Making the Jump to Hybrid Space: Employing Face-to-Face and Online Modalities in a Special Event Planning Course

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Abstract

Every quarter at California State University East Bay, a special event-planning course is offered in a hybrid format (face-to-face and online) and uses interactive Problem-Based Learning (PBL) activities designed to challenge and inspire intellectual growth. The PLB method is different in that students are not only receivers of knowledge but are more actively engaged in their own learning (Clark, 2009). Students are asked not only to absorb facts and theories but to also discover and create knowledge that is useful in the real world. The students' main assignment is to produce a special event, while the goal is to provide exciting learning experiences that allow growth, skill development, and expertise related to the curriculum. As a result, students have produced three events: "Yes Wii Can," a mini-Wii tournament and fundraiser for Haiti; "Sizzling Summer Celebration," an outdoor open-mic and "poetry slam" and fundraiser for the American Red Cross; and the "FalliDay Holiday Party," a multi-themed party (Halloween, Christmas, New Year, Hanukah, etc.) and fundraiser for Toys for Tots. Adapting the special event curriculum has proven to be a positive and successful learning activity. Allowing college students the freedom to develop and create within the course guidelines in multiple learning environments is an effective teaching tool that continues to be a fruitful academic endeavor for all involved.

KEYWORDS: *Special events, hybrid learning environments, problem-based learning, interactive learning, applied learning, learning outcomes*

Introduction

Every quarter at a major university in Northern California, a special event-planning course is offered in a hybrid format (face-to-face and online) and uses interactive Problem-Based Learning (PBL) activities designed to challenge and inspire intellectual growth. The PBL method is different in that students are not only receivers of knowledge, but are more actively engaged in their own learning (Clarke, 2009).

Students are asked not only to absorb facts and theories, but to also discover and create knowledge that is useful in the real world.

The Hospitality, Recreation and Tourism department (HRT) that offers the course is an applied, hands-on professional development-related program for students interested in the major. The HRT major has a long history of integrating the teaching and learning experience to "real-world" application, and upon graduation, students are hired into various positions related to the field. Using advanced teaching and learning tools such as the Blackboard learning management system, faculty helps students to "discover knowledge" instead of relying solely on lectures as a means of instruction.

Because the program is designed to provide the knowledge and skill development to enable graduates to become productive professionals, students are encouraged to be employed in a job related to their major while in school. This accomplishes two objectives. The students 1) try out new knowledge learned in class and 2) share their successes and failures with fellow students who are experiencing a similar challenge. This promotes applied learning and not just theoretical learning, because the knowledge gained can be used to their advantage and incorporated as part as their professional portfolio. This is advantageous because it puts into practice the need to develop skills that can be used to connect and communicate, work in a team, and accomplish a task using multiple platforms both face to face and online. The paper will outline the basic tenants of the course and how using problem-based learning produced some amazing special events related to the course learning objectives.

Theoretic/Practical Foundation

To "make the jump" to a hybrid learning environment, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) was applied in the special event planning course. Problem-Based Learning (PBL) was designed over 40 years ago in the medical field (Albanese, 2010; Savery, 2006) and is an instructional approach that provides learning through the completion of complex problems or situations (Savery, 2006; Corderoy & Cooper, 2000). Problems are typically open-ended and include multiple solutions based on the experience and potential outcome desired by those involved. The end results include the development of critical thinking skills and creativity with increased motivation and understanding related to the problem at hand. This becomes a useful tool that translates into valuable skills that can be used throughout their career.

In the event planning course, the instructor uses PBL and self-directed learning and assumes the role of a guide and facilitator who leads the process and ensures an open and permissive environment to enable problem solving to occur (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006). This theory directly applies to the special event-planning curriculum because students independently create, develop, and facilitate a major special event for course credit that integrates complicated and complex tasks in an environment that can be stressful.

Teaching Modalities

Most students today are digital natives when it comes to technology and communicating over the Internet. They use it regularly with comfort and ease (Solnet

& Hood, 2008; Salaway, Caruso, & Nelson, 2008). The Pew Research Report in 2006 found that 94% out of 8,000 college students possess a cell phone, 56% own an iPod/ MP3 player, and 97% own a computer (Kohut, Parker, Keeter, & Doherty, 2007). The use and ease of these tools reflects students' overall ability to communicate and compete regularly at an academic level that uses technology on a daily basis (Jones, Blackey, Fitzgibbon, & Chew, 2010). Students also use these tools to stay connected with friends and families, and to relieve stress in a fast-paced environment. Additionally, students who use the Internet as a leisure activity (i.e., computer games) view online learning as a functional tool as opposed to non-students who view it as "just a technology" (Peng, Tsai, & Wu, 2006).

Because students use such technology with regularity, their focus is often centered on it—much like playing a video game (Selander, 2008). Students become producers and creators of information because the online learning environment often strengthens their communication skills related to technology. Yet many do not know how to communicate effectively using technology, and so the professor has a role in helping them to learn how to connect with their classmates and the course content by use of technology with online discussion boards and assignments. This idea fits nicely with the professor's role in PBL. Online learning also provides new experiences that are collaborative, flexible, and convenient, and, for this reason, many suggest that technology should be incorporated into course instruction (Ransdell, Rice, Snelson, & Decola, 2008; Ellis, 2001). Teaching and learning online and face to face are no longer unique and prove to still contribute to perceptions of learning (Fortune, Spielman, & Pangelinan, 2011).

Coleman and Furnborough (2010) found that different modes of teaching do not necessarily lead to different learning outcomes. They assert that online learning is just as effective as the face-to-face (F2F) classroom environment. Kirtman (2009) discovered similar results with respect to paper grades, but found differences among midterm exam scores. It was determined that the F2F students scored higher on the midterm, but both groups indicated that the material studied was learned regardless of the teaching modality.

The Learning Activity

Using a hybrid learning environment where students meet face to face (F2F) on campus and over the Internet using the Blackboard learning management system, the special event management course teaches students how to plan and implement a special event or conference. Topics include event planning, coordination, research, marketing, logistics, themes, programming, volunteers, risk management, and developing an assessment/evaluation tool (i.e., survey). The goal is to provide exciting learning experiences that allow growth, skill development, and expertise related to the curriculum. Students are required to follow directions and demonstrate an ability to adapt to change, solve problems, resolve conflicts, and complete a task using critical and creative thinking skills individually and in a group within the F2F and online structures. Students also work collaboratively and cooperatively while honoring diversity and exercising personal integrity with responsible and professional behavior at all times.

Because of the hybrid learning modality, students only meet five times throughout the quarter on campus and complete the remainder of the course online. Acting as the "guide on the side" (King, 1993), the instructor evaluates student performances through pop quizzes, discussion board posts, and weekly assignments related to the special event.

At the first F2F meeting at the beginning of the quarter, the instructor reviews the syllabus and discusses the course learning outcomes, learning activities and assignments, and the main assignment, which is to produce a special event that also serves as their final. During this meeting, the students develop the event by brainstorming special event ideas and select their team leaders and divide into smaller working teams related to the to the course learning outcomes: An understanding of 1) program and event theme, 2) marketing, 3) catering, 4) facilities/risk management, 5) budget, and 6) assessment and evaluation.

The final ideas are incorporated into an event plan and fact sheet, which serve as the template and guide for the activity (see Appendix A).These documents must detail the event, dates for the planning period, and a structured timeline for implementation. Students must also state the event goals, objectives, and strategic steps to accomplish the task, which is determined during the first part of the quarter.They are also required to post online a list of materials for the event and to indicate how they will evaluate the event at the end. The final process is to copy and paste the event plan and fact sheet into the online discussion board for the students to read and review, including group members who participated and what each of them did related to the assignment.

In between the F2F meetings, students communicate online using BlackBoard's discussion board thread, responding to each other at least three times a week. Because of their limited time on campus, students also used the information and tools provided online to ensure that all the event-planning elements are present as prescribed in the learning outcomes listed on the syllabus. Communication and teamwork is a part of the course assignment and work is graded and counts toward a students' participation grade. Work is due every Thursday night by midnight, and late work does not receive credit.

At the remaining F2F meetings, the instructor taught special event planning techniques and reviewed work done to date in the course. Toward the end of the class, the instructor deferred to the team leader(s) who went through the event plan and fact sheet. Each team reported out as to what the status was on their particular assignment responsibility and what still needed to get resolved before the event.

As a result of the learning activity and hybrid teaching style, students, on their own, have produced three amazing special events: "Yes Wii Can," a mini-Wii tournament and fundraiser for Haiti, winter 2010, "Sizzling Summer Celebration," an outdoor open-mic, "poetry slam," and fundraiser for the American Red Cross, spring 2010; and the "FalliDay Holiday Party," a multi-themed party (Halloween, New Year, Hanukah, etc.) and fundraiser for Toys for Tots, fall 2010.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the assignment using multiple learning platforms (F2F and online), students are expected to 1) understand how to develop, plan, organize, and

implement a special event, 2) identify key elements of a special event or conference (risk, assessment, themes, programming, volunteers, marketing, logistics, budgets), 3) demonstrate ability to work in a team, 4) exercise critical thinking skills while working individually on a project, and 5) communicate professionally with both on and off-campus business and community members. To assess a students' understanding of the course learning objectives, the Instructor graded the online discussions, pop quizzes, on campus attendance and the quality of the final special event and how the students applied the course learning outcomes.

Adding to their final grade and to evaluate each event, the students enrolled in the course distributed a survey questionnaire at the end of each activity. As a result, that the students produced in the "FalliDay Holiday Party" fall of 2010 received positive feedback from those who attended. They said that the activities were above average to excellent and that they would recommend future events produced by the special event-planning management class.

Recommendations

The learning activity is a positive and fun activity targeted to students enrolled in a hybrid special event planning management course and counts as a general education requirement for the university. The special event that the students produce on campus is their "final" and contributes to their final letter grade. Several challenges should be noted. Using the hybrid platform (F2F and online modality), the course is offered over a ten-week period. Because it is designated as a contributing course for students' general education requirements, not all students who enroll are hospitality, recreation, and tourism majors. As a result, the level of design can be compromised. Yet, the outcomes are positive, and students continue to gain new and useful knowledge related to special event planning and the use of the hybrid modality of learning. Taking the special event course curriculum and adapting it to the hybrid environment has created a positive and successful learning experience. PBL allows college students the freedom to develop and create within the course guidelines and in multiple learning environments and is an effective teaching pedagogy that continues to be a fruitful academic endeavor for all involved.

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Appendix A

Event Plan and Fact Sheet

Step One: Event Plan

Answer the following:
Event Name
Team Leader(s)
Team Members (include who's the leader(s) of each group)
1.   A brief description of the project/event
2.   Dates for the planning period
3.   Date for the project/event
4.   Goals
5.   Objectives
6-8. Strategies/Steps –separate each step description /date to be completed/and who is to complete the task.
6.   Steps
7.   Date
8.   Who
9.   List of materials
Event Management Company:
10. Evaluation

Step Two: Event Fact Sheet

Event:
Date:
Time:
Location:
Facilities Requirement:
Guests:
Purpose:
Format:
Budget:
Statistics:
Invitations sent:
Accepted:
Actual:
Attrition:
Cost per person
Refreshments:
Marketing:
Sponsors:
Contact:

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