10 Tips for Wrapping Your Brain Around Distance Education

Note: These are not technical tips about online learning. This list is not advice about whether to use Blackboard, Skype, gotomeeting.com, WebEx or live streaming or any other platform the university is considering. These are tips for thinking about DE as distinct from f2f (face-to-face) learning.

Consider these tips for use with Blackboard, which is the easiest and fastest online model to put into place between students and faculty.

1. **Distance Education is not necessarily a video of you talking.** If you want to see versions of online lectures, check out UC Berkeley’s offerings, such as some physics lectures posted on YouTube. [http://www.youtube.com/user/ucberkeley](http://www.youtube.com/user/ucberkeley). But this is not what you will likely be doing. Preparing good video requires camera set-up, lighting and a pretty tight lecture, ideally one that is edited before being posted. Those who are adept at this should go ahead; others should not worry about producing these.

2. **Distance Education can be synchronous or asynchronous.** It is your call. In other words, you can decide to “convene” class during the normally scheduled time, or you can post homework and reading materials earlier, and then post questions for students to answer on Blackboard discussion forums at anytime that they can. If you are using Bb, asynchronous is much better.

3. **Distance Education syllabi and instructions must be crystal clear.** Repetition is good.
   - If you tell a student to look for the online discussion about Media Convergence, then the online discussion subject title should have those exact words, “media convergence.”
   - If a paper is due online by Tuesday, tell students it is due Tuesday at 4 p.m. and, if you don’t use Drop box (I urge that you do not), post a discussion board thread that says in the subject field “post your homework here by Tuesday at 4 p.m.” I like all assignments to be posted for the whole class to see; this keeps quality high.
   - If you post a link under Course Documents to something that you want students to read, also provide the date and time and headline of the link so that students can Google it as well. Often, links die and you want students to still be able to find the information.
4. **Put word limitations on discussion board posts.** It turns out that students who do not talk in f2f classes are more comfortable online. But you don’t want any students to write too much. I suggest limits of 250 words a forum post. Also, ask the students to summarize their comments in the subject field of the post. It makes for more varied reading.

5. **Follow up with students’ online discussion posts.** Consider summarizing your thoughts in the subject field. Students do not like to be left out there thinking no one read their posts.

6. **Visuals are good.** If you have a Powerpoint that can stand alone, post it. Or a video. Or photos. Or interactives. It depends on your skill level.

7. **Consistency is as important as clarity.** If you send an e-mail that says you are holding a discussion on Tuesday, then have the same directions on your announcement page and the very same directions on your Forum thread.

8. **Don’t assume students are technically advanced because they are younger.** Most studies (and experiences) show that students are good at e-mail and Facebook but not necessarily at advanced technologies. This is a good argument to keep things simple.

9. **Try to keep student communication on Bb rather than in e-mail.** This is most important for group messages. Everyone gets the same answer and it is archived.

10. **Don’t worry.** We are communicators. We should be good at this.

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August 2009