

■ BIH-RU LEA, Feature Editor, Missouri University of Science and Technology

Changing the Game: Learner-Centered Course Design

by Melissa St. James, Natasa Christodoulidou, and Kaye Bragg, California State University, Dominguez Hills



Melissa St. James

is an assistant professor of marketing in the Management and Marketing Department at California State University, Dominguez Hills. She earned her PhD from The George Washington University,

her MBA from Meredith College, and her BA from The University of Cincinnati. Her varied research interests include celebrity endorsements, wine consumption, online teaching, and the history of advertising.

mstjames@csudh.edu



Natasa Christodoulidou

is an assistant professor of marketing in the Management and Marketing Department at California State University, Dominguez Hills. She earned her PhD from

University of Nevada Las Vegas, her MBA from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and her MAcc and BSc from Arizona State University. Her research interests are in the areas of technology, electronic commerce, electronic distribution, and supply chain.

nchristodoulidou@csudh.edu



Kaye Bragg

is an associate dean of the College of Business Administration and Public Policy at California State University, Dominguez Hills, where she collaborates with faculty in program assessment and curriculum

design. She received a PhD in international relations and comparative politics from Colorado State University. Her research reflects her interdisciplinary interests in non-government organizations, Asian public policy, models of agenda setting, and pedagogy.

kbragg@csudh.edu

The members of the faculty of California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH), at the 2008 WDSI meeting were proud to share the strategic decisions behind the success of their Online MBA Program. The authors believe that we all share the ultimate goal of helping as many students as possible attain a successful and fruitful education. Sharing this information can benefit our industry and raise the level of professionalism. The goal of this article is to share our learner-centered online program with others in our industry.

Learner-centered Program Design

A successful online MBA program begins with a curriculum that is learner-centered. In an article published earlier this year (Christodoulidou, St. James, and Nelson, 2008) and in a panel discussion at Western Decision Sciences (WDSI) Annual Conference in San Diego (St. James, Christodoulidou, and Bragg, 2008), the authors shared five tips for creating and managing an online program. In the Christodoulidou et. al (2008) article we identified the elements that would make the curriculum a student-centered model:

1. Design the program *around* and *about* the students.
2. Make the program *flexible* yet *focused*.
3. Make the program *interesting* and *interactive*.
4. Make the program *affordable* for the students and *profitable* for the university.
5. Design the program with the *convenience* of an "online" delivery system

but without sacrificing the "on-campus" emotional *connection* to the university.

At the program level, course scheduling becomes the unique strength of the online "anytime, anywhere education" modality. Academics refer to this characteristic as "asynchronous learning networks" (ALN). Such networks individualize the learning experience to fit each person's work and social demands (Hiltz, 1998). For example, in the MBA program at California State University, Dominguez Hills (mba.csudh.edu), students have the option to enroll during any of the four terms throughout the year. Students build a set of courses each term given their work and personal obligations along with curriculum requirements. In each of the four 12-week terms, the program provides a consistent offering of core requirements and electives. This consistency permits students to continue through the program in a timely manner. This sequence of courses is based on the cognitive skills and information that a graduate of the program is expected to master.

This sequencing also radically transforms the students' approach to thinking and learning. An online MBA program should do many things. It should cover the essential areas of knowledge and give students the skills required in today's competitive business environment. The challenge is to establish a series of courses that bring the students from point A—what they currently know—to point B—what they need to know. A successful online MBA curriculum needs to be focused on giving students the tools not only to solve business problems but

to make decisions within the framework of a strategic plan. The program should be designed not only to impart the knowledge of accounting, economics, finance, management, and marketing, but also to equip graduates with skills such as team building, quantitative and qualitative decision making, and creative problem-solving. In contrast to the undergraduate program, the graduate online course refines critical thinking as it asks that students apply new knowledge to professional problems.

New Student-Instructor Relationships

One key to the online-learner-centered environment is that the educator understands that students may not be accustomed to such a structure. This approach requires more involvement, participation, and even proactive behavior on the part of the student. Instructors conduct a self-assessment of their course using a rubric based on the seven principles of effective teaching identified by Chickering and Gamson research. The rubric provides instructors with specific format and content elements that build student engagement. The self assessment permits reflection by instructors on the degree to which their course is learner centered.

Through this course redesign, the student-instructor relationship changes as the instructor invites students to directly participate in the inquiry-based learning. The student and instructor become collaborators who investigate problems and discussion solutions. Because students learn through personal inquiry and evaluation, each student assumes more responsibility for his learning. In this learning environment, students ask questions, posit propositions, and investigate alternative solutions, all through online team and individual chats, team presentations, or extensive email exchanges. In contrast to the classroom, these written exchanges allow individuals several exchanges across weeks. These written exchanges also let student make references to past communications. The instructor may call students' attention to linkage between ideas by referencing the

communication record of a class. These references let students reflect on changes in their attitudes and skills.

In his book *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain explains how this new relationship assumes that "knowledge is constructed and not received" (Bain, p. 24). By the time we reach college, we have thousands of mental models, or schemas, that we use to try to understand the lectures we hear or the texts we read (Bain, 2004). Bain posits that our brains are both storage and processing units. In any course, students use their existing mental models to build knowledge and to interpret what they encounter. Learning is enhanced when they encounter something that involves solving a problem or resolving a dilemma, especially when doing so pushes students beyond common solutions and ideas. Online courses that ask students to podcast their presentations or discuss their case study solutions facilitate such learning. They also provide a ready source of feedback—other students may critique solutions and presentations, and as a result the student being critiqued can update and repost his or her work. This dynamic exchange uses timely feedback from other students to motivate individuals to perform at a higher level. Instructors must conduct classes and craft assignments that stimulate the construction of new mental models of reality rather than simply transmitting knowledge. The group, one-to-one, and personal reflection that is part of an online course helps construct these new mental models.

Through the use of text, visual and audio components, the online modality is a multidimensional environment that directly engages students in the learning process. In addition, by using case studies and simulations, an instructor can construct a safe space for students to experiment, fail, reflect, and revise. Once given a set of guidelines, students can shape their own coursework by choosing project topics. Through this selection process, students express their own diverse points of view and share their unique perspectives. These course activities provide the basic scaffolding

through which students will question their assumptions and knowledge. An instructor uses chat rooms, discussion boards and team projects to place students in situations where some of their mental models will not work. Such activities make understanding those models and the emotional baggage attached to them significantly more simple.

In the learner-centered course, the instructor may no longer be the "sage on the stage," lecturing to an audience that merely takes notes to later recite that information on an examination. Through the design of course activities, the instructor is a facilitator and resource that students can interact with as they learn. The instructor provides two types of feedback: information and acknowledgment. The information feedback is the traditional evaluation, clarification of a task, or grading of an assignment. The acknowledgement feedback confirms some event or shared experience. Together these types of feedback encourage learning by using an ongoing dialogue between the instructor and the students. This new relationship shifts attention away from the instructor and focuses it on the process of learning. In a learner-centered course, both the student and the instructor are "learners."

Constructing Engagement for Learning

At the core of each online course is a learning process in which students become aware of the limitations of their current knowledge base and after doing so begin using new strategies and perspectives. First, courses designed around and about students utilize a curriculum that turns the practical experience of professionals into assignments and activities. Case-based learning experiences, simulations and team projects take academic knowledge and apply it to a work environment. These types of assignments construct a learning environment based on the *learner-centered model*. The learner-centered model asks that students reflect and integrate course work in accordance with their personal backgrounds.

Second, an online MBA program should include courses that feature a high level of interaction between faculty and students as well as between students themselves. Each class needs to combine diverse methods of delivering the subject matter such as text materials, lecture videos, case studies, group interaction among students, threaded discussions, interactive net meetings, and video conferencing. The online sessions should aim at transformative learning instead of sessions where students acquire new information that they can easily fit into their pre-existing knowledge structures (Cranton, 2002).

The Threaded Discussion forum lets the instructor begin a flow of conversation with a mere question or comment. It also promotes a greater level of discussion than often found in the classroom and allows students to think and react at their own pace. In contrast to a traditional classroom discussion, the treaded discussion encourages personal reflection about a student's learning experience and learning styles. The online format also lets the instructor reference past comments or ideas that students may wish to review. In addition, students may reflect on their personal growth throughout the course by reviewing their comments across the weeks of posting. In many instances educators should actually get to know their students better when teaching a distance education class. For example, some students are more comfortable sharing information with teachers one-on-one via email as opposed to face-to-face communication. Threaded discussions and emails enable students to validate changes in their mental models and assumptions.

The final piece for engaged learning is program assessment based on course learning outcomes. Each online course should contribute to the knowledge and skills of a graduate in your program. Two forms of assessment are needed so that you may revise specific course activities and assignments. The first form is an indirect assessment of the student's perception of the learning environment through some type of survey questions. Classroom management and instructor

rapport are measured by these questions. Based on this information we revised courses to include clear guidelines for student-instructor interaction, policies describing the *types* of communication that should take place over different channels, and standard *timelines* for instructors responding to messages. In this online modality the instructor rapport is built around informational feedback (evaluation of work or answering questions) and acknowledgement feedback (confirm student involvement). Thoughtful and timely feedback to students regarding their assignment is a cornerstone of a learning-centered online course.

The second assessment is a direct measure of learning outcomes through review of student work. Collectively, instructors apply a common rubric to a course assignment or test question. In the online course, a representative sample of the student assignments per course and across terms may be stored electronically. Using our team work rubric, we reviewed student projects across multiple sections of our capstone course and revised the organization of our online groups based on the low performance relative to the teamwork dimension of "cooperation." This direct measure of student work permits specific revision of assignments and activities given the competencies and information you expect from your graduates. Program assessment using both these forms insures quality and consistency between online and campus courses.

Conclusion

The process of transformative learning asks that students become active participants in learning by applying new knowledge, challenging assumptions, and evaluating new viewpoints. Online discussion boards and group projects provide an opportunity for students to challenge assumptions and consider new perspectives. Many MBA online participants cite the level of discussion and interaction as high points in the program. Instructors, as well as students, need to have 24-hour access to the course web site so that they can participate in Threaded

Discussions at will. Technology allows a great deal of control, yet it also grants unfettered access and participation.

The internal experience of the student should never be forgotten. Failing distance-education programs that are ready to be shut down have been revived when educational institutions restructure the program on the student-centered model. At the core of this model is transforming an individual: the learner. Often, the delivery system gets in the way of the product as well as the experience. For example, in the music business the recording industry forgot what it was selling. It thought it was selling records when, in fact, it was selling music. This was made clear as the industry moved to CDs and then to MP3s, iPods and eventually "YouTube." The same analogy can be applied to education. Education is not selling stodgy professors with black boards and screeching chalk; it is selling the experience of learning.

Learning is an experience which is forever changing courtesy of its delivery system. Today, education uses various components of distance education: hybrid courses, exclusive on-line courses, video conferencing, podcasts, and Second Life, to name a few. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Whatever it is, educators should not forget that the product they are selling is the experience of learning. The online learning environment establishes a virtual community of learners that shares discipline knowledge and unique perspectives. In the process of such sharing individuals transform mental models and self-identity.

For more information, please visit www.mba.csudh.edu.

References

- Bain, K. (2004). *What the best college teachers do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Boyd, R. D., & Myers, J. G. (1988). Transformative education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 7, 261-28.

See **CLASSROOM**, page 16

equately addressed here. However, Table 1 provides a snapshot of some of the topics he discusses as well as his brief descriptions of implications for teachers. In conclusion, the book presents an interesting set of ideas. The most engaging portions are the explanations of how the brain works, how memory is created (or not created), and how the brain generally defaults to memory when presented with new information. There are a variety of suggestions for improving teaching, engaging students, and, in some cases, accepting the way things are. Willingham extensively employs cognitive science research to support his ideas, and his willingness to sometimes say “we just don’t know” is refreshing. A metaphor quoted in the book captures his advice to teachers, which in turn serves as advice for our students: “Let me take you on a mental journey. Follow and trust me. The path may sometimes be rocky or steep, but I promise a rewarding adventure.”

Endnotes

1. Transportation, Excess production, Added processes, Motion, Waiting, Inventory, Non-conformance (defects). Thanks to Rachna Shah, my colleague at the University of Minnesota, for this acronym.
2. “Albania, Albania, you border on the Adriatic, your land is mostly mountainous, and your chief export is chrome” sung to the tune of “When the Saints Come Marching In.” ■

Cognitive Principle	Classroom Implication
Students are naturally curious, but not naturally good thinkers.	Think of course materials as answers, and put most of your effort into creating the right questions to create student interest in learning the answers.
Factual knowledge must precede skill.	Students cannot think about a topic, i.e., employ critical thinking skills, without a factual knowledge (mind map) base.
Memory is the residue of thought.	For each lesson plan, consider “What will cause my students to think?”
Students understand new things within the context of what they already know.	Start by ensuring that students have the shallow knowledge, and work toward deep knowledge as a goal.
Students are more alike than different in terms of learning.	Let lesson content, not student differences, drive decisions of how to teach.
Intelligence can be changed through hard work.	Recognize or reward both successes and failures in terms of the effort the student has expended; avoid focusing solely on student’s ability.
Teaching, like any complex cognitive skill, must be practiced to be improved.	Improvement requires more than experience; it also requires conscious effort and feedback.

Note: Adapted from Willingham (2009 p. 163).

Table 1: Willingham’s cognitive principles and classroom implications.

CLASSROOM, from page 6

- Chickering, A., & Gamson, Z. F. (1991). *Applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Christodoulidou, N., St. James, M., & Nelson, K. B. (2008). Tips on creating and managing a successful online MBA Program. *HOSTEUR*, 17(1), 19-22.
- Cranton, P. (2002). Teaching for transformation. *New Directions of Adult and Continuing Education*, 93, 63-71.
- www.GetEducated.com article. Last accessed on March 11 2007 at http://www.geteducated.com/rankings/best_mbareg.asStarr Roxanne Hiltz
- Grandzol, G. R., & Grandzo, C.J. (2006). Best practices for online business education. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 7(1).
- St.James, M., Christodoulidou, N., & Bragg, K. (2008). On-line MBA program. *Proceedings of the Western Decision Sciences, San Diego, CA*.
- Starr, R. H. (1998). Collaborative learning in asynchronous learning networks: building learning communities. Invited address at “WEB98” Orlando, FL. ■