Design and Delivery: Embracing Instructor Responsibility in the Online Communication Course

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Abstract

This manuscript describes the importance of providing communication course instructors with training focused on cultivating instructor responsibility. Instructor ownership of creating and delivering pedagogically sound courses in an online learning environment is an important but often overlooked concept in online course design. Ultimately, courses should incorporate sound assessment and instructors should be committed to continued refinement of online learning pedagogy. This essay offers relevant principles for assessing online communication courses and creating assignments that encourage experiential learning and engage the 21st century learner.

Communication courses vary across institutions in terms of content focus (e.g., interpersonal, public speaking, hybrid) and delivery format (e.g., face to face, online, hybrid) (Morreale, Hugenberg, & Worley, 2006). Due to an evolving education landscape and environmental as well as institutional pressures, instructors across the country are faced with the challenge of moving towards greater adoption of online course delivery. Though this mandate is not new, the issue maintains relevance as budgets diminish, student populations increase, and more communication course instructors navigate the challenge of developing online or hybrid communication courses.

Often, discussions regarding online communication courses center on appropriateness of online delivery for the course content and objectives, quality of education, ability to best serve students, etc. (Allen, 2006; Noble, 2001; Schwartzman, 2006, 2007). Yet, what is missing from online communication course instructor training and preparation is not a discussion of technology skills and possible instructional strategies; rather what is missing from the conversation is the importance of ownership and responsibility for course construction, technological skill acquisition, effective strategy implementation, course assessment, and continued course and instructor development. That is, online communication course instructors need training regarding instructor responsibility and quality assurance in order to maintain high quality communication courses. Heeding Schwartzman’s (2006) call for instructors to “...behave proactively by recognizing the availability of the online medium and design pedagogically sound instructional materials” (p. 3), this essay seeks to describe the importance of providing communication course instructors with training focused on cultivating ownership of creating
and delivering a pedagogically sound course that incorporates assessment and is committed to continued refinement of online course instruction.

**Embracing Instructor Responsibility: A Theoretical Framework**

Before educators can improve instruction they must embrace their pedagogical responsibility. As communication course instructors, our primary responsibility is to deliver high quality instruction in communication reflective of our institution's, program’s, and course’s goals and mission regardless of the course delivery format (Backlund & Wakefield, 2010). To do so, we must embrace the responsibility of ensuring quality instruction by focusing on design principles that guide the construction, development, and revision process of our communication courses. Thus, online communication course instructors most need training regarding how to take ownership of the products (i.e., courses) they are developing and implementing, as well as the assessment and subsequent change process. By narrowing this training to a specific course delivery format, communication instructors are better able to create, facilitate, and adapt high quality online courses.

No matter the course modality, instructors should design courses that progress students through the stages of communication instruction in an attempt to establish more effective communicators. Instructors, searching for a theoretical model for quality online course design and assessment, should look no further than the annals of instructional theory. The domains of communication learning were originally intended to connect the learning process to communication instruction (McCroskey, 1982) and are foundational in the call of instructional obligation as well. McCroskey (1982) focused on three interactive dimensions similar to Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy. Specifically, McCroskey’s (1982) domains of communication learning include cognition, affect, and behavior.

The cognitive communication learning domain includes a student’s knowledge or understanding of content and the communication process. Affect signifies the communicator’s feelings, attitudes, motivations, and willingness to communicate while behavior refers to the ability of the communicator and the specific communication skills emitted or observed. Even though these elements were emphasized in the early eighties these domains can still be applied to traditional communication learning outcomes and assessment of a communication course, no matter the format.

Unlike McCroskey (1982), Littlejohn and Jabush (1982) settled on four elements of what was deemed communication competence (process understanding, interpersonal sensitivity, communication skills, and ethical responsibility), similar but not identical to the original domains. Over a decade later Morreale, Shockley-Zabalak, and Whitney (1993) made a case for the inclusion of a fourth domain of communication learning, ethical responsibility.
The ethical domain includes the communicator’s ability and willingness to take moral responsibility for the outcome of the communication event and its impact on receivers (Littlejohn & Jabush, 1982; Morreale, Shockley-Zabelak, & Whitney, 1993). The ethical dimension is a foundational pillar for students in online or distance courses as well as instructors and may be the missing theoretical link for quality distance learning in the online communication course.

The four interactive domains of communication can serve as a theoretical and pedagogical model for educators and a lens through which instructors view design and delivery responsibility. Communication education must remain relevant for 21st century students. Student applicability is possible through the purposeful design and implementation of a modern communication course. Therefore, design communication courses in multiple modalities (traditional, hybrid/flipped, and online) by purposefully applying the domains of communication learning as learning outcomes but do not forsake the ethical domain, the responsibility of the instructor to ensure quality communication in and through instruction.

Varying course modalities, especially distance formats, should not be entered into lightly. Instructors should adhere to the ethical domain of communication learning and be prepared to take responsibility for the outcome and impact of the course delivered in online, blended and traditional contexts. Instructional designers would do well to model class learning outcomes after the domains of communication learning while adhering to the ethical dimension as a means of assuring quality outcome variables. While our design must change our outcomes remain the same. Online courses further establish the necessity of instructors to round the learning cycle and appeal to a variety of learning styles in the design and development of distance learning courses (Kolb, 1984). Instructors can ensure a high educational quality of online and distance courses through consistent and relevant faculty development, clear learning outcomes (domains of communication learning), and quality assessment.

Assessment of the Online Communication Course

Similar to the traditional (i.e., face-to-face) communication course, there is a need to assess the online communication course to ensure quality and learning outcome achievement. Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley (2006) note that in online courses “an array of challenges impacts the process” when one uses technology to deliver the course (p. 434). Despite inherent challenges, assessment is a crucial component of pedagogically responsible distance learning.

Assessment should not be approached begrudgingly. Instructors can, and should, use assessment to determine student learning and to achieve
high quality instruction. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2008) higher education institutions should assess student work as an instructional imperative. Pedagogically responsible instructors must pursue accountability and student excellence. To accomplish those goals the assessment of online course design and delivery becomes a necessary imperative.

To assess the quality of an online course, instructors must first determine the accuracy and consistency of learning outcomes. Faculty must own student learning assessment as they are the ones who create learning objectives, course outcomes, collect assessment data and, hopefully, close the assessment loop (Backlund, Detwiler, Arneson, & Danielson, 2010). Learning objectives should be written in such a way that students achieve holistic learning with specific deliverables. Ultimately, learning outcomes specify how students will achieve subject mastery in connection to program outcomes and learning objectives (Krider, 2010). Ethically responsible instructors will craft learning objectives and outcomes that center on communication cognition, affect and behavior, the domains of communication learning.

Conducting assessment of course outcomes and learning objectives will help to address those challenges and foster change to improve the online communication course. With this being said, assessment is two-fold. Instructors need to assess the course content presented as well as the delivery and implementation of the course. In order to do so, instructors need to be cognizant of the different ways this could be accomplished. Below are a few suggestions.

There are several ways to assess the quality of an online course. One way is using a rubric developed by The Quality Matters Program (QMP). QMP (2013) explains that when it comes to distance learning and blended courses, how the course is designed and implemented matters. This is one set of standards available for those to rely on when assessing an online course.

The Quality Matters Rubric is comprised of eight general standards. According to the QMP, the critical course components include: (1) course overview and introduction (e.g., explaining what the course entails including timelines and due dates), (2) learning objectives (e.g., the outcomes or competencies the student should attain from the course), (3) assessment and measurement (e.g., the tools for how the instructor will ensure the learning objectives are met by the students), (4) instructional materials (e.g., videos, texts, lessons, activities, assignments, grading rubrics), (5) learner interaction and engagement (e.g., how the instructor plans to get students to interact with classmates and engage in content), (6) course technology (e.g., the technology provided to the student through the course, which could include platforms, learning management tools, software students will be required to use), (7) learner support (e.g., access to help and virtual resources), and (8) accessibility (e.g., considering the different constraints and availability that
a student may encounter during the online course and preparing to provide alternatives so that all students may learn).

Thus using a guide like the Quality Matters rubric when developing and implementing an online communication course should help assess whether the online course is clearly achieving what it should for the student. Assessing an online course using the QMP standards is one way an instructor can check for quality of delivery and implementation without forsaking communication-based learning outcomes.

Additionally, Ko and Rossen (2010) provide several actionable items that could make a difference in the overall quality of one’s course when developing assessments online. First, they suggest considering the timing of assessments. Being cognizant of the spacing between those assessments, the time allotted for creation and submission as well as the variety of formats for assessments, all lends itself to the end product. Second, Ko and Rossen explain that assessments online should have rubrics posted early enough for students to review. Next, they suggest creating assessments that include multiple students. They explain this is a great way to build community and to help students learn from one another. Lastly, Ko and Rossen encourage instructors to make sure the assessments that are developed for an online course are appropriate for online. This means that the assessment should be something that is easily accomplished via the mediated setting. Examples of online assessments can range from journal or discussion responses, vlogs (video-blog) about experiences, or even digital projects like websites.

Creating, Publishing, and Evaluating the Online Course

Taken together the aforementioned research and suggestions, the following outlines a few steps for creating, publishing and evaluating an online communication course.

1) Develop course outcomes and learning objectives that represent the communication course content. For example, by the end of this course, students will be able to create an informational speech outline, or students will be able to identify the positives and negatives of personal self-disclosure.

2) Create assessments that engage students with content and with each other. Based on the two example objectives, one could have students create an outline of an informational speech and post it online for students to review before the student gave his or her speech. Second, students could respond to a discussion post where they discuss their own positive and negative experience with self-disclosure. They would then need to take it a step further and apply the content to analyze why those experience were positive or negative. Students could respond with applicable suggestions for future disclosive interactions.
3) As the instructor, if students are not meeting the set expectation (i.e., what the instructor perceives as the appropriate response) for the assessment, this is where the instructor would need to evaluate what is missing for the students to be successful. Is it more prompting from the instructor? Additional videos? Additional readings? Asking the students for their feedback on the course is also a great way to gain insight regarding the students' interpretations of the content and materials. Requiring students to respond anonymously about the strengths and weakness of the course materials. Students will be honest. They will let instructors know what is and is not working. This is the instructor's chance to close the loop and make improvements for the next time the course is presented thus ensuring instructor responsibility has been achieved.

Conclusion

In the limited time we are able to introduce students to communication and teach communication competencies, we are faced with many challenges. Keeping up with technology, learning new skills, understanding the pedagogical implications of changing course delivery format, assessing and revising courses, and remaining committed to the goal of providing quality instruction tests our instructional innovation. Importantly, embracing instructor responsibility in terms of pedagogy and assessment, particularly of online or hybrid communication courses, is not new. However, remembering to embed these conversations and provide instructors with skills needed in instructor trainings is critical to addressing the challenges we face. This is an exciting time as higher education administrators continue mandating creative course delivery modalities. Communication instructors can lead the initiative and set quality standards for creative, and effective, instructional design.

References

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