they would in the traditional classroom setting. Tasks such as testing can also be accomplished in an online environment similar to the way it would in a traditional

classroom. However, technology would have to allow for setting time limits, if need be, and teachers would have the concerns of students cheating or utilizing materials to assist them with answers. According to the author, a good point to mention would be that even in the traditional classroom, take-home exams exist and these types of tests would transfer almost directly to an online environment. Another element that transfers is the process of feedback. In the traditional environment, the teacher provides feedback verbally on occasion, but typically it is provided in writing to protect the privacy of the students. In an online environment, instructors can communicate with students regarding assignments and projects in a proactive manner electronically (Galbraith, 2004).

A professor at a university in Canada was selected to instruct her first online course (Hutton, 1999). This professor completed this course and wrote a paper reflecting her experiences transitioning from a traditional face-to-face environment to an online environment. She stated that

the online experience challenged me to reevaluate the basics of program planning. I reconfirmed the importance of learning objects, detailing content, selecting materials and formative and summative evaluation. The areas I discerned were the most different for me from “teaching” F2F were that of my role and the heightened importance of developing a learning community. (Hutton, p. 10)

Although many things are transferable, there are many things that remain distinct, such as the role of the instructor and the way in which the course is facilitated.

Which is More Effective?

When acquiring knowledge about the online learning versus the traditional learning environment, one may question which of the two is more effective. Although, there are some people who are skeptical of online learning and/or distance education in general, research indicates that distance education can be as effective as traditional face-to-face

instruction when the methods and technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, when there is student-to-student interaction, and when teacher/student feedback is timely (Verduin & Clark, 1991). Studies have suggested that students enrolled in distance education courses earned higher grades than did traditional students. However, other researchers have contended that there are no significant differences in grades for distance education students versus traditional students (Tucker, 2000).

In summary, the research concludes that online learning is just as effective as learning in the traditional classroom. Research affirms that neither one is greater than the other in terms of effectiveness. A student faced with choosing between the two would rely on personal preference. For now, skepticism of online learning remains, even though the research provides a firm foundation for its effectiveness. As time progresses, the uneasiness of a few, as it relates to the notion of online learning, could be a thing of the past.

Chapter Summary

Online learning is an important topic for instructors in general but particularly for instructors in higher-education.

By 2004 at least two million higher-education students in the U.S. were engaged in distance education utilizing various ALN [Asynchronous Learning Environment] technologies where whole classes can engage in a continuous discourse and group project work independent of time, place, and synchronous constraints of participation. (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005, p. 60)

Some researchers even think that digital learning will eventually replace the traditional classroom. Whether there is a gradual replacement or not, online education is a current and fast growing delivery system in higher education and should be of high importance for both instructors and administrators. For educators, there are new roles and methods

for teaching in an online environment that should be taken into consideration. The study of online education would be beneficial to many in the field of higher education whether one intends to teach an online course or not.

Online education is as effective as traditional education and can be extremely valuable to distance learners by providing opportunities that may have not otherwise been available. Self-directed, distance learning and online education are all methods that can be considered as beneficial methods of teaching and learning. Staying current on the developments of online learning is critical for all educators as the field of online education constantly grows and changes.

Based on the current research available about online education, instructors have a plethora of effective strategies to apply to their online classroom environment. These strategies are spelled out more precisely in Chapter 4. Some of these strategies are as follows: 1) understanding the history of online learning, 2) a call for innovation and a shift in mind-set, 3) understanding the roles for both the instructor and the student 4) timely communication & setting clear standards and expectations, 5) fostering an online community, and 6) knowing the demographics, dynamics, and preferences of the online learner. All of these effective strategies can serve as valuable tools that may help a novice online instructor develop into an effective online learning facilitator. In Chapter 3, the author discusses the methodology involved in developing these effective strategies for instructing online courses.

Chapter 3

METHOD

Target Population

As online learning continues to grow within the field of higher education, more instructors are transitioning from a traditional classroom environment to an online environment which requires different competencies. A list of effective strategies could be beneficial to the following constituents in higher education: administrators, program planners, online instructors, and business professionals such as trainers who facilitate elearning programs. The strategies within this project are geared toward the instructor who has never taught an online course. These strategies may also be helpful to those instructors who possess more experience but would like to expand their online teaching skill set.

Procedures

A basic list of effective strategies for facilitating online learning was compiled based on journal articles, books, statistics, and case studies written about the online learning process. Many of the authors selected for this project have spent years in the field of higher education researching topics such as distance education, independent learning, and online education. Most of the research material selected for this project is recent and relevant to the current status of online education. There seem to be certain commonalities across the various research materials reviewed for this project, and these served as the foundation for the effective strategies.

The elements within the effective strategies were selected based on the following criteria:

1. The strategy was tested and proven effective in an online classroom environment.
2. The strategy was utilized often and/or was often referred to or recommended by experienced professionals in higher education.

Goals of the Applied Project

The goal of this research project was to develop effective strategies for instructing online courses that instructors new to the online environment can utilize to teach online courses more effectively. There is much research available, such as journal articles, case studies, and research papers, that address the issue of teaching online distance learning courses, the role of the online instructor, and the various elements of online teaching. However, a consolidated list of effective strategies that instructors can utilize in an online environment could be beneficial to those without time to gather research data on the subject. Toward this goal, the author gathered and synthesized current information regarding online learning practices and consolidated these findings into a concise, applicable list of effective strategies.

Assessment

The purpose of this research project was to develop effective strategies for instructing online courses that instructors new to the online environment can utilize to assist them in teaching online courses more effectively. In order to gauge the effectiveness of the strategies, the author solicited the feedback of four professionals currently working in the field of post secondary online education. Two of these individuals hold the title of instructional designer while one works as a chancellor and the

other as an instructor. Three evaluators obtained master's degrees in a related field, and one obtained a doctorate degree in education. The average work experience in higher education among these professionals is 8 years. Three individuals work at higher education institutions in the state of Colorado, while another represents the state of Arizona. Three of the four institutions represented have an established formal training program for new online instructors. Each individual was asked to review the strategies, and provide feedback by completing an evaluation form (see Appendix A).

Chapter Summary

Six effective strategies were extracted from the research of several authors who have studied the area of online distance learning in relation to the traditional classroom. There are several reoccurring themes in this research, and the six strategies chosen for this project stem from these themes. In Chapter 4, the author presents the list of effective strategies.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

Introduction

Online instruction represents a tremendous change in the role of instruction (Clay, 1999). Instructors new to the concept of online instruction need assistance and training in order to be successful in an online environment. Clay speaks of four stages of development for faculty who plan to engage in online instruction. The four stages of development are as follows: 1) awareness, 2) consideration, 3) implementation, and 4) innovation. At the awareness level, instructors began to develop questions and seek out information related to online learning. During this stage, instructors need general information, through workshops or printed material, which provides them with clear information about online learning (Clay). The purpose of this research project was to develop effective strategies for instructing online courses that instructors new to the online environment can utilize to assist them in teaching online courses more effectively. The strategies produced in this project are representative of the type of print material which may be useful during the awareness stage. More institution specific information would be needed in the remaining stages. In this project, the author gathered and synthesized current information on online teaching practices and consolidated these findings into the following concise list of six effective strategies.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES
FOR INSTRUCTING ONLINE COURSES
A Resource for Instructors New to the Online Environment
by
Brandi Nicole Van Horn

The following set of effective strategies is tailored for institutions that have no formal training program and can be utilized by instructors seeking to teach in an online environment. It is meant to assist instructors who teach in traditional face to face classroom environments, have never taught online, and are seeking basic principles and strategies related to transitioning to an online teaching environment. Each strategy has been tested and proven effective in an online classroom environment and is recommended by experienced professionals in higher education who have extensively studied this topic.

Six Effective Strategies for Instructing Online Learning

1. Understanding the History of Online Learning
2. A Call for Innovation and Shift in Mind-Set
3. Understanding the Roles for Both Instructor and Student
4. Timely Communication & Setting Clear Standards and Expectations
5. Fostering an Online Community
6. Knowing the Demographics, Dynamics, and Preferences of the Online Learner

1. Understanding the History of Online Learning

Rationale:

Understanding the evolution of online education can be helpful to online instructors because it provides them with a picture of the past, present, and future status of online learning. Knowing the history of online education helps instructors to understand how and why the current status of online education exists. This information also assists educators and administrators in understanding certain trends and the potential for continuing growth in online education. Information such as this is vital to keeping instructors abreast of new developments in the field.

Examples of Application:

If an instructor is aware of the benefits and potential pitfalls of online learning, the instructor may be empowered to learn from the successes and prevent the mistakes of past instructors. One way to stay current on the status of online education is to subscribe to scholarly journals that deal with the topic of technology and education. Other sources of information are online discussion boards, symposiums, and groups in which an instructor can engage in dialogue with other professionals in the field. An instructor could also explore certain databases, such as the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) published by the U.S. Department of Education, for numerous articles, dissertations, papers, books and presentations that provide support and information related to online learning.

2. A Call for Innovation and Shift in Mind-Set

Rationale:

It is critical for instructors to shift their thinking from the traditional classroom to an online environment. Although there are similar competencies utilized in both traditional and online distance education environments, there are very distinct elements within online distance education. The two environments are unique; therefore, they each should be addressed in different fashions. Consequently, instructors will have to rethink how they will facilitate an online course and make adjustments for the different roles involved for the both the instructor and the students.

Examples of Application:

An instructor could provide students with more options to receive and exchange information by:

- Posting lectures online
- Enabling students to download and print lecture notes
- Conducting video or audio lectures for downloading
- Providing online discussion boards, blogs, journals, chat rooms, etc.
- Allowing students to email, fax, mail, or upload assignments in addition to the traditional method

3. Understanding the Roles for Both Instructor and Student

Rationale:

Due to the dynamics of an online distance course, the roles for both the instructor and the students are different than their roles in a traditional classroom. According to Hutton (1999), the instructor loses the traditional control afforded in face to face classrooms. Hence, instructors will need to take on a facilitator role tailored more toward student-centered learning, and the students will have to take on more responsibility for their learning.

Examples of Application:

One way to encourage students to take more responsibility for their learning could be to assign students as discussion leaders in an online discussion forum. Additionally, an instructor could involve students in the assessment process by requiring online peer evaluations and self evaluations. These two examples not only increase student responsibility but also promote peer group interaction and learning.

4. Timely Communication & Setting Clear Standards and Expectations

Rationale:

Setting clear standards, expectations, and procedures from the beginning can make the transition from a traditional learning environment to an online classroom as smooth as possible. Although the practice of setting standards and expectations holds true in a traditional learning environment as well, it is even more critical in an online environment. Because the instructor may not be as responsive in an online environment, having clearly stated procedures communicated to students at the start of a course helps to diminish frustration, confusion, and can also provide students with the confidence and know-how to succeed in an online course. Classroom time and student/instructor interaction are used more effectively if communication is clear, concise, and timely from the start. Research indicates that distance education is only as effective as the traditional classroom when there is student-to-student interaction and when teacher/student feedback is timely (Verduin & Clark, 1991).

Examples of Application:

Instructors could set-up a mandatory, initial face-to-face classroom meeting to discuss their expectations for a hybrid course, for instance. Discussion of the following could be beneficial:

- How and how often students are expected to communicate with other students and the instructor
- How and how often assignments should be turned in or communicated
- Establish certain rules that exhibit acceptable and unacceptable behavior in an online environment
- Conduct a demonstration of the online framework and how to navigate the system

When a face-to-face meeting is not possible, the same material that would have been discussed face-to-face can be posted online along with information for students to print out as well. Another method of communicating expectations could be to develop an online student training class/demo/module (either face-to-face or online) that would walk students through the functionality of an online environment in addition to communicating classroom expectations.

5. Fostering an Online Community

Rationale:

Because student-to-student interaction is so vital in the online environment, the online instructor needs to discover ways to foster a sense of community in the online classroom. This component is important because student-to-student interaction can be hindered due to lack of familiarity among students without instructor intervention. This concept seems to be a reoccurring theme throughout current research on this topic. If this issue is left unaddressed, students may feel disassociated from the course and may also miss out on peer group learning experiences.

Examples of Application:

Instructors could post their pictures online and provide students with the opportunity to post their pictures to begin to develop a sense of community. Coupled with, or as an alternative to this method, an instructor could require students to post a brief introduction about themselves so that group members can learn more about one another. Yet another way to begin fostering an online community would be to create small groups or teams to complete certain assignments together. In this case, an instructor could provide students with “space” and time in a chat room to discuss assignments.

6. Knowing the Demographics, Dynamics, and Preferences of the Online Learner

Rationale:

Knowing information about online distance learners is beneficial to online instructors as it may provide them with an advantage in the classroom. Although distance education learners are in no way a homogeneous group, they tend to share some demographics and situational similarities (Gibson, 1998). Being cognizant of demographics, such as age, family, and work commitments, can help instructors and program planners offer the flexibility needed to accommodate this group. Knowing the learning dynamics of your students, based on the current research available, and also getting to know them in the classroom environment, could help promote a sense of community that may not have otherwise been possible.

Examples of Application:

In order to solicit information needed to assess student needs and preferences, an instructor could compile a questionnaire and require all students to complete the form. This questionnaire could be posted as an online form for students to complete or as a document attached to an email sent to students. Once an instructor is aware of the dynamics of a group of students, the instructor could offer optional online meeting times, one during the day time and one during the evening, to accommodate students who have daytime jobs, children, and/or other conflicting commitments.

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Chapter Summary

The effective strategies produced during this research project are meant to be a starting point for instructors to assist them in transitioning from the traditional classroom environment to an online environment. The list of effective strategies is by no means exhaustive and is meant to serve as a supplemental tool within a formal or informal training program. In addition to print materials, there are several other ways for instructors new to an online environment to gain knowledge and support, such as group sessions, one-on-one lab sessions, web-based tutorials, listservs, mentorships, monthly discussion sessions among peers, and observation of other distance courses (Clay, 1999). A discussion of this research project is presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

DISSCUSSION

Resolution of the Original Problem

The main issue addressed by this research project is the fact that online learning presents a new teaching environment and new instructor responsibilities. The goal of this project was to develop effective strategies for instructing online courses for those new to the online environment. These effective strategies would be most beneficial to those with limited time to gather and synthesize the research data for online teaching. The objective of this project was satisfied in that the author produced a tool that can be utilized and/or adopted to most online training programs. It can also serve as a useful resource for individual instructors who are engaged in an introductory online training program. The most beneficial factor related to this set of effective strategies is its flexibility. Some frameworks or models can be rigid and stagnant, whereas the set of strategies produced in this project provides a framework whereby professionals can modify the strategies to coincide with their specific situational needs. The element of flexibility is important because there is no solitary solution that addresses every online situation. Additionally, every model, framework, handbook, or guide has its own set of limitations; therefore, providing instructors with the ability to adjust ideas and concepts in a manner that more accurately addresses their own situations is advantageous.

Limitations to the Project

Technology within the United States and throughout the world has an ever changing face. Changes in computer technology occur rapidly and, in many cases, on a drastic level. Therefore, professionals engaging in research on topics related to technology must be cognizant of this notion. For example, the timeline required to complete a text on online learning or teaching has a very long time span relative to the rapid advances in technology. Therefore, information represented in books may be outdated upon publication due to rapid advances in technology. The resources utilized throughout this project were published as early as the year 1991 and as recent as the year 2005. This wide range of time span can be attributed to the author's attention to the history of online learning as well as the current status. Even when considering the timeline of the resources utilized throughout this project, a vast majority of the information presented in this paper is quite relevant and representative of the current status of online education. Nevertheless, new concepts and ideas relating to online learning have emerged since the conception of this paper.

The assessment of the effective strategies developed through this project was provided by higher educational professionals located in the states of Colorado and Arizona. This factor could be deemed as a limitation to this research project because the culture and needs of the students can vary based on demographics. The status of online education may differ from one location to the next. Hence, the perspectives and assessment of individuals outside of the states of Colorado and Arizona are absent from this project.

Peer Assessment

The purpose of this research project was to develop effective strategies for instructing online courses that instructors new to the online environment can utilize to assist them in teaching online courses more effectively. In order to gauge the effectiveness of the strategies, the author solicited the feedback of four professionals currently working in the field of post secondary online education. Two of these individuals hold the title of instructional designer, while one works as a chancellor and the other as an instructor. Three evaluators obtained master's degrees in a related field, and one obtained a doctorate degree in education. The average work experience in higher education among these professionals is 8 years. Three individuals work at higher education institutions in the state of Colorado, while another represents the state of Arizona. Three out of the four institutions represented have an established formal training program for new online instructors. Each individual was asked to review the strategies and provide feedback by completing an evaluation form (see Appendix A).

There were six strategies that the higher education professionals were asked to evaluate. They were asked to rate the effectiveness of each strategy, the helpfulness of the rationales and examples, and the overall usefulness of the strategies. Additionally, the professionals were asked to rank the strategies based on the importance of each strategy. Table 1 depicts the results of each evaluation element followed by a summary of the results.

Table 1. Effective strategies peer assessment results

	Effectiveness of each strategy*	Helpfulness of examples provided	Helpfulness of rationales provided	Usefulness of the strategies
Extremely Effective/Helpful/Useful	33%		25%	
Somewhat Effective/Helpful/Useful	33%	50%	50%	50%
Neutral				
Somewhat Ineffective/Unhelpful/Not Useful	33%	50%	25%	50%
Extremely Ineffective/Unhelpful/Not Useful				

Note.* Only 3 of the 4 evaluators responded to this particular question.

Each professional was asked to rank the importance of each strategy. The order by which the group ranked each strategy is represented below starting from most important to least important.

- Fostering an Online Community
- Timely Communication & Setting Clear Standards and Expectations
- Knowing the Demographics, Dynamics, and Preferences of the Online Learner
- A Call for Innovation and Shift in Mind-Set
- Understanding the Roles for Both Instructor and Student
- Understanding the History of Online Learning

Some of the suggestions the author deemed valuable to the enhancement of the strategies were as follows:

- Define the user of the strategies more clearly
- Provide more concrete examples for the following strategies: 1) Understanding the History of Online Learning, 2) Understanding the Roles for Both Instructor and Student, 3) Knowing the Demographics, Dynamics, and Preferences of the Online Learner
- Include additional resources to support the strategies

There were a few other suggestions provided that stemmed from the fact that the purpose and target audience of the strategies were not more clearly defined. Therefore, some of the suggestions were not relevant or related to the intended purpose of the project. Each of the suggestions mentioned above were addressed in the final draft of the effective strategies.

The overall assessment was extremely beneficial to the research project. The professionals who were solicited evaluated the effectiveness of the effective strategies and provided substantial feedback. Sixty six percent of three evaluators rated the strategies as either extremely or somewhat effective. Fifty percent of the evaluators rated the examples as extremely or somewhat effective and 75% percent viewed the rationales as extremely or somewhat effective. Half of the evaluators considered the strategies useful. One out of four stated they would utilize or recommend the use of the strategies in their training programs at their respective institutions. One evaluator stated, “Our training is more detailed and advanced than the handbook. This handbook is more useful for people who are seeking quick and basic knowledge of online teaching.” This statement is accurate as the strategies presented in this research project were geared toward institutions with no formal training program. Most of the evaluators liked the format of the list of strategies and deem it as effective. There seemed to be a consensus that although the strategies were in need of improvement, they were off to a solid start and that there is a need for such a tool in the field of online learning. One evaluator stated, “You’ve got some good stuff in this handbook.” Yet another mentioned, “Development of tools for online instructors is definitely needed. Many institutions are now realizing they need to have manuals for the online instructor, and this is definitely a

good start!” Based on the results of the evaluations and constructive feedback provided, the author considered the suggestions and updated the strategies to reflect the changes. For instance, the author revamped the introduction of the set of strategies by making the target audience more evident and also provided additional resources to support the strategies, thus improving the overall quality and effectiveness of the strategies and research project.

Recommendations for Further Development

One recommendation provided by an evaluator during the peer assessment was to provide more concrete examples for several of the strategies presented in this project. This recommendation could be implemented in the future and could further develop the current list of effective strategies. The author could also provide real life scenarios and quotes from online instructors and students reflecting their experience in an online classroom environment. The elements mentioned above could potentially expand and transform the set of effective strategies into a handbook that consists of more detail than the project currently provides. Additionally, more recent data and information could provide additional value to the overall project.

Project Summary

“There is arguably no area more important to distance learning administrators than that of training and support for distance educators” (Clay, 1999, p. 1). The purpose of this research project was to help address this issue by developing a set of effective strategies for instructing online courses that instructors new to the online environment can utilize to assist them in teaching online courses more effectively. In Chapter 2, the review of literature, the author discussed the current literature available on online

education to support the development of the effective strategies. The literature reflected such topics as the history of online learning, a comparison of the traditional classroom versus an online classroom environment, distance learners, shifting from teacher-centered learning to student-centered instruction, and the like. The information provided in the literature review was synthesized to provide support for and produce the ideas and concepts listed in the effective strategies.

The goal of this research project was effectively met by producing a set of effective strategies to meet the training needs of higher education professionals new to the online environment. As technology continues to advance and online learning continues to grow, there needs to be an on-going research effort to produce information needed to improve the quality of education produced through an online environment.

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APPENDIX A
Effective Strategies for Instructing Online Courses
Evaluation Form

**Effective Strategies for Instructing Online Courses
Evaluation Form**

Name (optional): _____

Title: _____ **Name of Institution:** _____

No. of yrs. in higher education: ____ **Your education (please fill in all that apply):**

Bachelor's Degree in: _____

Master's Degree in: _____

Ph.D. Degree in: _____

1.) Please rate the effectiveness of each strategy:

- 5 Extremely Effective
- 4 Somewhat Effective
- 3 Neither Effective nor Ineffective
- 2 Somewhat Ineffective
- 1 Extremely Ineffective

2.) Please rank the importance of each strategy (1 being most important and 6 being the least important):

____ Understanding the History of Online Learning

____ A Call for Innovation and Shift in Mind Set

____ Understanding the Roles for Both Instructor and Student

____ Timely Communication & Setting Clear Standards and Expectations

____ Fostering an Online Community

____ Knowing the Demographics, Dynamics, and Preferences of the Online Learner

3.) How helpful were the examples provided in this handbook?

- 5 Extremely Helpful
- 4 Somewhat Helpful
- 3 Neither Helpful/ Unhelpful
- 2 Somewhat Helpful
- 1 Extremely Helpful

4.) How helpful were the rationales provide?

- 5 Extremely Helpful
- 4 Somewhat Helpful
- 3 Neither Helpful/ Unhelpful
- 2 Somewhat Helpful
- 1 Extremely Helpful

5.) Please rate the usefulness of this handbook:

- 5 Extremely Useful
- 4 Somewhat Useful
- 3 Neither Useful/ Not Useful
- 2 Somewhat Useful
- 1 Extremely Useful

6.) Does your institution have a formal training process for new online instructors?

- Yes No

7.) Would you utilize or recommend the use of this handbook in your training program?

- Yes No

Please explain:

8.) Is there any information that should be added to this handbook to make it a more effective tool?

9.) Is there any element you would remove from this handbook? If yes, please explain:

10.) Please provide any additional comments in the space below:
