TEACHING AN INTERNET COURSE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY DAVID PENNER

During the spring of 1995, I taught a graduate seminar entitled “Leadership and Vision,” which focused on discerning future trends. One of the textbooks was Joel Barker’s Paradigms: The Business of Discovering the Future. This was not the first time I had taught the course, but always before I had used a traditional classroom.

I love classroom teaching—the give and take of the discussion, the drama, the stimulation. On the other hand, I hate to teach the same thing twice. So I regularly change reading assignments, lectures, discussions, and textbooks. However, I had never tried teaching without a classroom. But why not—a course about the future using something new? Since a number of our graduate students hold full-time jobs and do not live on campus, I decided that I could best accommodate their needs in terms of time and location by teaching the course on the Internet.

I set out to re-create in the electronic setting the same learning excitement provided by a conventional seminar’s stimulating group discussion and interaction. First, I wrote the syllabus using HTML (hypertext markup language) to make it usable on the World Wide Web. I designed the “discussion” around specific questions that would stimulate e-mail responses and interaction among the students. Some replies would be sent directly to me, others to the whole class.

The students were at first a bit apprehensive about the experiment. After all, they were successful survivors of many traditional classes. (I admit to having felt some uncertainty also!) Those who were not regular users of e-mail were slower in getting started. Some encountered technical problems such as finding a suitable software package, acquiring e-mail access, defining the class mailing list, or simply increasing their typing speed and accuracy. On the opening day of class, 15 students from Massachusetts, Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan were “packed into the classroom.”

As it turned out, the class was a lot of fun. Student responses indicated a high level of involvement and learning. Some participants, particularly at first, asked tentatively, “Is anyone out there listening to me?” But the vast majority offered thoughtful, relevant, and helpful responses. We quickly learned that short answers were better than long ones; this helped to focus our discussion. The use of e-mail abbreviated the rambling monologues characteristic of the traditional classroom where stu-
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The first message you read is from Dr. David Penner, the “instructor” of the course. (He cautioned us to use this term loosely, since our interaction together would be the key instructional element of the class.) In his message, he reminds you of an assignment that is due tomorrow and offers some feedback relating to your e-mail submission from the previous week. You continue to read the other mail. Janeric challenges Patrick’s observation about Joel Barker’s definition of leadership in his book Paradigms: The Business of Discovering the Future, one of the required readings for the course. Israel has submitted a leadership theory for the class to read, and Jeanette has posted another riddle for the group to consider as part of a continuing discussion about riddles and paradigm shifts. Naomi recommends a great reference she has found, and so it goes. You fire off a few responses of your own, then settle down on the sofa to read a few chapters of Stephen Covey’s Principle-Centered Leadership, the other required text for the course.

In the end, not one student regretted taking part in this “wonderful adventure,” as Dr. Penner described it. All said they would recommend a similar course to others, with the caution that enrollees become somewhat proficient at e-mail communication before signing on. Because I am completing a degree at Andrews from several hundred miles away, I eagerly look forward to taking part in other distance-learning opportunities. Dr. Penner’s experiment has given us a taste of the future. We all agree with our classmate Carol who said, “It was a serendipitous experience of a lifetime and increased our enthusiasm, knowledge, and experience—thanks to everyone.”

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