

Creating an Environment for Online Courses in Recreation and Leisure Studies Programs: A Case Study

Robert Hopp
Concordia University

Peter Morden
Concordia University

Lisa Ostiguy
Concordia University

Abstract

Like most university programs, recreation and leisure studies have begun to explore possibilities in online course delivery. Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec, an urban university with over 30,000 undergraduate students, has many issues related to diversity and flexible course offerings for its students. In response to these issues at Concordia, the department of Applied Human Sciences reconfigured two of its required courses into an online format. These two introductory courses, Recreation and Leisure in Contemporary Society and Introduction to Therapeutic Recreation, fulfill a dual role of being required courses for majors in Leisure Sciences and Therapeutic Recreation, and popular service courses for other university students, with over 800 students taking these courses annually. Issues and strategies for successful online classes are discussed including student contact and interaction, content and delivery, time and course planning, assessment of student learning and student support.

Keywords: Online courses, technology, flexible student learning, introductory courses, large-sized courses

Introduction

Online course delivery, while still in its infancy, has the potential to transform higher education. Like most university programs, recreation and leisure studies have begun to explore possibilities in online course delivery. Issues, opportunities, and challenges and practical strategies of providing online courses in recreation and leisure studies programs are discussed, using the example of two online courses in the Leisure Sciences and Therapeutic Recreation undergraduate degree programs at Concordia University.

Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec is an urban university with over 30,000 undergraduate students. The slogan of the university is to provide "Real education for

the real world,” and its mission states that Concordia is responsive to the needs of a diverse student population, and that Concordia offers its students inclusive and accessible academic programs (Mission statement, 2004). As a result, Concordia has a focus on meeting the needs of traditional and non-traditional students. The university aims to provide access to high quality, higher education opportunities that are affordable and accessible. Being a very diverse university, Concordia has always attempted to consider flexibility in its course offerings. There are a large number of students who are also parents, single parents, or primary family wage earners. There are also a large number of students who speak English as their second language. Concordia, like the city of Montreal, has incredible socio-cultural diversity as well. Addressing myriad student needs, Concordia runs its classes from 7am until 11pm five days a week, on weekends, and in intensive formats. Some potential “customers” have found it difficult to fit into traditional courses because they live too far away from campus, or because their schedule does not permit them to dedicate specific time each day or week (Porter, 1997). At Concordia students are constantly looking for increased flexibility in course offerings and as a result student demand for online courses has been increasing.

The demand from students for online courses came at a time of enormous growth in the classroom and in the department. A decade ago, the *recreation and leisure in contemporary society* and the *introduction to therapeutic recreation* courses were each offered once a year, with approximately 40 students in each class. Due, in part, to their popularity as service courses to the rest of the university (the courses draw students from all disciplines, whose students take them as general electives), and the growth of the Applied Human Sciences department itself, student demand for these courses had increased to the point where several sections of over 100 students each were being offered by the department annually. The challenge of finding qualified instructors with no graduate program to draw from, and the somewhat limited readiness of part-time faculty to teach ever-growing classes, forced the department to look at different options for course delivery. In addition, therapeutic recreation has a dearth of qualified faculty across Canada, and there was an attempt among university and college programs to share their resources and access to courses with other regions lacking programs or expertise.

As the number of sections in the introduction classes grew, so did the need for consistency in content delivery. The most appropriate use of department resources was considered in the development of different approaches, especially for our large lecture-based classes. Owing to these factors, the two introductory courses, *recreation and leisure in contemporary society* and *introduction to therapeutic recreation*, were configured into an online format. Currently, each of these courses is offered annually in an in-class and an online format. Approximately 800 students take one or both of these courses annually.

The experience of offering eight sections of online introduction courses has allowed the professors to adapt and design the course to address the issues presented. The design and implementation of a number of features increased the effectiveness and

the quality of the learning environment. Following are some specific examples from the online courses that have enabled those courses to be delivered in an academically rigorous format, while respecting the need for flexibility.

Issues and strategies for designing online classes

Redesigning an existing course into an online class format is a challenge. Simply converting or adapting an existing course by putting class notes onto web pages does not make for a successful online course. All the web can do is make information available to the students. To learn anything at all, students have to construct knowledge and draw applications and meaning from the information. In addition, the department of Applied Human Sciences did not want this important course to simply become a readings course. Students need the opportunity to explore and discuss different issues that arise from the information presented.

Course professors were faced with addressing a number of issues including student contact and interaction, content delivery, time commitment and course planning, evaluation of student learning and student support. There are many issues unique to the administration of online courses that need to be addressed in order that learning outcomes are reached in a manner that is considerate of student needs. Below, issues related to online class delivery are highlighted. Subsequently, strategies and course features that have proven to facilitate positive student experiences and successful learning within the department of Applied Human Sciences are discussed.

Student contact and interaction

A concern in the design of online courses was the lack of student contact with the instructor and with other students in the course. Since this was one of the first courses for students in the major, it was important to have a connection with the university, the students and the professor. According to Porter (1997) online classes offer a number of features that allow students to actively engage with the course content and interact with other students, and offer an opportunity for student interaction in large classes.

Although modes of interaction and participation differ between “real” and “virtual” courses, there are many features that easily allow students to actively participate during online classes. Tools such as chatrooms, focused discussion, study groups, specific discussion groups, and groups limited by size, topic, project or interest can be utilized. These tools enable the large-sized class to take on a seminar-sized feeling. For the Concordia courses, study groups were formed and moderated by the professor or teaching assistants to tackle certain content issues. These “virtual” groups met online and discussed questions posed by the professor. In addition, questions about the course material were brought up, discussed and often answered by another student in the group. Though the students were anonymous to each other, their group discussions were more focused than most introductory courses. There were fewer irrelevant discussions and less need to re-explain directions or discussion parameters. Discussion in large classes can be very

difficult to undertake in an in-class environment, but was relatively straightforward in an online class. In this our experience is congruent with the observation of others that distinct benefits may be realized through online instruction and interaction (Brooks, 1997).

Since face-to-face content is missing from online courses, it was important to design a structure that offered interaction among students and between students and professor. When large classes are offered on our campus, there is very little opportunity to discuss issues beyond limited group discussion or the common "turn to your neighbor" approach. Curriculum designs that force students to respond, make choices, and organize material generally have better outcomes than ones that focus on reading and listening (Brooks, 1997). In the two online courses at Concordia, there is a structured opportunity for discussion each week related directly to the content being addressed.

In the *recreation and leisure in contemporary society* class, discussions were organized into themes. Sample discussion questions included: How did reaching certain lifetime milestones, such as getting a driver's license or getting married, change your leisure patterns or habits? We all know how the Industrial Revolution changed work, but how did it change leisure? How would the mass introduction of new technology, such as the Segway, change the Montreal downtown? Each discussion would be monitored, and the professor would interject or redirect as needed. The students were directed to read any and all responses that had been given prior to their own, and to add only if they had something useful to say; that way, a multiple string of students asserting "I agree" was avoided.

In the *introduction to therapeutic recreation* course, discussions and learning activities were organized for each unit. For example, as a lead-in to discussion about the role of media in the formation of attitudes towards people with disabilities, students were randomly assigned a day of the week and were required to watch prime time television. Following this, each student was asked to report her/his findings related to the representation of people with disabilities and how they were portrayed based on the guidelines from the readings and the unit. Another example involved students selecting a building in their neighborhood and assessing the accessibility of programs and services based on course material criteria and report their findings. Discussions can also be used to encourage debates and understanding of different points of view. To understand different issues related to integration, students were randomly assigned to report on pros and cons of integrated community services from a variety of points of view such as a parent of a child with a disability, a parent of a child without a disability, or a community recreation leader. If the class is large, a variety of cases can be easily explored with many points of view represented. The online course allows for an easy formation of discussion groups and allows for greater monitoring of the quality of the discussion.

The online discussion offers the students in a large class environment a chance to integrate material and exchange ideas with fellow students. It also presents a different kind of participation than expected in other courses within the department. Students

who were not strong or confident public speakers were able to contribute in ways that they were unable to in other courses. The organized discussion forum also forced students to come prepared. Students who were not prepared were not able to “wing it” or react to the discussion, they were forced to come up with their own ideas.

The online format is an ideal place for discussions. In large classes, discussions (especially of a more personal or reflective nature) take away from the amount of time available to deliver the course content material. There is rarely enough time for everyone in a large class to participate actively. In online courses, the professor is able to separate the discussion from the course content to allow for more material to be presented while maintaining an interactive discussion.

This relative anonymity of students actually contributes in a positive way to class discussion. According to Kiesler et al. (1984) people on the internet are more willing than they would be in real life to exchange hostilities, swap personal information and publish normally protected aspects of themselves (Joinson and Harris, 1995). In Concordia's two online courses, shy or less verbal students, students who have English as their second language, or students who have perceived cultural barriers have reported that they felt more at ease participating. This is in part because they could “construct” their written responses. In an online classroom, there is no “back of the class;” every student is expected to play a role in contributing to the discussion. There is a tendency for the academic study of recreation and leisure studies to be culturally homogeneous, especially at the introductory level. In the online format, students from different backgrounds or at different life stages can freely express dissenting opinions or differing views. Of course, the visual anonymity of students could potentially lead to very negative remarks or comments, but the fact that the students' names are attached to their comments has resulted in very few such occurrences. Any behavior difficulties or verbal class disruption is drastically minimized. Class discussions were monitored closely by professors to ensure there was an appropriate climate for the discussion.

In addition to the decreased likelihood of disruptive comments, based on our experiences, general student interaction and student interaction with the professor are both perceived to be improved in comparison to traditional course-delivery formats. For example, rather than a student saying they did not understand the readings, a student in the online course would offer greater explanation of where the material was contradictory or unclear. Students generally receive immediate feedback for their comments, either from the professor or from other students. If there is an issue that may polarize student opinions, such as negative use of leisure time, controversial student comments tend to spark debate about the issue, rather than students drawing their own conclusions about the material without debate or discussion. Students have reported that they generally feel increased access and one-on-one attention from the professor. Since all of the correspondence is written, students get personal attention that they may not receive in other large classes. There was also the opportunity for students to periodically review their feedback as the semester progresses.

Content and delivery

The preparation and approach to teaching by the professor is different than in a traditional course. To transform courses into more than just lecture notes, several instructional design considerations have been made at Concordia. The two courses were designed with three guiding principles. First, the process of understanding the information was presented in an active format. Second, the information was presented in a contextual way. Third, the social nature of learning was considered. The professors at Concordia prepared the materials and became comfortable with technology far in advance of the course. In the first attempts to teach the introductory courses online, the technology was used at the lowest common denominator, without (for example) streaming video technology or required synchronous communication expectations. Students who exhibited high levels of stress or concern about technology knowledge needed for the class were encouraged to take the in-class version instead of the online one. Providing options for choices related to online classes was important since the forum and format did not suit the learning styles of every student.

A great concern of the online class design was ensuring the quality and comparability with the same course offered on campus in the traditional format. It was important in the design of the courses that course objectives were closely followed and that materials and issues followed the traditional class format. The online courses were reviewed for consistency similar to the process applied to other multi-section courses in the department. A comparison of exam, assignment, and overall grades between in-class and online versions of the two courses showed no differences. In addition, quantitative student course evaluation averages were similar, though a number of questions are less applicable in an online course, such as evaluating the instructor's performance in taking action when students appear bored. Students' written comments about the course relating to flexibility, the high quality of class discussion, and online procedures were overwhelmingly positive.

In a traditional classroom, students are aware of the importance of the information and in what context or situation it is presented. Yet in an online class, misinterpretations can be made more easily since details or understanding can not be assumed. The expanded use of lecture material is necessary to "operationalize" theories and concepts presented. While it may be a handy procedure to tell a long story in class that clarifies some class material, that procedure does not lend itself as well to an online course format. In contrast, multiple examples that are short, clear, and without the possibility for various interpretations tend to be more appropriate.

Time and course planning

There are advantages and disadvantages of online courses in terms of time commitment and course planning. Online courses require dedicated, usually daily commitment on the part of the professor. In the case of the two introduction classes, all

units and discussion activities were prepared well in advance. This enables students to have the opportunity to work up to six weeks ahead on the course material.

Interaction with students can occur in any time available. Thus, fifteen spare minutes can actually be productive, in terms of monitoring student discussion or posing questions to further a project, or if a professor has half an hour before a meeting, for example, s/he can interact with students. Although the dream of monitoring the online course from a Caribbean beach never actually materialized, teaching online does add some flexibility to the professor's schedule. However, the set schedule of classroom teaching is replaced by the tendency to check the course on a daily basis.

There was an initial tendency, alleviated by further teaching of the course, for the professor to have anxiety about what is happening on the course when she/he is not actually online. Fears about group discussion careening out of control rarely materialized, and it is doubtful that any content or discussion-related problems should arise if the content and discussion questions have been carefully prepared.

There was a tendency for students to say, "It must be easy for the professor, since there is no class," before the course got into full swing. During the semester, students begin to recognize that the interaction with the professor and other students is far greater than in most large introductory classes, and most students adjust their course expectations accordingly. Furthermore, since the course is perpetually 'on', students also need to adjust their expectations regarding feedback from professors on questions they might send via e-mail. More than once, students have e-mailed with an urgent question at midnight and have followed up with a "why haven't you answered my e-mail" question before breakfast.

Online exams have their own time-related issues for professors. Students were given a larger block of time than classroom-based courses (24 hours or longer) in which to complete the exam. Because of that, the professor needed to be on-call for that length of time in case there were server problems at the course or university end of things, for example.

There are always students who put the course on the "back burner", since there isn't the weekly reminder of a class to attend. That tends to happen to a number of students in any class, but time management for students is definitely a greater issue with an online course. Keeping the issue of time management in mind, the courses featured a detailed outline of what was expected in terms of readings and keeping up with the units each week. Discussions held on a specific topic were time bound in order to maintain consistency each week and to encourage students to contribute regularly rather than delay involvement or finish the course on an intensive time schedule.

Assessment of Student Learning

Linked to content were questions from skeptical colleagues concerning how students could be reasonably and fairly assessed without the professor ever seeing them.

How could knowledge and understanding of material be gauged? How would student effort be determined? How could we be sure that the students were submitting their own work? Are open-book exams a fair measure of evaluation when the in-class section of the course does not allow for similar resources when taking the test? Questions such as these raised concerns about the appropriateness of online courses for students in the programs, and framed the pedagogy behind the course development.

Students were evaluated in ways that did not differ significantly from most introductory classes- assignments, exams, and class participation.

Assignments. All assignments for the two courses were submitted electronically. Students were given detailed instructions on how to submit assignments in the course package, and on the discussion forum. In order to discourage cheating, all assignments for the online course included both a research component and a personal component which involves reflection, or requires the student to leave the computer and pursue some type of activity. Student assignments were also changed annually. According to Brooks (1997), "real world" activities have proven to be the best kind of experiences because they provide realistic environments, can be motivating, and can promote active learning. In the *recreation and leisure in contemporary society* course, students were given the option of selecting from a specific number of shorter assignments. In the *introduction to therapeutic recreation* course, students were randomly assigned to one of six disability groups and asked to carry out a six hour simulation of the disability and write an account highlighting the experience relating course principles and carry out research on their specific disability. Because of the available electronic submission of the assignments, there was little need to alter the expectations for written assignments.

Exams. Each time the courses were offered, the professors developed insight into better approaches to examinations. Some strategies for enhancing the examination process included providing students with the study guides to identify significant points or concepts, the opportunity to take sample quizzes prior to the exam, and adding more time to exams to account for slower systems. Setting a time for all students to take the exam was difficult since the courses were not set in the university schedule. The exams were given over a 24 hour period to allow all students to have access to the exam without conflict. To address the concerns of cheating by colleagues, each student received an individual exam with questions randomly selected from a large database of questions. The exams were timed (one hour) leaving little room for collaboration with others. Exams were taken using a secure password. Some online course exams require even stricter control measures for exams including only one exam to be taken from a particular location (IP address). To address problems such as "my computer froze" during the exam, students were offered the option to take the exam twice. However the score of the second exam would be recorded, regardless of the first try at the exam. Questions for the second try were again randomly selected so the exam was likely significantly different than the first try. Students received their score immediately upon submitting the exam.

Participation. In both courses, participation grades were assigned as part of the final grade. Participation grades were determined by the quantity and relevance of posts to the discussion, and number of messages read. Quantitative data was kept by the course software, which counted the number of messages read and posted, and qualitative data was compiled by the course professor, who separated comments by student, and assessed each comment as to its quality and relevance. Students reported that at the beginning of the semester, they responded to the course discussions because a grade was involved, but were compelled to continue because of the interesting and exploratory nature of the discussions.

Support

One main issue in developing and maintaining a successful online class concerns support, which needs to be available in a variety of forms. Students taking online courses need to have support in two ways. First, the professor needs to provide support related to the understanding of course material and the giving of clarity for tests and assignments. Second, students need technology support. When taking an online class, there are a variety of potential problem areas. Students need usernames and passwords to have access to the secure course sites, have different computer hardware and internet connection speeds, possess different levels of confidence about online knowledge, and use different internet service providers. There needs to be assistance so that the technology does not get in the way of the learning.

To address the isolation of students in the course, many features related to the courses were added to connect with students and increase opportunity for interaction. To begin with, a reading package containing a course syllabus, a list of expectations for the course, a precise timeline, detailed explanations of all course elements, a set of instructions on how to log on, and rules for the discussion forums (such as keep your messages brief and to the point, don't send personal messages to the discussion forum, etc.) was available to students prior to starting the course.

An orientation evening was held on campus to explain all the essentials of the course and give examples of how to log on, how to take exams, how to submit assignments, and how to send course e-mail and discussion forum items. The orientation gave students a chance to meet the professor and ask questions in person. The session was videotaped and made available to students at the campus library and online. A personal welcome from the professor and teaching assistants, including photos, was placed on the course website. Students were also encouraged to come and meet the professor on campus if feasible.

The course software featured a virtual student lounge, for students to chat about class or non-class related items. This area was off-limits to the professor. The idea behind this was that students in an in-class environment have opportunities, before and after class, to discuss any issues, regardless of relationship to the class. Students

reported that they would post announcements about campus and social events, organize study sessions, or share ideas about class projects while in the virtual lounge.

Conclusion

The Department of Applied Human Sciences has found that online courses can be successful in meeting student demands and helping to alleviate the current overcrowding situation at the university. By having an entire course available in a written format, there was significant standardization of content for these multi-section courses. By offering an online version, there was greater flexibility for students, adding a variety of options and examples to the course content. Although an online course is not necessarily an appropriate format for every student, the popularity and success of online classes at Concordia demonstrates that many students find them to be an attractive option. Although much of the wisdom gained about online course delivery was garnered through trial, error, and subsequent improvements, the online courses in Applied Human Sciences truly address the mission of Concordia University, "Real education for the real world."

References

- Brooks, D. (1997). *Web-Teaching: A guide to designing interactive teaching for the world wide web*, New York: Plenum Press.
- Hiltz, S. (1988). *The virtual classroom: Learning without limits via the computer networks*. Norwood, NJ: Alex Publishing Corp.
- Joinson, A., & Harris, P. (1995). *Self enhancement and self protection on the internet: A study of football fans on the WWW*. Paper presentation at the BPS London conference, Institute of Education, London.
- Keisler, S., Siegal, J., & McGuire, T. W. (1984). Social psychological aspects of computer mediated communication. *American Psychologist*, 39, 1123-1134.
- Porter, L. (1997). *Virtual classroom: Distance learning with the internet*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Mission Statement (2004) Retrieved April 7, 2004 from <http://www.concordia.ca/about/fastfacts/>