

DISTANCE EDUCATION: HOW TO TEACH ONLINE HISTORY COURSE EFFECTIVELY

Distance education is growing rapidly in many countries across the world. There are several major reasons for its growing popularity:

1. It provides greater flexibility for the students, who typically build their academic schedule around their professional and family obligations. Students can study online and work outside of their home at the same time. Students can also take online classes while living in a different city or country.

2. Distance education allows for a personalized course of study. If a student is already familiar with the material, she does not have to wait for other classmates to catch up. Instead, he/she can engage into independent study and research the subject matter in greater detail. If a student is having trouble comprehending the material, distance education affords the student with an opportunity to use extra time to gain adequate knowledge of the subject matter.

3. Online classes offer a great variety of learning mediums, such as asynchronous discussions, power point presentations, wiki projects, pod casts, and video and audio lectures, all of which can satisfy diverse learning styles.

4. In the United States of America, distance education is often more affordable than its campus counterpart. In addition, students do not have to pay the cost of gasoline to commute to a school and paying for parking or childcare.

While distance education is often praised for its flexibility and affordability, nonetheless it produces its own, unique set of challenges for both the instructor and students. Factors, which contribute to the poor academic success of students, include inadequate time-management skills, poor knowledge of technology and inability to study independently. In addition, inferior course design, absence of course outcomes and poorly designed assessments, and the lack of student-student and student-instructor interactions can impede students' success. My aim as an online history instructor is to create an exciting and well-designed course, with crystal clear learning outcomes, wide range of assessments, and effective course interaction on all levels.

A well-designed online course consists of four major components:

1. Course Overview and Introduction.
2. Course Organization and Design.
3. Assessments.
4. Student-Student and Student-Instructor Interactions.

Course Overview and Introduction

On the first day of class, I post a welcome greeting on the course homepage, where I ask students to read the documents from the online folder titled *Welcome to the Course*. First item in this folder is my personal introduction, where I tell students about myself and my academic background. Likewise, I ask my students to post their personal introductions to the Discussion Board forum titled *Introduce Yourself*. Students are encouraged to tell the class about themselves – their majors, jobs, hobbies and interests, and to share their photos or brief video greeting with the class. The goal is to establish a personal connection between students and the instructor. This activity is an excellent “ice-breaker” and helps the class to start a new semester on a positive note.

In the same folder, I also post my syllabus, which contains a course description and schedule, required software and books, learning outcomes, information on assessments, plagiarism and netiquette, policies on grading, attendance, and office hours.

After the students have read the syllabus and familiarized themselves with the course, they are required to take an online readiness survey, which helps to pinpoint possible lacunae students might have in their knowledge of internet technology and specific course management system used by the college. Students who did not pass the readiness surveys are encouraged to contact the Informational Technology Help Desk for personalized help and training.

After students complete online readiness surveys, they are directed to the folder, titled the *Toolbox of a Historian*. This folder contains information and links for success strategies. The students learn more about the field of history and what historians do. They are encouraged to make parallels between the detective’s work and the work of a historian, where interpretations must be based on a primary source evidence. Next, students read a PowerPoint presentation on how to differentiate and analyze primary and secondary sources. They also read policy on how to avoid plagiarism and bad paraphrase, and how to cite sources correctly. Students are also informed of the consequences of academic dishonesty. In addition, I explain the

meaning of netiquette, which helps promote a civil and respectful tone in all classroom discussions.

The last piece of information in this folder is the letters from my former students, in which they give new students advice on how to succeed in the class. I have gotten excellent feedback from students who read these letters. In short, the *Toolbox of a Historian* provides students with tools necessary for successful completion of an online history class.

Course Organization and Design

Course organization and design must promote successful student learning. The very first step in this direction is to construct a set of learning outcomes for the course and to provide weekly learning outcomes for each module. I tell the students what they need to learn and master each week. I show them how the weekly learning outcomes are tied into the general learning outcomes for the course. For example, one of the learning outcomes in the History of Modern Western Civilization course that I teach online is to “Examine the interactions of the West and the World from the 17th to 21st century”. An interaction between the West and the World is a recurrent theme throughout this course, but there is one module where we investigate the Western expansion into Africa. Upon completing readings and assignments for this module, students should be able to reach the following goals: 1. Explain the causes of the New Imperialism. 2. Analyze the effects of the New Imperialism on the western and African societies. 3. Identify stages of the Western imperial expansion into Africa. Having both sets of outcomes (for weekly modules and for the course in general) is necessary to guide students through the course content and to facilitate and assess students’ learning.

The content of my course is divided into weekly learning modules that are presented in a chronological order. Each module provides a to-do list that contains the following information: 1. Brief summary of the period/event under study. 2. List of reading and multi-media sources students have to read, listen, watch and interpret. 3. Requirements for posting to the Discussion Board Forums. 4. Questions to answer and post to the Discussion Board.

Each weekly module is enhanced by a variety of multi-media such as PowerPoint, virtual trips to the European museums, podcasts, recorded lectures, and discussion forums. Last semester I had a great success with using open course content from the Harvard Extension School. My students were given a terrific opportunity to watch lec-

tures given by the Harvard Professor Charles Maier on the topics of *New Imperialism and First and Second World Wars*.

An asynchronous discussion constitutes a substantial portion of my online course. Students who do not actively participate are not given credit for being present. Students are required to post a minimum number of responses to the instructor's questions and comments to other students' posts. Online discussions can be a liberating environment for those students who are shy and are not comfortable participating in the face-to-face classroom environment. My goal is to design an effective and engaging discussion that promotes learning, reinforces critical writing skills and sustains thoughtful participation on behalf of students. Some of the guidelines I use to achieve this goal are as follows:

1. Give choices. I provide students with a wide variety of questions or topics to choose from, so the conversations do not become redundant.

2. Construct open-ended and relevant questions, which involve a variety of primary and secondary sources and are designed to promote critical thinking skills.

3. Encourage active learning. Active learning is a key to getting students engaged.

4. Be organized and clear in creating discussion board forums. Even though majority of students are probably familiar with an online environment, not every student has adequate knowledge of specific course management system used by the college. It may take some time for a student to learn how to navigate course materials and participate in asynchronous discussions; therefore, I try to create a simple and organized format.

5. Be present in a discussion. Just as students have to be present and active in online discussions, instructors also need to be present.

6. Netiquette. To promote safe learning environment, online exchanges must be done in a civil and respectful manner. Students are asked to treat everybody in the class with respect and be mindful of diverse opinions, life experiences and backgrounds of other students. I also expect my students to be cautious in using sarcasm or humor. When responding to someone else's message, I suggest to students to address the ideas, not the person and not to post inappropriate or offensive messages to the Discussion Boards. Students are encouraged to see their instructor if they have a problem concerning the requirements, grades or another student.

7. Determine how discussions must be graded, craft grading rubric and share this information with the students in the beginning of the semester.

Assessments

Students are assessed in the variety of ways. Each week I assess and grade students' contributions to the discussion board forums. Students are also required to complete weekly quizzes, which designed to promote deeper comprehension and retention of the subject matter. There are typically few major exams in the course, several research papers and object presentations.

It is imperative for the instructor to provide clear, detailed instructions and grading criteria for the course assignments. I usually provide my students with grading rubrics for the discussion board forums and research papers. A grading rubric for the discussion forums includes such grading criteria as the grasp of relevant historical facts and concepts, depth of content analysis, quality of follow-up postings, content contribution and length, late submission, and clarity and mechanics of the posts. Detailed grading rubric helps students to learn and successfully meet expectations of the course. I design assignments for the course with the course learning outcomes in mind. Each individual assignment aims to assess how the students meet the learning outcomes of the individual modules and the general course learning outcomes.

Student-Student and Student-Instructor Interactions

Academic success of an online course is also based on the effective interaction and collaboration between all participants in the course, including the Instructor. In my course, students are required to post their answers to the Instructor's questions, and to provide constructive feedback for their classmates. Students know that they will not earn any points by merely agreeing with the author of the post. They need to define strengths and weaknesses of the post and to ask thoughtful questions in order to generate a debate. I am always present in the discussions by replying to students, affirming good points and asking questions to promote further thinking.

The Instructor must provide students with continual dialogue, questioning, and feedback for the course to be effective. It is also important for the Instructor to state response times for grading assignments and for answering emails. A well-designed online course is crucial for the students' success and requires thoughtful and analytical planning on the part of the Instructor.