

# **Best Practices in Online Teaching**

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## **Abstract**

The goal of most major universities in the twenty-first century is to secure a place as a top ranking educational institution in online education. Certainly, this is the stance of National University, a private institution, which is “WASC” accredited and operates predominantly in California, USA. National University has achieved the status of graduating more than 50% of the teachers in California. Along with the onus of leading the state in credentialing more than half of the teachers, many have achieved the status of teachers of the “year”.

Given the achievement that National University has attained, and the premise of maintaining its motto of a “University of Values”, it “...is dedicated to making lifelong learning opportunities accessible, challenging, and relevant to a diverse population of learners. Its aim is to facilitate educational access and academic excellence through exceptional management of University operations and resources, innovative delivery systems and student services, and relevant programs that are learner-centered, success oriented, and responsive to technology “(NU, 2009). In keeping with the above direct quote of the University’s mission statement, it is the mission of this researcher to uncover a “best practice for online teaching” model to guide the University in reaching its ultimate goal of becoming one of the top ranking educational institutions, not only statewide, but globally. It is the purpose of this project to devise that model, based on current and ongoing research and to share this information with a global forum.

With the growing numbers of students enrolling in online courses, numbers of students in class (SIC) for on ground courses are diminishing. Conversely, SIC is increasing for online classes (Keough, 2009). In FY06, approximately 37% of SICs were online students; in FY07, that number increased to 45% (Fawson, nd).

The driving question for the study is: What are the most effective practices to ensure that top ranking universities, or those that strive to be so, are providing quality online teaching and learning to insure its place, globally, in the highest ranking online education providers?

This project will benefit all faculty at institutions of higher learning to keep pace with a global market and demand for effective, accessible, affordable and convenient learning that

meets the needs of students in a competitive society. The demands for the best and brightest students speak to a current economy that asks for innovative solutions to a wave of financial disasters that have been felt around the world.

## Theoretical Framework

The literature is prevalent in various theories of what incorporates effective online teaching. A much broader, less reader friendly document has been compiled by WASC, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, *Good Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs* (nd). The context supports five key areas to effective online teaching and learning: 1) Institutional Context and Commitment, 2) Curriculum and Instruction, 3) faculty Support, 4) Student Support and 5) Evaluation and Assessment.

Teaching to various learning modalities is another theory that emerges from the literature. How, might one ask, is this accomplished online? According to Roy (2006), “interaction” is the key. In the summary conclusion of her action research study, *The Impact of learning Styles on Interactivity in Asynchronous e-Learning*, Roy stated that more than interaction, “We [must] continue to incorporate adult learning theory and sound instructional design methodologies when we develop our interactions. We should ensure that our interactions will enable learners to meet the learning objectives, either simple or complex”. Finally, Roy suggests that effective online teaching and learning incorporate a “usability study” to guarantee that content is conveyed and mastered uniformly.

Additional framework, theoretically speaking, must look at communication modes that meet students’ needs and relationships within the online community. Students can’t see our smiles and positive attitudes when we talk to them online (Schwartz, 2007). According to Correa, et al. (2005), “Communication can be defined as a dynamic and ongoing process in which people share ideas, information, and feelings”. When teaching and learning in an asynchronous environment, it is imperative that the “human element” be considered and not all participants convey messages and concepts robotically.

Expanding further, the theory of effective communication, is the concept of the online learning communities (Motteram et al. (2005). As quoted in *Becoming an Online Distance Learner* (ibid), “Without adequate guidance, students may inadvertently find themselves in Wegerif’s (1998) terms “outsiders” and without any sense of collaborative group involvement or support” (p. 298). It is imperative that online instructors show a kinder, gentler side of their personality, even on those days when one’s computer is recalcitrant, since building a rapport of understanding, knowledge, and sometimes, flexibility, rests on the shoulders of the online instructor.

A final theory, but by no means, exhaustive, is a well integrated, systematic, user friendly template that incorporates structured knowledge delivered in a variety of kinesthetic, i.e. “hands-on” approach to learning. The clearly defined and well structured activities must meet the objectives of the course and allow students to master important conceptual knowledge of subject matter. The syllabus, ideally, will have clear rubrics for assignments, including a standard grading rubric that can be applied to the final grade. It is important to note that a well written

syllabus (and unfortunately, some not so well written) can be considered a contract between the university and the student. When APA or MLA format is required for all written work, it is advisable to include a URL (link) to an informative, “how to site” that can assist students that struggle with proper formatting. An effective online course will include in the “home” the instructor’s contact information, schedule of assignments, point values and when due, current text book, plus any caveats that might impact the student, such as consequence of submitting assignments late (Keough 2009).

### **Presentation Outcomes**

The goal of the proposal and ensuing presentation is to contribute to a university’s global presence as a premier institution of higher learning by creating an effective model for online teaching/learning

A further outcome of this work will be to establish points that will encourage “people-friendly” communication that will enhance the cohesiveness of online learning communities. Based on recent research by R. Carter (2008) of National University, over one-half of students desire a connectedness to the human element at some point in their educational career.

An additional presentation/project goal is to allow participants/readers to become aware of proper “netiquette” when communicating to students online so that clear directives, student support and dissemination of concepts contributing to course knowledge is mastered by all students enrolled. Specific guidelines must be followed to insure that the contract between the student and the university, i.e. a comprehensive syllabus and course outline, is comprehensive and includes the requisite guidelines to insure full understanding by both parties in case a grade appeal dispute ensues.

### **Conclusion**

Institutions of higher learning, in the twenty-first century, are quickly becoming universities competing for the rank of premier online teaching/learning in a global setting. Competition is fierce the university that will out rank all others is the one who can successful create an effective model that addresses all learning modalities, establishes online cohesive learning communities, and practices netiquette in the form of humanistic and positive communications.

It is the purpose of this presentation/proposal that a clear model of effective online/teaching and learning be established for the benefit of universities in order to establish a premier ranking in a global setting.

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