

**Teaching Online and Teaching Adults: Issues of Course Design,
Academic Quality, and Community Building**

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“We believe that education is most effective when students, faculty, staff, and administration unite as a community of learners.”

- Antioch University McGregor Mission Statement

Antioch University McGregor (AUM) has been delivering online courses for the past three years. Initially, two faculty ventured into the realm of online learning as a way to better serve their students, most of whom are working professionals and many of whom are living outside of the greater Dayton area. The first courses were delivered using the university’s existing email messaging and conferencing software, FirstClass. The university then purchased WebCT and courses are being developed and delivered using this program as well. Currently, the entire curricula of two Master of Arts programs are offered online, with two others offering a growing number of online course options. This paper describes our experiences with and lessons learned from the development and design of two online courses, one using FirstClass and the other using WebCT.

The reflective nature of this paper demands a narrative style of presentation that allows for personal voices of both its authors. First, Karen will present a general overview of the set up of two online classes, one using FirstClass and other WebCT. That will be followed with a reflective review of Beloo’s experiences in online teaching. This part of the paper is written in the tone of a teacher-researcher deliberately reflecting on her experience and in the process drawing out lessons for personal practice and practice of fellow educators.

**Getting Ready to Teach and Learn
by
Karen Crist**

The Online Instructional Design

When I began working in the program only two faculty offered online courses using the FirstClass system. The Information Systems (IS) department worked with faculty creating folders and setting up the courses. IS was involved after this initial set up to monitor the courses somewhat and serve as tech support for faculty and students. Once

the course offerings expanded with one program opting to offer its entire curriculum online, there was an immediate need to have someone, namely me, begin supporting faculty more as a course manager. I became intimately involved with the needs of both faculty and student and worked to improve upon each course as it was developed. This process will continue as more faculty begin teaching on-line and more data is collected from these courses.

What follows is a look at the development and design of two courses, one using FirstClass and the other using WebCT. All courses are developed with faculty and a technology staff working together to integrate academics with effective course design. For the two courses we describe here I was the online course manager and my co-author was the developer and instructor.

CR615: Thesis Proposal Writing

This FirstClass course was designed for a student population that is spread across the world. The students had been to campus once prior to the course for a two-week residency including three hours of FirstClass training and online learning orientation. The course is structured around “Course Folders” used for specific purpose throughout the course. The course is primarily asynchronous. The structure of this course is as follows:

CR615(12-13) Syllabus

This folder is a read-only area for students. It contains only the syllabus. In the syllabus are the course description, learning goals, texts, readings, and assignments.

CR615(12-13) Student Chat

This area is for students desiring “real time” communication with their classmates. This area was not used frequently during this course as the international population of students found it difficult to coordinate times which would work for all involved.

CR615(12-13) Beloo's Chat

The instructor would, at times, make herself available to students for chats with her and other students. Participation is strictly voluntary.

615(12-13) Discussions (6 unit folders)

This folder contains six different unit folders. Within each folder is the posted lecture and related assignments. Student use this area to discuss assignments and answer questions related to the learning units. This folder is designed to foster group discussion and build an online learning community.

Beloo's 12-13 Drop Box

The Drop Box serves as a means for private communication from student to faculty within the context of the course. Students are able only to send messages to this box, but cannot open the folder and read the postings of others. This serves to keep all

course communication contained within the course and not clutter faculty personal email boxes with course-related correspondence.

CR5615(12-13) Café

The café is a place for informal communication among students in the course. It is also a place for faculty and the course manager to post messages related to administrative items or technology related concerns. This area is designed to foster community building not only within this particular course, but the cohort as a whole. It is a place where students can ask for and give support to one another.

FirstClass was originally used because it was affordable, easily accessible, and it was known to both faculty and staff. It is still used today although some faculty are migrating to WebCT. Below is a look at the design of one of the WebCT courses offered:

RSH615: Qualitative Research

This primarily asynchronous course was designed for a student population that is spread across the country. The students had been to campus once prior to the course for a two-week residency including three hours of FirstClass training and online learning orientation. However, at the time of their residency, a WebCT orientation was not available. This course is structured around areas or sections used for specific purposes:

Syllabus

The course syllabus is posted here.

Curriculum and Schedule

Course Design, Text, and readings

This section includes detailed information about the course, learning goals and outcomes, the overall design and flow of the course, all required and suggested texts, and a list of particular reading assignments. This gives students a sense of the whole course and provides a context in which to place each particular assignment of week's work.

Course schedule

This section includes a week-by-week schedule of what is to be expected throughout the course. It includes a schedule of learning unit postings, readings, and assignments. Students who are looking simply for dates can check here easily without looking through the entire syllabus.

Calendar

This feature allows particular dates to be posted to a graphic calendar. This includes assignment due dates and the beginning and end dates of learning units.

Learning Units

The six Learning Units in this class contain instructor lectures. Segments of the units are broken into subcategories for easy searching from within the course. The screen appearance is that of an outline format so that the lecture can be “digested” in increments. This outline format also allows the student to return to particular segments of the lecture to easily review needed material.

Discussion

The Discussion area allows for the informal and academic discussion that so richly enhances the online learning experience. Different sub-folders are created for each instructional unit of the class. It is a place for all to participate in dialogue about course material and what is happening in their lives. Here you will see questions and comments about the course material as well as other “community building” posts such as a “hello” posting from a student traveling overseas during the course. This is a critical area in the building of the online learning community.

Instructor’s Home page

This page is designed to give the student a better idea of who this instructor is, her educational background, research interests and a photo. Students who did not have the opportunity to meet this instructor while on campus can use this page to “put a face with a name” which some students find helpful in developing a connection with the instructor and the course as a whole.

Student’s Home pages

This area provides students with the opportunity to create and post a personal web page.

Chat

This area is for students desiring “real time” communication with their classmates or instructor. The need for synchronous participation seems to vary from course to course and seems to depend on the needs of each particular group (or vocal individuals within the group). However, it is important to note that the chat feature in WebCT also allows for the conversation to be recorded and later posted as a transcript for those who could not join the “real time” chat.

Mail

Each participant has a mailbox associated with this course. This allows for more private communications and allows all course-related communication to remain in the course area. For faculty, this greatly reduces the number of incoming and outgoing messages in the personal email box.

WebCt vs. First Class: A Course Manager’s Perspective

We have found that both FirstClass and WebCT provide faculty, and online course managers, the necessary tools with which to create an effective academic environment. They each have strengths and weaknesses in their application. Regardless

of the particular selection, it is imperative that the faculty and course manager work collaboratively to create a course which supports the academics and which allows students to participate to their fullest without getting lost or frustrated or confused. Keeping the design simple includes developing a structure in which course folders or sections support the syllabus and eliminate needless shuffling from one area to the next. Simplicity for the student is key in our experience.

Additionally, good design will only take the instructor and students so far. The expectations set by the instructor for course participation are key. The instructor must be specific about what is required in terms of the following: how often will participants need be online, how many postings are expected, the expected quality of participant postings, and the requirements around responding to one another's postings, etc.

WebCT requires more from faculty in terms of setting up the initial course. However, once it has been taught once, the course may be reset and easily updated. On the technology support side, it is fairly easy to set student and faculty permissions for the entire course. However, there is more upfront training needed for faculty when adopting WebCT. Students require less training to participate in a WebCT course, provided they are already comfortable with using the Internet.

In contrast, FirstClass requires less technological skill on the part of our faculty, but requires a tremendous amount of course management support especially during the initial set up. Permissions must be set for all course folders and sub-folders and courses cannot be reset. Students must be trained on the use of the FirstClass application.

Next, Beloo will provide a reflective analysis of her online teaching experience, pointing out the successes, lessons learned, and areas for improvement. She will also emphasize the notions of academic quality and community building in an online teaching-learning environment.

Teaching, Learning, and Reflecting

**by
Beloo Mehra**

Learning to Learn: Navigating Through an Online Class

Over last three years I have taught several online and face-to-face classes in research design, qualitative research methodology and research proposal writing to students in two AUM programs - Individualized Liberal and Professional Studies (ILPS), and Master of Arts in Conflict Resolution (MACR). The first time I taught an online class for MACR, I knew that students in my class (CR 615 – Thesis Proposal Writing) were familiar with the workings of FirstClass. I did not have to give any formal instructions to the students. However, as the class went on, from time to time I reminded students of the purpose of each sub-folder in the class, and where to post their comments about class readings, where to post their assignments, and so on.

Last Spring, when WebCT was first introduced at AUM, the IS department gave me some initial training, and also emailed students some general instructions on logging on to the WebCT class. I also recommended that students visit the WebCT website and look at a dummy course to become familiar with the class features. As our class went on, most of the students were able to successfully navigate through and fully participate in the class. But some had questions about the workings of some of the class features. I found myself replying individually to each student's query or posting general messages on the discussion folder in case others were experiencing the same problem. Some technical questions were also forwarded to the IS department. This back and forth emailing took time and effort on part of everyone and more importantly, interrupted the students' learning. This being our first time using WebCT, we all considered this as a learning opportunity for us, and one early lesson we learned was that for next WebCT class, we had to come up with a better way of providing instructions before the start of the class, and if possible also provide a demonstration of the different features of the WebCT class.

The following summer, the WebCT class that I was going to teach was actually a sequel to the spring class. This online class, however, was going to have many new students – the students who were taking the earlier class in the face-to-face format. At the end of spring quarter, I gave a WebCT demonstration to these new students. I used the spring class as a demonstration tool, at the end of the demonstration students felt that they will be able to find their way around the summer WebCT class. Early in the summer quarter, after the students were sent login information by the IS department, I emailed them some detailed instructions a couple of days before the start of the class.

Once the class was underway, the value of an actual demonstration and providing detailed instructions before the start of the class was soon visible, as the individual questions about the working of class features substantially dropped. More students were able to actively participate in the class from the first day onwards. This was partly because this was the second WebCT class for many students, and they like us, had learned from the first experience. But even those students for whom this was the first online class ever, the experience of navigating through the class was made easier with demonstration and instructions. But during the second week of the class, a couple of new students joined the group. For them and as a reminder for others, a second demonstration was arranged. Several students showed up for this, the demonstration now involved the actual class these students were enrolled in. This helped students to pose specific questions and seek specific responses.

This last lesson learned about WebCT class demonstration is critical – it helps when students can be given a demonstration using the actual WebCT class that they are taking. It requires that the course be built few days before the beginning of the class to arrange for a demonstration. It also requires that the instructor give the demonstration, so that specific questions about the class can be addressed. This demonstration is more effective when all class related information such as syllabus, schedule, due dates for assignments, and other details are already posted on the WebCT class. This gives students a real feel for the working of the class, and gives them an opportunity to ask specific questions. For my students taking a WebCT class this quarter, I arranged for such a demonstration on the first day of the class. The positive results of this demonstration

can be easily seen in the active class participation by most of the students. In the first two weeks of the class itself the number of postings crossed the one hundred mark.

Giving an actual WebCT class demonstration is not possible when all the students in online classes are distance students in far off places. This was the case in two classes I taught last year, when I relied on a combination of providing detailed instructions at the beginning of the class, and answering any specific queries students had during the first few days of the class. The effectiveness of an actual demonstration however, has clearly shown us that there is a need to seriously consider other ways of providing virtual demonstration to distance students. Alternatively, such a demonstration can be arranged at the time when these students are on campus for their first residency.

Learning to Teach: Combining Lecture and Discussion

In my own learning efforts on online teaching I took two online courses last year offered by Learning Resources Network (LERN). One important lesson learned in these classes was combining lecture and discussion as two online teaching strategies. However, the lectures in these week-long courses were very short, and only provided an outline of the reading assigned for each day's class. The primary responsibility was on the students who were expected to participate in the discussion. A discussion thread was set up for each day's class. A general discussion question related to each day's assigned reading was posted by the instructor, the students were expected to respond to this question and engage in a discussion. This system seemed to work well for students who are registered for a week-long class, which was more of an extended seminar instead of an actual course meant to pursue a subject matter in depth.

In my online classes students have responded favorably to a combination of lecture and discussion. However, my experience has taught me that if I want to provide a learning environment for my graduate students where an in-depth exploration of the subject matter is not only desired but also a class expectation, my lectures need to be more challenging, informative, inspiring, full of examples, and practical advice. These lectures must provide information that is both complementary and supplementary to the information students would be expected to obtain from the assigned readings. Each instructional unit has one lecture, which is followed by discussion on the topics covered in the lecture and other readings assigned for that unit.

Another lesson learned in the LERN classes was to consider the differences in the technology available to online students. Lectures in both LERN classes involved a combination of audio-lecture and PowerPoint presentation. While this was a more creative way to deliver information, it also required that all students taking these courses had hardware and software to access such information. For our WebCT classes, we decided that it will be more in the interest of students if the information can be delivered to them in a way that will be most easily accessible, without having to require them to upload any new software or upgrade their computer hardware. The lectures posted in my WebCT classes are all text-based, are posted directly on the class homepage, and can be easily printed by the students for future, easy reading. Furthermore, each lecture is divided into small sections and sub-sections, thus providing the information in manageable chunks that are easier to absorb by most students. This, however, was not

possible when I taught on FirstClass, where the entire lecture was posted as a long email message.

Another lesson learned is that in order for students to participate actively in discussion around the class readings and topics of interest, I must provide them with challenging but open-ended questions as guideposts to frame their discussion. I include a separate section in each lecture appropriately titled, "Questions for Discussion." In FirstClass, the lecture and discussion responses for each unit are posted in the same folder. In WebCT, while the lecture itself is posted in the Learning Units, the responses to discussion questions are posted under each unit's sub-folder in a separate folder titled Discussion. This creates a visual distance between instructor lecture and student discussion, thus allowing for more indigenous responses from the student perspective. It also gives students a sense of ownership and control over the flow of discussion and hence their learning from it, as they are the primary contributors to these discussion folders. My contribution in the form of lecture is posted under a separate folder, and my contribution to the discussion is limited to occasional motivational message encouraging students to participate, or responding to the key issues or questions raised in students' comments. Some of these questions are further addressed in the following unit's lectures.

Learning Together: Building Online Communities

The first time I taught an online class, I realized that some students knew one another from previous classes they had been in together. Karen had provided the students my brief introduction highlighting my teaching experience. However, I did not know anything about these students, except their names. As a novice to online teaching, I did not realize the importance of facilitating the evolution of an online learning community. Even in a face-to-face classroom, it takes enough time for students to feel part of a learning community, and to expect that such a thing would happen on its own in an online environment was surely naïve on my part.

By the middle of my first online class, I was beginning to realize that as instructor, I had to take an active role in helping an online community to evolve during the duration of the class. This led me to incorporate a special activity aimed at building online learning community. This involves asking students to post their personal introductions during the first week of the class. Under a separate discussion thread titled, "Online Learning Community" I make the first posting - my own introduction - not just professional introduction but also including a little bit of myself as a person. This serves as a model for students trying to figure out what to include in their introductions.

This structured activity allows students and instructors to get to know one another, and makes them feel part of a learning community. One clear sign of this emerging community was evident last year when after September 11th events, students in my WebCT class posted messages to one another making sure that everyone in the class and their families were safe. Specific messages were also directed toward one student whose wife worked as a flight attendant for one of the airlines whose plane was involved in the tragic events. These exchanges reflected the sense of community that these students

felt a part of as the class went on, despite the fact that none of these students had ever met one another in person.

Academic Rigor and Student Participation

The real working of a learning community is only visible when members start participating actively in discussions about the class topics. This student participation is closely related to academic rigor in an online learning environment. Palloff and Pratt (1999), in their book, *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom*, suggest that in an online learning environment, the key to the learning process are the interactions among students themselves, the interactions between faculty and students, and the collaboration in learning that results from these interactions. In describing the evolution of a learner-centered learning community, the authors suggest that instructors need to find ways to make students feel “embodied” with the course content.

My experience has taught me that such a learner-centered learning community evolves more easily when students are given a general framework for discussion. As mentioned earlier, in each unit’s lecture I include a list of open-ended questions to guide student discussion. Also, the in-depth discussion of critical topics and issues related to subject matter in my lectures provides ample opportunities for students to engage with the content, and thereby creating a learning environment where academic rigor is valued.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) suggest that one of the most significant ways of involving students with the online content is to establish minimum levels of participation which require students to make use of the communication tools inherent in WebCT. This involvement is critical to an understanding of the concept of academic rigor in an online course. In order to encourage active participation by students, instructors should specify in their class requirements a minimum number of comments that each student must post for each unit’s discussion. Even the nature of these minimum required postings could also be made specific so that some of these postings include students’ responses to one another’s comments. However, the important thing is that these expectations are notified to the students before the beginning of the class.

In my online classes, I am very specific in my expectation that active student participation is an important class requirement, but I have never specified the minimum number of postings to be made by each student. Because I work with mostly self-motivated, self-directed adult students, it may not be very appropriate to be this specific in my class requirements. Most of my students have participated in class discussions, though some have been more active than others. Class size and individual student personality are other factors effecting their participation.

My experience with student participation was also mixed when I taught using FirstClass. In most classes the students were active participants, but in a class I taught during Winter 2001, for the first three units of the class, the student voice was almost missing. This, I realized, was mostly because these students were all strangers to one another, and even the “online learning community” activity at the beginning of the class did not help these students to feel part of a learning community. The participation did improve as the class went on, but I strongly felt that most students were missing great learning opportunities by not participating in the discussion. Next quarter the same group

of students were enrolled in another class with me, but this time it was a WebCT class, and the novelty of the instructional delivery platform contributed to a mixed trend of student participation. But overall, my experience with two online teaching formats clearly shows that as compared to FirstClass, the ease of threaded discussion in WebCT and better visual appeal of discussion folder and sub-folders in WebCT allow for more student participation in the class.

Content Robustness and Blending Theory with Practice

Content robustness is concerned with the breadth and depth of the content included in or part of a web-enhanced or asynchronous course, and the extent to which students are required to interact with that content and with each other. An online course has robust content if it goes well beyond the mere inclusion of a course syllabus and a few pages of instructor notes or readings (WebCT, 2001). The online research courses at AUM do aim to being robust courses, and provide a lot of different learning situations in which students can interact with the content. One such learning opportunity involves requiring students to engage in real-world research (library research or fieldwork depending on the course objectives) that allows them to apply their newly acquired theoretical knowledge of research methodology and design, and also learn by doing.

This blending of theory and practice is an important Antioch value. It is incorporated in all online research courses currently available at AUM. In the methods courses, students are expected to engage in fieldwork, report on their progress in online discussions, and submit a research report. In the course that teaches library research and critical analysis skills, students are required to conduct extensive library and critical research and submit a literature review on a research topic of their choice. Similarly the proposal writing course requires students to submit an acceptable research proposal. All these assignments involve practical application of theoretical knowledge students are gaining in these courses, and also provide them with opportunities to test the new skills they are developing. According to the WebCT exemplary course project (WebCT, 2001), one criterion for an online course to be considered content-robust is when the course assignments cause students to apply course content and skills, and also require critical thinking on the part of students. The AUM online research courses not only meet this criterion by blending theory and practice, but also prepare students to embark on their master's research projects.

A Final Word: Values in Online Education

We are experiencing a virtual revolution in American higher education. According to a report by International Data Corporation, in 2002 approximately 85 percent of two- and four-year colleges will offer distance education courses, up from 62 percent in 1998. One main reason for such an expansion of distance education is that it allows to provide educational access to students who are unable, or find it extremely inconvenient, to attend a traditional institution. Another important reason is that as colleges and universities see more and more non-traditional, adult, professional students join their undergraduate completion programs and graduate programs, the demand for

alternative ways to provide learning opportunities increases. These non-traditional, adult students are generally highly motivated and self-directed learners, and feel most comfortable in a learning environment that allows them to be in control of their learning, and provides ample flexibility. An online learning environment can be effectively designed to provide such learning conditions. At AUM, we constantly work towards creating such learning environments – both in our face-to-face classrooms and in our online classrooms.

The courses offered at any educational institution must reflect the philosophy of the institution. A brief description of some of the online AUM courses as presented above highlights how these courses reflect some of the key Antioch values. These courses encourage critical thinking, provide opportunities for collaborative learning, and promote the integration of life and work experience with academic knowledge. Our approach to education stems from Antioch University's historical emphasis on intellectual, emotional, and ethical development.

The increasing popularity of AUM online courses reflects the entrepreneurial spirit of its faculty and staff. It also clearly signifies the institution's commitment to provide high quality, socially responsive, flexible, and innovative educational programs. AUM seeks to pass on to its graduates a legacy of passion for lifelong learning and a commitment to the application of knowledge toward the betterment of our workplaces, our communities, and the wider society – all values that are emphasized in the online research courses offered at AUM.

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