Implementing Information Technology Learning Approaches into a Degree Completion Program

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This article will report the process used to implement two information technology learning approaches with cohort groups in the Management and Organizational Development (MOD) program at Fresno Pacific University (FPU). The information technology learning approaches discussed will be Internet research training for students and implementation of a higher education Web-based portal called Campus Cruiser™. A rationale for implementation of these technological learning approaches into the FPU MOD program will be given. Student reactions to these information technology learning approaches will also be provided. This article will conclude by discussing implications for practitioners. I work as a facilitator in the MOD program at FPU.

Background on the MOD Program at Fresno Pacific University

The Management and Organizational Development (MOD) program at Fresno Pacific University (FPU) is a 57-week management degree completion curriculum designed specifically for working adult professionals who have a minimum of seven years previous work experience. Students entering this program average approximately 38 years of age. These older non-traditional students grew up at the tail-end of the computer age and have found the computer age almost forced on them by employers. Approximately 20 percent of MOD students still enter the program with very weak computer technology skills (B. Jost, personal communication, June 04, 2003). Until recently, the MOD program has not offered students any form of information technology learning as part of the curriculum.

Explanation of Information Technology Learning Approaches Implemented into the Curriculum of the CDC Program at Fresno Pacific University

Online Research Training

During week two of the MOD program, students now meet together in a computer lab and receive two hours of classroom training on how to conduct online research. This training is provided by an information services teaching expert. Students learn about different search engines, Web indexes, Web directories, parallel search engines, searching the “invisible Web,” search agents, online reference sites, different sources of online news, citing electronic resources, and evaluating online resources in terms of validity. In preparation for these two hours of classroom training, prior to class students read three chapters from an Internet field guide 3rd edition textbook called Find It Online by Alan M. Schlein. These three chapters cover creative uses of the Internet, Internet
terminology and concepts, and how to frame a search strategy on the Internet (Schlein, 2003).

MOD students use this Internet research training to complete 11 Internet research assignments that are due on a weekly basis during the following 23 weeks of the program. These assignments provide students with the opportunity to apply the Internet research training they receive on their own computer. Each Internet research assignment requires students to provide two titles and Web addresses on an assigned topic. The student briefly summarizes what he/she learned from each site visited, how visiting the site changed their previous view on the topic, and explains the validity of each source (see Appendix). Development of these Internet research skills also assists MOD students when they conduct online literature searches to find books and articles needed for their baccalaureate thesis project.

CampusCruiser™

Campus Cruiser™ is a Web-based higher education enterprise portal incorporating use of the Internet that allows colleges and universities the ability to provide different student services and academic administration and learning. Currently, over 100 colleges and universities nationally use Campus Cruiser™ (B. Sharpton, personal communication, June 04, 2003). Campus Cruiser™ provides an online communication platform for managing, tracking, and sharing information with tools such as e-mail, message boards, discussion groups, and publishing features, all in one unified system that operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This Web-based higher education portal is designed to allow faculty increased communication with students regarding course work, class assignments, office hours, and learning initiatives. Campus Cruiser™ also allows students immediate access to transcripts and grades, and connection with classmates through e-mail. Students can also check on homework assignments, access campus news, and even download extensive curriculum (Campus Cruiser™, 2003).

Rationale for Implementation of Information Technology Learning Approaches into the Curriculum of the CDC Program at Fresno Pacific University

Three major reasons support implementation of information technology learning approaches into the curriculum of the CDC Program at Fresno Pacific University. The three reasons are: 1) preparing MOD graduates become part of the global economy, 2) preparing MOD graduates for increasingly computerized work environments, and 3) MOD program administration cost savings. These three reasons are explained in more detail below:

Preparing MOD Graduates to Become Part of the Global Economy. The computer as an information tool is transforming the economies and cultures of the entire world. The world is becoming a smaller “global village” characterized by people of different nations using the computer as an instant medium to do business with and learn from each other.
MOD students need to learn to use the computer as an information tool for gaining knowledge. This knowledge will prepare future MOD graduates to participate in this world-wide technological revolution that is taking place.

Preparing future MOD Graduates for increasingly Computerized Work Environments. MOD students are increasingly finding that they must develop the flexibility to transition quickly into a constantly changing business world that is being increasingly computerized. National job trends indicate the need for MOD graduates to obtain skills in learning and use of computer technology. For example, it was recently reported that 56 percent of adult workers nationally are now “wired” and use computers as part of their work. Approximately 80.5 percent of people in managerial and professional specialty occupations use a computer at work (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002). Based on these job trends, knowledge and use of computer technology has already become a common work requirement for many management professionals.

MOD Program Administration Cost Savings. The transition to information technology approaches such as the Campus Cruiser™ portal provides significant cost savings associated with administration of the MOD program. For example, MOD students are now using Campus Cruiser™ to individually download MOD curriculum from the Web portal directly to their personal computers and printers. MOD administrative staff are no longer required to spend the time required to copy hundreds of pages of MOD curriculum, place the copied curriculum into individual binders, and distribute the binders to students. Other ways that Campus Cruiser™ provides cost savings is that MOD students are now being directed to go online through the Fresno Pacific University library and download management articles on the Internet. Many of these articles previously required MOD program administrators to pay a copyright fee to the authors. However, these fees are no longer required since many of these same articles on the Internet are now legally considered part of the public domain.

MOD Student Reactions to Implementation of Information Technology Learning Approaches into the MOD Program at FPU

Beginning in February of 2003, all new MOD cohorts began to receive online research training and using Campus Cruiser™. The following discussion will summarize the reactions of MOD students to use of these two information technology learning approaches. Student reactions were gathered from discussions I had with other MOD professors leading new MOD cohort groups using Campus Cruiser™, and by own perceptions using Campus Cruiser™ to interact with my students.

Online Research Training. Generally, MOD students have been very positive about the online research training they have received. This training has been very successful in helping MOD students complete 11 Internet research assignments required during the first six months of the program. Increased knowledge of online research training has also assisted MOD students to identify literature sources for their baccalaureate thesis project, and improved their overall learning in the MOD program.
Student Reactions to use of CampusCruiser™. MOD student reactions in the first two cohorts using Campus Cruiser™ were initially mixed. However, later MOD cohorts have reported few problems with effectively learning and using Campus Cruiser™ (D. Langhofer, personal communication, June 28, 2003).

A few MOD students have expressed dislike for the additional time and/or printing expense required to individually download MOD curriculum from Campus Cruiser™. In recent cohort groups, students have generally shared enthusiastic appreciation for the different communication qualities of Campus Cruiser™. For example, students attending class in the evening at FPU now feel more “connected” to the student life of the university because when they first log on to Campus Cruiser™, they are brought to a screen where they can read and learn about recent university news or announcements. Students also have expressed satisfaction about the improved ability for receiving online grades on weekly assignments in a timely manner.

Instructor Reactions to using Campus Cruiser™

I am using the CampusCruiser™ e-mail feature to instantly communicate important information to my classes. This feature of CampusCruiser™ has significantly improved my ability to communicate effectively with my students outside of the classroom setting. I have also used CampusCruiser™ to create asynchronous threaded discussions on various class topics. With this approach, I can go online and post a question on the CampusCruiser™ class message board related to the weekly reading. During the week, students can respond to a question and continue the “thread” of online conversation with other students in their class. This asynchronous approach allows students the opportunity to reply at anytime during the week according to their own personal schedules. Many of my students are actually more comfortable with this “space-free” form of dialogue versus the traditional face-to-face classroom experience.

CampusCruiser™ is a very effective tool for entering grades for students. For each of my college classes, I can now easily create separate assignments with an associated grading scale. I can also quickly create individual journals, syllabi, and announcements for each of my classes. Another excellent time-saving feature of CampusCruiser™ is the ability to upload class assignments, grading schemes, and other grading features from previous classes I have taught to a new class I have just started. This saves me valuable time by not having to create identical grading schemes for each new class.

Implications for Practitioners

In the future, the use of information technology approaches in curriculum offered to adults will be increasingly common. However, I still believe that adult students can benefit synergistically from the traditional classroom experience, where students experience real-time learning while interacting with both the teacher and other students in a face-to-face dialogical setting. Where will the world of high-tech and human touch meet in terms of best meeting the learning needs of future adult students? Where will these two worlds collide? The answers to these questions are not presently clear.
More research is needed to address these type of questions. However, I believe some constructive combination of the worlds of high-tech and high-touch offers the best solution to offer transformative learning for future adult students. Finding that effective hybrid of “clicks and bricks,” or effectively mixing a combination of human touch (the traditional classroom setting) with human technology (cyberspace learning) presents interesting learning challenges for entire field of adult education.

References


Appendix

MOD Internet Research Assignment

Student Name: ___________________________ Topic of Research: ___________________________
Date: __________ Time spent on this research: ___________________________

Below consider two articles that you found valuable for information related to the topic assigned. You must give enough information that the topic and importance of your research is clear to the reader. This assignment has a value of two points.

Article One Title ___________________________________________ Author __________________________
Web address ___________________________________

1. What specifically was this article about?
2. How did it change your view on this topic?
3. Explain the validity of this article.

Article Two, Title ___________________________________________ Author __________________________
Web address ___________________________________

1. What specifically was this article about?
2. How did it change your view on this topic?
3. Explain the validity of this article.