"10 Commandments" of Effective Online Teaching

By Lawrence C. Ragan

(Ed.: In this issue, Distance Education Report is pleased to present a new regular feature, Between the Clicks, a column by a leader in the field of distance education, Dr. Lawrence C. Ragan, Director of Instructional Design and Development for Penn State's World Campus.)

I was recently invited to conduct a Magna Publication audioconference based on a research project identifying strategies to help faculty manage the online workload. Apparently this topic hit a nerve of concern for faculty, support staff and administrators alike. The response to the presentation suggested this was an important area for further exploration and development. The presentation generated many more questions than I was able to address during the program.

Helping faculty learn to survive and even thrive online is critical if we are to realize the potential of this new learning space. This column will be my attempt to tease out the most critical of the questions I received, to reflect and respond, and to share my insights on a variety of topics. I hope you will find it informative and helpful.

Communicating expectations

During the presentation, I made reference to a strategy that an institution can employ to help faculty save time online. I referred to a document created at the World Campus as the "10 commandments" of faculty performance. Simply put, it is the articulation of what our organization expects from our online instructors in order to ensure a quality teaching and learning experience. Although this may initially sound like a "heavy handed" approach--faculty being told how to perform--I would offer another interpretation.

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When we step into a physical classroom we are stepping into a time-tested model with well-defined operating parameters. There is a class schedule and syllabus that tells me when to meet with my class, for how long, and even the room location. There are a set of familiar tools such as a chalkboard, a podium and seating for the students. There is also an inherited protocol of classroom experience--I am the teacher and you are the student. We both roughly understand the dynamics of the interactions of this arrangement. My responsibility as the course instructor is to show up in the designated location, and conduct the course to the best of my ability through to successful completion for the students. The responsibility of the learner is to meet the criteria for satisfactory course completion as measured by the instructor.

The asynchronous online classroom has little or no similarity to the classroom experience. There may be no "class schedule," no meeting room or physical location, and, certainly in the asynchronous classroom, no defined timeframe for operation. Even the dynamics between teacher and student is challenged because online we can all appear to "be equal." Other than a vague sense of responsibility to "teach the course," the instructor has little definition of these new and often ill-defined operating parameters. The course instructor is left on their own to figure out what constitutes a successful learning experience.

Many years ago I was in a faculty meeting and we were discussing the issue of defining instructor performance. I was soft-selling the idea of defining these behaviors for fear of insulting our faculty. One senior faculty, well versed in the domain of online education, responded to my approach by saying, "if you don't tell us what is expected, how will we know what to do to succeed?" His point was well taken. Although we assume that faculty know something of the face-to-face learning setting, we cannot assume that knowledge translates to the online classroom. It is our responsibility to provide the instructor with the best definition of successful performance for their success and the success of their students.

Clearly defining and communicating the expected performance behaviors for online instructors saves faculty time because it eliminates uncertainty about roles and responsibilities. These suggested guidelines, based on best practices gathered through experience, serve as a benchmark for faculty to gauge their online course activities and manage their online workload. The intent of the "Online Instructor Performance Best Practices and Expectations" document generated by the World Campus is not meant to be all-inclusive but rather to define a baseline of online performance.

In recent discussions around this topic we acknowledged this is an evolving document based on what we and our faculty have experienced in our online activities. My intent in sharing this document more broadly is to test our basic assumptions and refine

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our thinking. I welcome input and insights into this document and know that it will evolve and change over time. Additionally, each institution or organization must review and consider how these expectations are interpreted within the operating context of their own online program.

The approach I will take over the next several "Between the Clicks" columns will be to expand on the ten performance expectations, providing a rationale, identification of barriers and limitations, and specific strategies to assist instructors in achieving the performance expectations.

I'd like to have a genuine dialog around this the topic. Please forward your comments and contributions to: BTC@magnapubs.com. ●