

My Experience With Distance Learning

A Discussion Paper Presented for:

e-Learning: A New Era in Learning and Culture

First International Conference & Exhibition of the e-Learning Center

Bahrain Conference Center—Crown Plaza
Kingdom of Bahrain
April 17-19, 2006



Sponsored by:
The University of Bahrain

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April 17, 2006

In the Spring of 2000, I began utilizing WebCT software to web-enhance my American Government course at Holyoke Community College in Holyoke, Massachusetts in the United States. In the spring of 2002, I began to teach American Government (now United States National Government, POL 110¹) as a fully online distance learning course. And, in the fall of 2002, I began to teach my distance learning course online from the Kingdom of Bahrain in the Arabian Gulf. Having just begun my thirteenth semester of teaching distance learning courses at HCC in the past four years, I have encountered many of the problems and seen many of the possibilities of distance learning utilizing the internet and the world wide web.

At first skeptical of the concept of distance learning, owing much to previous limitations of technology, my outlook began to change when, in the mid-to-late 1990s, I began first to utilize the University of Massachusetts' gopher server to put up documents for the Graduate Student Senate. Gopher technology originated at the University of Minnesota and, at the time, was all the rage. Suddenly, in about 1995, the World Wide Web, with its multimedia functionality, overtook gopher technology and sent it to the dustbin. The WWW, developed in 1991 by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN (a particle physics laboratory in Geneva, Switzerland), suddenly made all sorts of possibilities probabilities, and this included distance learning.

For the next five years, I developed web pages as my part-time work while finishing my doctorate at the University of Massachusetts, working with the Office of Information Technologies, UMass Extension, UMass Outreach, and other organizations.

¹ The course Welcome page is accessible at the following URL:
<<http://webtide.hccd1.org/public/POL110CC/index.html>>.

When I began teaching at Holyoke Community College in 1999, WebCT technology was being introduced and the college was looking for instructors to begin putting courses on the web. At first, I utilized the web to enhance my in-class courses. Once I got familiar with WebCT technology, then I began teaching a fully online distance learning course in the spring of 2002 and have continued ever since. At present, in addition to teaching a distance learning course in Massachusetts from Bahrain, I am now designing a couple of courses for the new e-Learning Center at the University of Bahrain.

In contrast to its antecedents, distance learning through the world wide web has many advantages over previously mail-based correspondence courses, the latter which began in the mid-nineteenth century and remained small relative to the overall education providers until the 1980s with the development of satellite and cable television. One of the more noticeable differences with web technology is the enhanced speed of communication, utilizing either asynchronous email or synchronous chat-room technology. Nearly instantaneous communication allows for the needed dialectic of interaction necessary for students and teachers to exchange thoughts and criticism.

As well, the asynchronous nature of a web-based course allows students and instructors to access the course at a time of their discretion within certain boundaries, and this is most useful for students whose work commitments limit their availability for classes, e.g. those with fulltime jobs, mothers caring for infants, et al.

Thirdly, related to the first two advantages of a web-based course, is the important fact that a student and/or instructor can be anywhere in the world as long as they have access to the internet. This overcoming of the limitation of the place of instruction not only opens up the available student pool but as well allows an instructor, such as myself,

to teach my course from half-way across the world from the US or, for example, when I vacation in the north African country of Morocco during the summers.

In addition, one must not overlook the anonymity of a web-based course in luring students who for some reason are reticent to participate in in-class lectures and discussions. Whether this is a positive advantage or not is debatable from an academic perspective, as being able to master face-to-face interactions is a necessity in most jobs. However, from a student's perspective, the fact of a certain degree of anonymity, at least as regards their classmates, likely forms part of their motivation for opting for a web-based course.

Fifthly, as opposed to an in-class course, a web-based course like mine requires the participation of all students. Political science courses require much discussion, and in many of my in-class courses, there are always some students who sit in the back of the room and seldom raise their hand or offer voluntarily to participate and contribute to class discussions. This problem is overcome with a web-based course like mine as all students are required to contribute to chapter discussions and are graded on whether they submit a contribution or not.

Sixthly, and related to the fifth advantage, is the fact that typed submissions of contributions, presentations, papers, etc. are available for all students in class to view and comment on—a factor which each student in my web-based course becomes aware of very soon—which I believe has an effect on the substance (logic and structure) as well as the style (written grammar and spelling as well as choice of words) of their contribution.

And the seventh advantage of a web-based course I will list is the fact that your students, some of whom are quite conversant with the world wide web, will help keep

you up to date on information in specific areas which are available on the web, from purely informational sources on the web, to books, to journal and newspaper articles, films, videos, etc.

Yes, there are some disadvantages as well, though I suspect some of these can be overcome with future technology or merely the application of existing technology to web-based courses. The most noticeable disadvantage from my perspective as an instructor is the difficulty in returning graded research papers or presentations to students. At present, other than snail-mailing such assignments back to students, such a task requires either utilizing a fax machine, a scanner (and then emailing the subsequent photos back to the student), or typing in your comments to the student's presentation or research paper and then emailing it back to them. Overcoming this disadvantage will make a huge step forward for web-based courses.

A second disadvantage to a web-based course is control of content, for once you put your comments on the web, these become publicly accessible at least to all of the students in your class. This may cause some academics to hold back in their commentary in their web-based courses, at least until they have had the opportunity to publish their findings.

Thirdly, the loss of that physical relationship which often develops between student and instructor can sometimes be disconcerting, as it is often in that ongoing face-to-face exchange of ideas that much learning actually occurs, because it is built upon recognition, acceptance, and trust. And while I do have students email me with questions long after the web-based course in which they participated is over, my recognition of them is based upon my knowledge of them over the web. Yes, it is also based upon a

certain degree of trust and acceptance; however, in truth, I am relying on their identity as indicated by an email address. And most of you know how hesitant you can be when you are not sure as to whom you are communicating with over the internet, even if the person claims to be your brother or sister.

A final caveat to be aware of is class size, which, if too large, can be a disadvantage. A web-based course requires more technical knowledge and time and constant attention; hence, it is important not to succumb to the temptation to take on too many students, for what is most important to students in such a course is the quick response to queries, and if your course is too large, your students will begin to notice the lag time in response to their questions, and this can be a serious detriment to the rhythm of the course and to the morale of the students. In my distance learning course at Holyoke Community College, our union contract limits online class sizes to 25 students, and from my experience this is the maximum number of students one should have.

In summary, I have come to believe that extant web-based technology and software adequately allow for introductory college-level survey courses to be taught on the web without a loss of standards which apply in an in-class environment. Furthermore, I believe that web-based courses are here to stay and will increasingly, as technology improves, complement much in-class instruction, albeit not replace totally the face-to-face experience.