Beyond the Foothills:
Passion and Personality in the Virtual Classroom

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Online education provides a variety of educational opportunities for students, faculty, and institutions. To ensure that the quality of these programs remains high, faculty passion for teaching must be translated into the virtual classroom. At the University of Minnesota Duluth we have developed one of the most innovative online psychology programs in the country. By combing faculty expertise with innovative software we have eliminated the restrictive nature of many e-learning programs, which limit faculty creativity.

Our courses reflect the unique interests and personality of the faculty who teach them. These courses utilize many of the resources found on the internet as well as audio and video streaming that has been produced in our department. Courses are designed to be interactive. We encourage faculty to be creative when developing online courses and help them convert their innovative teaching methods into their virtual classroom.

Our experience has shown us that conversion of traditional classes into online courses is best facilitated by a providing faculty with technology and support staff that eliminates any need to learn intricate software programs. After we developed our first few courses we added
a distance education coordinator, an information technology specialist,
and a part-time computer graphics person who provided images for the
course as well as video and audio streaming. The salaries for these staff
have been covered by the revenue generated from our online program.

As we began adding courses we saw the need for creating our own
courseware management system. Working with our technology specialist
we have developed a very flexible, inventive, and responsive software
systems to manage the delivery of our online courses. This integrated
software includes an internal message system, a drop box for student
easays, a grade book for faculty, course announcements, multiple choice
tests, course evaluation and discussion. We have recently added a
content management component that allows faculty to make changes to
their online courses using a one-step process similar to editing a Word
document. Although there are many commercial products available, our
software responds to faculty needs, rather than inhibits them. Our
software is now available for review by other departments and
institutions.

Our Courses

Our courses take advantage of the vast resources of the World Wide
Web. We use links to classic texts as well as contemporary sources. The
web provides a vast library that is readily available. For example, we
could never assign a whole class to read a chapter from Freud’s “The
Interpretation of Dreams,” unless every student bought the book, but
the entire text is available on line. We also link to contemporary writings,
recent articles, and newspaper features. We encourage students to think
critically about what they find, and with unified nature of the World
Wide Web students are able to further pursue their own interests about
particular subjects.

Textbooks - Many of our courses use traditional textbooks, and we
take advantage of textbook offers when appropriate. For example our
statistics course uses a statistics text with many online opportunities for
students such as online quizzes and crossword puzzles. Other courses
do not use traditional textbooks. Some faculty prefer original texts,
many of which can be found online.
Streaming – Some of our courses use audio and video streaming which may either be from a web link or produced in our department. For our Psychology and Social Responsibility course there are multiple links to web archived radio and television programs from such places as National Public Radio and C-Span. In our History and Systems course, the instructor created audio streams to describe pictures of her antiques that she integrated throughout the course. In another course, the faculty member created a video-steaming introduction to each unit of the course.

Interactive opportunities – When possible we have utilize interactive opportunities for students. For example, in one course students can tour Freud’s museum, navigating from room to room seeing pictures and reading original documents. In the Behavior and Learning class students can train the virtual rat Sniffy. (Online students can get acquainted with Sniffy through a free download.) Since psychology students are often interested in learning about themselves, the personality course utilizes links to dozens of inventories on line. These range from the Eneagram to the Eysenck tests of extroversion and introversion. Thought questions can be adapted to promote an integration of knowledge, so students studying Adler and birth order can reflect on their own place in the family while they read more of what Adler really said.

Student Projects - Most of our courses have written assignments to accompany each of the 15 units. Students often write a thought question, first reading the material for the unit and the material from the text, and then following some of the suggested links to enhance their knowledge of the subject before writing about it. Some courses have ongoing projects, which develop throughout the semester. Theories of Personality has a “letters project” so each student finds a set of original letters on the web and then writes about them in a variety of units. This allows students to do original qualitative research on a person of their choice. Many students are interested in Helen Keller, but they have also used letters that are not from famous people such as Private Art who wrote about his experiences in World War II.

Interdisciplinary Options - Online courses provide many opportunities for interdisciplinary study. For example the art and letters of Vincent van Gogh are entirely available on line, and students are assigned to explore
his work as it relates to various theories of psychology. In another class the letters of Galileo's daughter are integrated throughout the online course. Galileo's daughter was a nun who wrote to her father during the 1630's when he was in exile. For Women's Studies students, these letters provide a first hand look at the life of women in the Renaissance. We also find that online students, taking multiple courses, often cross-reference them in their written work.

**Written Exams** - In addition to other assignments, most of our courses include five multiple-choice tests that are completed after every three units. Students log on and take the tests during a short time period in which the test is available. There are always questions about cheating, and we do not have the final answer to the idea that one student might take a test for another – the same question comes up in our large classes with 300 students in General Psychology. We require students to sign a contract, we tell them that cheating will lead to a failing grade, we monitor our tests carefully, our software enables us to give timed tests, and we monitor changes in grade distribution from semester to semester. Still there is no final answer to this age-old problem. Since Transpersonal psychology was one of the first courses to go on line, we warned the students about bad karma.

**Discussions** – Our software also allows faculty to post discussion questions and students to respond. In some courses this is required and in others it is used for extra credit. We have found that some students are very interested in the discussion, post something often and pose their own questions, which other students then answer. Our discussion can be monitored by the faculty for appropriate content. Faculty can also respond privately in writing to the student and enter a score for the posting. The score is automatically transferred to the grade book.

**Evaluation** – We evaluate all of our own line courses just as we evaluate our in class courses. To make comparisons we adapted questions from the university questionnaires and added others that were specifically for on line students. This allows us to make comparisons to the in class courses and to other online courses. For example we have courses with a few features and some with many features so we are interested in whether students evaluate the courses differently. We are interested in link usage as a unique form of evaluation for on line courses and our
software enables us to determine when students log onto the course and how much time they spend on various features of the course. For these evaluations, students sign consent forms that have been approved by our human subjects committee. In numerous studies online courses have been shown to be comparable to the brick and mortar classes on a number of dependent variables. In order to expand our knowledge about online courses, we have begun exploring questions about link usage, how students navigate through the units and time on task. We are very interested in fully examining the student experience.

**Student Screening** - Over several years of offering online courses, we have found students who were self-disciplined and highly motivated and others who were not. In order to eliminate procrastination, we have set specific dates for tests and other assignments. This helped increase our course completion rates to over 95%. Prior to enrolling in an online course we direct students to a web page where they can take a short test where they can examine their learning style and consider if online learning is really for them. Our faculty and staff help to advise students about whether or not an online course would be the right choice. Since our online program has been in existence for over four years students, through their grapevine communicate about our course standards and our expectations.

**Ethics** - As we link to other sites it is important to remember to link to the main site. It is important to consider access for students with disabilities. It is important to consider copyright and fair usage. The web tends to be a very open environment, so most people are thrilled to have us use their material, but we need to be careful about anything that is protected. In addition we try to avoid sites that ask students to buy anything, those which link to inappropriate material, and those with biased viewpoint rather than truly informed scholarship. These are the same standards that we would adopt in the classroom.

**Learning about Technology** - Online courses prompt both students and faculty to learn more about technology. Faculty involved in online course development often find that much of the material they discover online can be adapted in their traditional classrooms. While the university offers numerous courses in technology, it seems that our faculty learn
more from creating their own online courses than sitting in a technology lab

Open classroom - While traditional classrooms seem closed and private, this is a new era. Faculty new to our department, are quick to say, “I am writing an online course – can I see what you did?” There is a sense that we can share our ideas with others, and so this is an open classroom in which other faculty are also welcome. We find that existing courses provide models for other faculty, who are motivated to be even more creative with their own courses.

Faculty Development - Perhaps most surprising is the wonderful impact that this has on invigorating our faculty. Online courses prompt faculty to look at what is out there – to discover how their field is changing – and to be re-engaged in their own disciplines. They also begin to think about education in a new way – not holding to the idea that the material can only be delivered in the classroom, but really thinking – “what can I do better in the classroom and what can I do better on line?” The natural outgrowth of this opportunity is for faculty to design more and more hybrid courses, using the best of both worlds. Meanwhile we are finding that faculty are immersing themselves into the online possibilities and pursuing this as a media with new opportunities.

Summary - While these are some of our own discoveries and innovations, we believe that this is a rapidly expanding area of education, and countless new ideas are constantly emerging. It is difficult to translate what we have created on line into what we can describe on paper and we hope that you will take time to view our courses or write to us for further information.

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