

Online-Teaching

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Teaching a class without class room? Using the Internet with virtual classroom technology it is possible to give lectures at a distance. This form of teaching – online-teaching – is a very good alternative to traditional face to face teaching; but it is used too rarely by Universities in our continent. Here in Europe (Austria), the technique is more often utilized as one aspect of regular class lectures by posting additional information on an e-learning platform.

Why teaching online?

Online-teaching without a face to face combination is a form of distance-education. The advantages are:

- to reach a wider student audience;
- to meet the needs of students, who are unable to take part in a classroom-lecture, because of time or distance;
- to teach and link students from different geographic regions, with different social, cultural and economic backgrounds, without the need for the students (or the teacher) to travel to another town, country or even continent;
- to involve guest speakers, who are otherwise unable to attend the traditional class room course.

Approaches to Online-Teaching

In an online-course there are the same – even more – possibilities of teaching-methods, learning styles and exams facilities as in a class room. Two approaches of online-teaching and learning have emerged: synchronous and asynchronous.

Synchronous Online-Teaching

Synchronous online-education links the instructor and the students in “real time” via the internet. Therefore everybody has to be online at the same time; the instructor sees whose computer, microphone, and camera is active. It is more or less a meeting in the classroom, but virtual (for example: once a week).

Typically involved tools are: audio and video conferencing, live chat, virtual “hand raising”, shared whiteboard, and joint viewing of multimedia presentation and online slides shows.

With these tools there are a lot of interactive education possibilities: Speeches by the teacher or a presentation by a student with direct questions can be held; audio-visual-discussions between the lecturer and the students as well as among the students at different sites can be arranged. The instructor is the one who controls the discussion by a mouse-click that “allows” students to interact with others in the virtual class room via audio and/or video. Last but not least, students who missed a session or want to review for an exam may replay the audio-recorded lecture on demand.

Asynchronous Online-Teaching

Asynchronous teaching and learning uses the time-delayed capabilities of the internet. Synchronous courses will often have an asynchronous aspect, but asynchronous online-teaching is even more often used as the preferred technique for general online classes and as an online aspect of traditional face-to-face courses.

These courses are still instructor-facilitated, but are not conducted in real time, which means that students and teacher can engage in course activities anytime. These classes are very popular, because it is more convenient to choose the time of teaching or studying the materials. Traditionally popular tools for asynchronous online classes are threaded discussions, newsgroups, file attachments, and e-mails. Increasingly, however, asynchronous courses are incorporating PowerPoint lectures, podcasts, and video streaming.

Challenges of effective Online-Teaching

The online environment can be an effective education setting. However, just as there are challenges for both lecturers and students in the traditional classroom there are challenges in online education.

Hopefully, the class room instructor will be concerned about each of the following; but the online instructor may need to be even more vigilant about:

- offering a well-organized lecture;
- noticing which point a student does not understand;
- keeping in frequent oral and written communication with the students individually and as a group;
- and encouraging active learning by using appropriate pedagogical techniques.

When class room management achieves those goals, there will be a good learning atmosphere for the participants. That is even more important for online instruction since – at least today – it remains an unusual teaching and learning environment. Nevertheless, the students will quickly grow comfortable with the process of distance learning. The praxis shows that especially shy students feel more comfortable in discussions and are more active in an online class.

Online-teaching is typically accomplished by having students and instructors logon to an e-education platform (e.g., Blackboard) through the university's website. But, other than access to such a platform, neither students nor instructors need any special software or downloads other than those typically found on today's computers (e.g., RealPlayer, QuickTime, Java).

In this way, by using only common capacities, you may connect students and teachers from all over the world!

These and more information you can find:

Teaching and learning online – Communication, Community, Assessment, A handbook for UMass Faculty, Mya Poe et al. (Eds), to find: http://www.umass.edu/cft/publications/Teaching_and_Learning_Online_Handbook.pdf

<http://editors.merlot.org/OnlineLearning.htm>