

A Report on Online Pedagogy

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Submitted to CLAS Dean Dan Howard
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Overview

In the fall of 2008, questions were raised regarding the quality of the Department of Communication's online course offerings; in response to these questions, the Department curtailed its online classes in the spring and summer of 2009. Then, to address these questions, the Department convened a taskforce to study both the principles and practices of online education more broadly and the specific applications of online education to teaching communication classes. A draft of the report was prepared by Kathleen Pounders, one of the Department's full-time Instructors, our most experienced online teacher, and someone whom the Department has tasked with functioning henceforward as our "online pedagogy coordinator" (details of this position are offered below). Pounders's draft was then edited by the Department Chair and read with enthusiasm by the Associate Chair. As the Department submits this report to the Dean, then, we hope that it will persuade him of the following seven points:

1. Online Education is comparable to face-to-face instruction.
2. Online Education fosters accepted pedagogical standards.
3. Online Education prepares the students for their careers after college.
4. Online Education meets the needs of the changing demographics of the student population.
5. Online Education will increase enrollment in communication classes.
6. Online Education effectively teaches communication.
7. And thus the Department of Communication seeks the Dean's approval both to re-launch our online classes and to significantly increase such offerings.

The rest of this report addresses each of these claims in order.

1. Online education is comparable to face-to-face instruction

Contrary to some perspectives, online education is not an easier way to complete a course or a degree; rather, it is simply education delivered in a different mode. Studies comparing face-to-face education with online education find no significant difference in the learning of course content between the two methods (Bernard, et al, 2004; Brooks, 2009; Meyer, 2002, 2004; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). In fact, the U.S. Dept of Education reports that "in recent applications, online learning has been modestly *more* effective, on average, than the traditional face-to-face instruction with which it has been compared," (Means, et al, 2009, pg 71). Regarding work-loads, Palloff and Pratt (2007) observe that "faculty now realize that the time involved in the development and delivery of a high-quality online course is substantial, and students are now realizing that completing courses and degree programs online is hard work."

The University of Colorado Denver's approach to online education supports the recommendations and pedagogical philosophies articulated in these studies. For example, in recruiting students to its online courses, UCD states "The credit and education are the same, and even the professors are the same. The only difference is that it's online, on your terms . . . allowing you the freedom to spend time on what matters most to you (CU Online, 2009).

Lowenthal & Thomas (2009, pg 1) of the CU Online program re-iterate that “there is no evidence that online learning is a defective or otherwise inferior form of education. It is simply a different pedagogical mode. . . . [That] requires an adjustment in technique, style, and approach. In a sense, this is no different than the shifts we make moving from teaching a large lecture class to a small seminar.” Robert Zemsky, the Chairman of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education concurs that online education is comparable to face-to-face instruction. He presents the argument that the difference between online education and face-to-face instruction is the style and mode, and states that online learning is the “different space, not the replicated space,” (E-learning, 2007, pg 2).

2. Online Education fosters accepted pedagogical standards

At the Fall 2008/2009 Department of Communication Orientation, Dr. Brenda J. Allen (2008) facilitated a seminar on engaging students. She referenced Chickering & Gamson’s (1987) *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. The Department of Communication charged all teachers with incorporating these principles into their courses. In keeping with this challenge, online courses incorporate each of these “seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education”:

2.1) Encourages contact between students and faculty

Students in online courses engage in more communication with professors as compared to students in on-campus classes (Dunlap, 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Shank, 2007). This is corroborated by comments from students in the online Fundamentals of Communication Course (which are available upon request from the Department).

2.2) Develops Reciprocity and cooperation among students

Students in online courses cooperate weekly to form community through the features of the online course, including weekly discussions, document sharing, creation of a webliography, and cyber cafes (Bisson, et al, 2004; Cameron, Morgan, Williams, & Kostelecky, 2009).

2.3) Encourages active learning

Because online courses are extremely learner-centered (Dunlap, 2005; Sense of Community, 2002; Rovai, Wighting & Lucking, 2004), students in online courses help construct their learning. For example, Palloff & Pratt (2007, pg 5) state that in online classes “a web of learning is created. In other words, a network of interactions between the instructor and the other participants is formed,” thus encouraging an environment where “the process of knowledge acquisition is collaboratively created.”

2.4) Gives prompt feedback

Students in online courses receive prompt feedback by the nature of the course, including interactions such as constant feedback on their application of theoretical concepts from other students and the professor in the discussion room. Additionally, while turn-around of grading of papers is the same as in an on-campus class, exam results are available immediately on the system. Cumulative percent of grades is also instantly available to students in the course Grade-book as soon as a grade has been entered. The syllabus, assignment requirements, study guides, and all course materials are also available at the click of a button.

2.5) Emphasizes time on task

Because timelines, calendars, and other reminders and tools are constantly on view when using online course platforms, students in online courses are encouraged to be aware of time

on task. Furthermore, announcement reminders are regularly available to help students be cognizant of time. Students also remind each other of projects that are underway in both the discussions and the cyber cafes (Pallof & Pratt, 2007; Shank, 2007).

2.6) Communicates high expectations

Students in online courses have regular reminders of expectations by the common use of grading rubrics in online courses (Balmer & Krause, 2006; O'Reilly & Cyr, 2005). Online courses also tend to have lists of learning objectives not only for the course itself, but for each individual learning unit (Pallof & Pratt, 2007). But of course, ultimately, the communication of high expectations rests with the choice of communication of the Instructor, just as in an on-campus class.

2.7) Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

Students in online courses experience diverse modes of instruction, from asynchronous discussion, synchronous chats, virtual project groups, links to websites and videos, power point presentations, audio presentations, games and exercises, assignments, etc. (Bogost, 2006; Fajardo & Leutengger, 2006). This multiplicity of learning tools insures that students with different skills sets can maximize their efforts.

3. Online Education prepares the students for their careers after college

Students graduating from college today will increasingly be exposed to the phenomenon of telecommuting and working in virtual groups. An increasing number of businesses have established virtual networks as a result of the economic downturn affecting the cost of travel. Employees will be expected to research, collaborate, discuss, and design via electronic communication. The student who has been exposed to this environment while in college will have a distinct advantage. Online education is increasingly becoming an attractive feature to add to a resume (Godar & Ferris, 2004; Rothwell, 2007). Harris (2002) reports that businesses are beginning to prefer electronic brainstorming groups as members remain somewhat anonymous and free of visual perceptions of each other; therefore group members are more willing to take risks in putting forth creative ideas. This behavior is much the same phenomenon reported in the research already cited in this paper about online education. Virtual groups are actually producing better results than face to face groups. Julia Wood (2008) refers to research which shows businesses increasingly relying on chat rooms and threaded discussions to discuss ideas. Both of these activities are a regular weekly (or even daily) part of the design of online courses.

Telecommuting is also on the rise in the workplace. Stroup (2001) shows that by the year 2020 it is expected that 40% of U.S. workers will telecommute to some degree. MSNBC reports that the word "telework" has begun to replace "telecommute" as "commute" connotes "getting from here to there" whereas "work" focuses on getting the job done. They say that telework isn't the future, it's today; with 14 million workers doing some combination of teleworking. The organization, discipline, and critical thinking a student is exposed to in online courses compose the skill set that would make that student successful in one of the most prominent business trends of today.

4. Online Education meets the needs of the changing demographics of the student population

The demand for online courses continues to grow. Reed E. Hunt, the former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, argues that traditional colleges and universities must compete with for-profit online institutions, such as Kaplan and The University of Phoenix (Young,

2008): “Now the virtual campus is re-emerging. But the new speculators are public universities, and instead of creating commercial, online branches like their predecessors, they are embracing a not-for-profit model” (cited in Foster & Carnevale, pg 1). For example, Dr. Schrader, President of Brenau College, talks about that institution’s decision to start an online program: “We did it to meet the communication needs of the current generation of students. If the majority of the world is going to learn online, the liberal-arts schools will have to make a decision: either they participate in them and do it well, or they throw in the towel” (Vinas, 2008, pg. 1).

Studies by the Sloan Consortium (Lokken, 2009) show online courses expanding year by year. A 2008 report by the Consortium shows that between 2002 and 2007, enrollment in online courses grew 19.7% compared with 2.5% growth in overall college population; 20% of American college students took at least one online course during the fall 2007 semester; and 55% of all national institutions offer undergraduate courses online.

These figures are supported by online enrollment figures at UCD, which reports that “in the spring of 2009, there were 6,540 enrollments in fully online courses, up 12.6% from the previous spring” (Lowenthal & Thomas, 2009, pg3).

Students enter institutions of Higher Education expecting to be able to take online courses. In fact, Brooks argues that “if our colleges don’t offer enough online courses, we run the risk of losing such students, either altogether or to competing institutions” (Brooks, pg. 2). Research shows that “75% of public schools now offer some sort of online or blended learning for students. That is to say, our students are coming to us with the expectation that *we have online*, not discovering it as a convenience or novelty” (Lowenthal & Thomas, 2009, pg. 3.) Some states, such as Michigan, are even beginning to require that high school students take at least one online course as a requisite to graduate (Watson, 2006). Our incoming freshmen students, in particular, are the “wired” generation, who enter the university with skills in electronic communication. This is the generation of Facebook, 2nd Life, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Magna:Resources for Higher Education (2009) concurs that online courses attract the “millennial” generation of students because they “defy traditional approaches to management and communication.” UCD is aware of the power, and now normative use, of electronic communication, as all communication from the University to students and faculty occurs online. UCD is also utilizing social media as part of their communication strategies as evidenced by the follow messages: “CU to go live with new student information” (UCD Faculty & Staff Newsletter, 2009), and “Become a fan of UC Denver on Facebook, and follow us on Twitter.” Because the Department of Communication’s report dovetails with these findings, we look forward to implementing their findings in our undergraduate curriculum.

More than studies about online pedagogy, the articles noted herein bear significance for larger pedagogical issues as well. For example, Julie Coates (2007) of the Learning Resources Network talks about the research compiled on characteristics of both the X & Y generations. These characteristics indicate why the X & Y generations are demanding more and more online courses, for they:

- believe work can happen anywhere—even at home;
- believe that schedules are not important;
- use large electronic social networks to communicate;
- believe most face-to-face meetings are too long;
- are multi-taskers;

- believe that it doesn't matter how you do it, as long as you produce what is required;
- and get most of their news/information from an online source.

Brian Watwood (2007, pg 1), Online Learning Specialist at Virginia Commonwealth University, thus warns that online education should not just be a second choice: "These students are not settling for online education; they are gravitating to online education as a natural environment for learning. Academe needs to heed these facts." Indeed, according to Allen & Seaman (2006, as stated in Lowenthal and Thomas, 2009, pg4), "online education is no longer a fringe activity; it has become critical to institutional long-term planning."

Finally, we need to consider the matter of the non-traditional student, or the student who is living in a rural region, or the student who works full-time with a family, or the student facing medical issues, or disabilities, or the student who is living outside of the country. These non-traditional students all have a difficult time making it to a campus class at a set time. By enabling such students to take more classes, online offerings ensure democratic access to Higher Education for all categories of students.

5. Online Education will help increase the number of students enrolled in Department of Communication courses

The UCD SIS system shows the majors of students enrolled in Communication courses. Historically, the courses offered online by the Department of Communication have been limited to the Fundamentals of Communication (CMMU 1011) and Fundamentals of Mass Communication (CMMU 1021). In looking at the enrollments for these online classes in the fall of 2008 and spring 2009, the SIS system shows:

- CMMU 1011, Fall 2008
 - Section One: 15 out of 22 were non-Communication majors
 - Section Two: 16 out of 22 were non-Communication majors
- CMMU 1021, Fall 2008
 - Section One: 16 out of 20 were non-Communication majors
 - Section Two: 16 out of 22 were non-Communication majors
- CMMU 1011, Spring 2009
 - Section One: 16 out of 20 were non-Communication majors
 - Section Two: 16 out of 21 were non-Communication majors
- CMMU 1021, Spring 2009
 - 12 out of 20 were non-Communication majors
 - 15 out of 19 were non-Communication majors

According to the Department of Communication Undergraduate Advisor Wanda Lakota, and Associate Professor Barbara Walkosz (personal communications, May and June 2009), the number of students enrolled in the on-campus versions of these courses did not drop by one single student when the online courses were introduced. Indeed, the data offered above regarding major choices indicates that the online students were students the Department of Communication would not have reached that semester if the online courses were not offered. These findings are supported by more formal research at other institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Lokken, 2009; Otwell, 2008). In short, online classes do not replace on-campus classes; rather, they expand our options for reaching non-majors. Moreover, because CMMU 1011 and CMMU 1021 are Pathways courses and are part

of the core of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, online versions of these courses are attractive to students not only on the Auraria campus but all across the state.

We should note as well that the demand for these courses is intense. Wanda Lakota, the Department's undergraduate advisor, tracks the popularity of Communication courses and states (personal communication, May 2009) that the online courses always "fill first." It is typical for the Communication online courses to be closed within days, sometimes within hours of their being opened up for registration. Furthermore, many students taking entrance courses are still fluid in their choice of a degree, even if they have declared a degree. Any Instructor in the Department of Communication will confirm the fact that exposure to the two courses mentioned above has caused many students to switch to Communication as a degree pursuit. More online exposure will help support that switch. Currently the Department of Communication has only one online course scheduled for fall 2009: CMMU 1011. By not scheduling the second section of that course, and by not scheduling either section of the CMMU 1021, as many as 48 non-communication students (using the figures offered above as our measuring point) will not be exposed to the viability of Communication as a degree pursuit.

In sum, because the Department of Communication has made a commitment to increase the number of students pursuing a Major or Minor in our Department, we believe that we should increase the exposure of students to our program by offering more online courses.

6. Online Education effectively teaches Communication

The question could be posed: how can an online course effectively teach communication? Online courses can effectively teach communication because the principles of communication do not change because of the modality of delivery. Dalton Kehoe, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at York University in Toronto, found not only great success at transferring how to teach communication from on-campus to online, but actually discovered he became more effective at teaching communication on campus based on what he learned from his online experience. He found that teaching (and learning) online forces one to concentrate more specifically on the subject at hand (Young, 2008).

Unless a student is specifically participating in an oral communication exercise in a small group, some traditional on-campus courses offer little chance to practice oral communication in the classroom. The students that mainly practice oral communication in an on-campus class are the students who repeatedly raise their hands to answer questions in all-class discussions; therefore, the quiet students are not actively practicing oral communication in class. And so, in many courses, students demonstrate their knowledge of communication theory and their ability to apply communication theory to specific cultural events and artifacts mainly by producing written examples: papers, journals, and exams. These traditional instruments for measuring student performance are as central to the online class as to the on-campus class, yet online courses also emphasize key communication concepts as teamwork, multiple author drafting and editing, and incorporating visual evidence into presentation and arguments. In short, we believe that online courses offer a viable vehicle for teaching communication.

Another aspect of online education that can meet the mandate of pursuing best pedagogical practices is assigning exercises, journal assignments, paper questions, and discussion experiments where the students are directed to go into the community to fulfill service learning criteria. Particularly as the Department moves to implement its new major, which focuses in part on

experiential learning and community service, we imagine that such online offerings could facilitate more students completing the major in a timely manner.

7. Steps for increasing the number of online courses in the UCD Department of Communication

The Department of Communication has taken the first step toward increasing the number of online courses and online students by creating the position of Online Pedagogy Coordinator. This position will be filled by Kathy Pounders, who, as part of her assuming this role, will be moved from a 4-4 course load to a 4-3 course load. In exchange for her one course reduction, Pounders has taken charge of preparing the first draft of this report; will oversee the construction of all online offerings within the department; will assume a mentoring role for all online teachers; will serve as liaison with the UCD Experiential Learning Center regarding our goal of implementing service learning components in our online courses; and will take charge of all Department homepage duties related to online pedagogy.

Based on conversations with Pounders, the Department would therefore like to make the following suggestions regarding online courses:

- **We propose to add a second online section of CMMU 1011 (Fundamentals of Communication) for fall 2009 and to offer two sections of that class in the spring of 2010.**
- **We propose to add one online section of CMMU 1021 (Fundamentals of Mass Communication) for fall 2009 and continue with two online sections of this course in the spring of 2010.**

As Pounders eases into her new role, and as the Department continues to explore the pedagogical possibilities articulated herein, so we anticipate making additional requests for more online courses. The Department of Communication hopes then, to pursue best pedagogical practices while expanding our SCH by implementing a newly robust list of online offerings.

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