Application of classroom good teaching practices to an online faculty development programme in India

Rashmi Vyas, Anshu, Hem Lata, William Burdick, Tejinder Singh

Introduction

Online learning is a new concept for developing countries. Although distance education in India dates back to as early as the 1960s (Sharma, 2001), until this day most of it is print-based, rather than web-based (Kanjilal, 1998). Initially, lack of technology posed a major hurdle for online learning in India. Today, although technology in India has developed in leaps and bounds and there are over 9 million internet subscribers (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, n.d.), online learning is still not very popular in medical education in India. Some of the barriers to online learning are concerns that the quality of education may be compromised in an online learning format. This is a potential threat in web-based learning, because we may too easily lose sight of the goal: learning (Conway, 2003).

Even with the revolution in information technology, online learning remains a relatively new concept in India. There have been no formal courses and no formal evaluations for this mode of learning. The situation is akin to what was faced by print-based distance learning a few years ago. One way to build credibility of this learning mode is to replicate the good practices of conventional class room based teaching.

To ensure that quality is retained in online learning, principles that have been identified for traditional classroom teaching need to be incorporated into the online learning environment.

CMCL- FAIMER Regional Institute, Ludhiana, India

Corresponding author:
Tejinder Singh,
Director, CMCL-FAIMER Regional Institute,
Christian Medical College,
Ludhiana, India.

Email: cmcl.faimer@gmail.com

A number of educational fundamentals have been listed in literature; and of particular interest are the seven principles that characterizes good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1991). These seven principles have stood the short test of time that has passed since they were compiled. Developed primarily for conventional undergraduate education, these principles can be extrapolated to online learning.

The Christian Medical College Ludhiana-Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research (CMCL-FAIMER) Regional Institute (CMCL-FRI) has been conducting faculty development programmes in medical education since 2003 (FAIMER Home Page, n.d.). In this paper, we use the example of the CMCL-FRI online faculty development programme to describe the use of classroom good teaching practices in an online learning programme.

Where does our online learning model stand, when viewed in the context of various theoretical concepts underlying online education? We first review the theoretical concepts of the good teaching practices and then will look at the 'good practices' visible in our model.

Chickering and Gamson's good teaching practices

Chickering and Gamson's good teaching practices are as follows:

Principle 1: Encourage contact between student and faculty

Teaching in any environment is much more than simply dispensing information. It should induce the students to analyze, synthesize and exercise critical judgment. This requires a high degree of interactivity between the teacher and the student (Weiss, 2000). Some methods to improve student-faculty contact in online courses include encouraging students to contact faculty; sharing values, attitudes and experiences with students and encouraging

students also to do so (Graham *et al*., 2000; Nelson, 2000). Communication policies need to be clear and issues which need to be addressed through private emails should be clarified. If teachers do not hear from students, they should be contacted to see if there is a problem and personal interaction may be sought if required.

Principle 2: Encourage cooperation amongst students

Cooperative learning promotes positive interdependence, face to face interaction, personal responsibility, collaborative skills and group processing (Johnson *et al*., 1990). Some of the suggested methods to encourage students to work collaboratively in online courses include designing collaborative group work, providing a number of milestones and good examples, making participation in discussions mandatory, providing 'weaving' comments when needed, and making sure that students know that you are 'present' and available for help (Conway, 2003).

Principle 3: Encourage active learning

Active learning can better be viewed as a situation, where the 'students are doing things and thinking about things they are doing' (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Some of the methods suggested in the literature to encourage active learning include making students construct deep explanations, justifications and reasons, developing question-response-clarification cycles, challenging students to develop reasoned responses, and making students present their work to the rest of the class (Graham *et al*., 2000; Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000).

Principle 4: Give prompt feedback

Students need to constantly monitor their understanding in order to make meaningful progress. Without an explicit understanding of their progress, students become anxious and may lose their path (Conway, 2003). Electronic media allows instant and timely feedback. However, there is a need to make feedback learner-centric rather than teacher-centric.

Principle 5: Emphasize time on task

If we view learning as encoding of knowledge and skills, then the information to be encoded has to be first attended to and processed by working memory, before it can become a part of long term memory (Cooper, 1998). How is time on task emphasized in online situations? Suggested methods include providing specific deadlines, providing intermediate milestones, emphasizing regular work and sound self pacing, using asynchronous communication to reduce stress on time, and making resources easily accessible (Graham *et al.,* 2000). In our discussion, the overall task was broken down into smaller ones, each with specific deadlines.

Principle 6: Communicate high expectations

In general, if teachers set high, but attainable goals, these are generally met by the students. Goals should be high enough to make the students stretch, but low enough for them to attain. Literature also suggests that students prefer difficult courses, where they have to work hard (Cashlin, 1988; Cashlin & Slawson, 1977). Literature suggests the following methods to communicate high expectations in online courses: modeling appropriate interaction, requiring students to become active learners, publically calling attention to good performance, and basing evaluations on quality rather than on quantity of posts (Graham *et al.,* 2000; Weiss 2000).

Principle 7: Respect diverse talents and ways of learning

There have been a number of reports on learning styles and their implications for instructional design. However, as Coffield *et al.* (2004) in a review of the available evidence on learning styles aptly state, 'learning styles are not as much concerned with matching instruction for individual student but providing a variety of methods in the learning basket'. In online forums, Graham *et al.* (2000) suggest the following methods to respect diverse ways of learning: encouraging students to express diverse view points, consider possible time-zone differences, limiting the use of contextual language, idioms and colloquialism.

Let us now take an in-depth look at the process followed in our online learning model.

The CMCL-FRI Online Learning Method

An online learning activity was planned for the participants (known as the "Fellows") of the FRI using the listserv on the ECFMG server. The participants included 15 Fellows and 10 faculty members. Fellows were included on the listserv using either their existing email IDs or a new dedicated web-based email ID (since there is a large volume of data inflow, we encouraged them to use Gmail or any other email with large storage space). Any mail addressed to the listserv was sent to the mail boxes of all the Fellows. Similarly, any reply

was also forwarded to all the Fellows. This offers some distinct advantages - Fellows do not have to specially log in to see the activity as everything is delivered to their mail boxes and all discussions are in public domain. Fellows and faculty, however, have the option of sending private emails if required. To prevent duplication, the server rejects mails with similar texts. The methodology of selecting topics for online discussion and the time schedule have already been described in detail in a previous paper (Anshu *et al*., 2008).

To illustrate the process, a month's online activity on the topic "Helping low achievers" is discussed as an example.

During the entire month, a total of 114 academic mails and 19 resources were exchanged related to the topic of the month's discussion on 'Helping Low Achievers'. Eleven of the 15 Fellows and 5 out of the 10 faculty members participated in the online discussion.

The topic was discussed under three heads: (a) how to identify low achievers (b) the causes of low achievement and (c) how to help low achievers.

There was consistently good participation by the Fellows on all the days of the month. However, issues such as 'policies for low achievers' and 'possible interventions to help them' generated more posts than others. Fellows posted their own reflections, shared their own experiences and posted learning resources in the form of articles or web links. The summary of the online discussion can be viewed from the relevant URL at *http://cmcl.faimer.googlepages.com/resources.*

The "good teaching practices" visible in our model are:

- Fellows engage in asynchronous threaded discussions, which provide time to reflect and think before posting a response. They can participate at their convenience in terms of time and place.
- Students decide on the topics to be discussed within the broad objectives of the course.
- Fellows were contacted by text messages or telephone when they were silent on the listserv.
- Peer coaching gets a pre-eminent place.
- Fellows learn the skills of moderating a discussion.
- Faculty usually plays the role of a 'guide on the side' rather than taking over discussions. This is in sharp contrast to traditional faculty role in India where teaching is didactic.
- Fellows share ideas, concepts and resources, and thus learn together. This tends to promote collaborative learning.
- A record of discussions is available for later review.
- Discussions begin with introduction and identification of learning issues. The topic is divided into small chunks. End of the discussion summary is provided and posted on the site for reference.
- Large amount of resource material, links and publications are shared by Fellows.
- Fellows demonstrate social, cognitive and teaching presence. Even though everybody is not equally active, we believe that these 'lurkers' do benefit from overhearing.
- The posts go to the regular email boxes of the Fellows - there is no need to specially log in to a site to follow the discussion. Even though someone may not respond, he is certainly reading the discussion.
- There are tangible end points in the form of periodic and month end summaries.
- Group activities promote acquisition of new skills (*e.g.* website designing), which were not part of the intended learning outcomes.
- The listserv promotes a community of learners, where one can seek help, guidance and network, not necessarily restricted to the topic of the month but on a range of academic and sometimes personal matters.
- There is ample opportunity for the Fellows to demonstrate their social, cognitive and teaching presence.

Certain issues which we plan to improve the process are as follows.

From the next online sessions, we will begin the discussions by asking Fellows to write their learning objectives for that month. These will be sent to the moderating faculty and will serve as the beginning of an e-folio. At the end of the month, Fellows will again write a 300-word summary, reflecting on what they learnt, how it relates to their existing knowledge and

how they plan to use this knowledge. A model template will be provided for this.

We have tried to judge our model vis-à-vis good classroom teaching practices. Our contention is that learners require support irrespective of the type of learning. Since the Chickering and Gamson model has withstood the test of time, it is a good idea to extrapolate the practices to online discussions as well.

Acknowledgements

Hem Lata and MadanLal moderated the sessions, while Rita Sood and Rashmi Vyas provided the faculty support. Other faculty members included Tejinder Singh, William Burdick, Stewart Mennin, Janet Grant and B V Adkoli.

References

Anshu, Bansal, P.K., Mennin, S., Burdick, W.P. & Singh, T. (2008) Online faculty development for medical educators: experience of a South Asian programme [online], *Education for Health,* 21, 3, p. 175, available at: *http://educationforhealth.net/publishedarticles/article_print_175.pdf* [accessed 1 February, 2009].

Bonwell, C.C. & Eison, J.A. (1991) Active learning: creating excitement in the classroom. Washington DC: ASHE-ERIC Higher Education, Report no 1.

Cashlin, W.E. (1988) Student ratings of teaching: A summary of the research IDEA Paper No. 20. Manhattan: Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University.

Cashlin, W.E., & Slawson, H.M. (1977). Description of data base, 1976–77. IDEA Technical Report No. 2. Manhattan: Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University.

Chickering, A.W. & Gamson, Z.F. (eds) (1991) *New directions for teaching and learning: applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education*, Jossey Bass Inc., San Fransisco.

Coffield, F., Ecclestone, K., Moseley, D. *et al.* (2004) *Should we be using learning styles: what research has to say to practice?* Learning and Skill Development Agency, London.

Conway, E.D. (2003) Teaching strategies for distance education: implementation of seven principles for good learning in online education [online] available at: *http://spacegrant.nmsu.edu/NMSU/2003/conway.pdf* [accessed 1 February, 2009].

Cooper, G. (1998) Research into Cognitive Load Theory and Instructional Design at UNSW. University of New South Wales Australia [online] available at: *http://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/education/CLT_NET_Aug_97.html* [accessed 10 October, 2007].

Foundation for Advancement of International Medical Education and Research [online] available at: *www.faimer.org* [accessed 1 February, 2008]

Graham, C., Cagiltay, K., Craner, J., Lim, B., & Duffy, T. M. (2000) Teaching in a web based distance learning environment: an evaluation summary based on four courses [online] CRLT Technical Report No. 13-00, available at: *http://crlt.indiana.edu/publications/crlt00-13.pdf* [accessed 1 February, 2009].

Hacker, D.J., & Niederhauser, D.S. (2000) Promoting deep and durable learning in the online classroom in: Weiss, R.E., Knowlton, D.S. & Speck, B.W. (eds.) *New directions for teaching and learning: Principles of effective teaching in the online classroom,* 84, pp. 53–64, Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco.

Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T. & Smith, K. A. (1991) Cooperative learning, report 4, George Washington University, Washington DC.

Kanjilal, U. (1998) Migrating to the electronic learning environment: prospects for LIS distance learners in India [online] available at: *http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla64/019-123e.htm* [accessed 1 February, 2009].

Nelson, C.E. (2000) Must faculty teach in ways that make them easily dispensable? *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, 9, 6, pp. 4–5.

Sharma, R.C. (2001) Technology for teacher training through distance education in India [online] available at: *http://vcisrael.macam.ac.il/site/eng /files/E5A018/files/isrealconf.doc* [accessed 1 February, 2009].

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, Annual Report 2006-07, available at: *http://www.trai.gov.in/annualreport/AReport2006-07English.pdf* [accessed 1 February, 2009].

Weiss, R.E. (2000) Humanizing the online classroom, in: Weiss, R.S., Knowlton, D.S. & Speck, B.W. (eds) *New directions for teaching and learning: Principles of effective teaching in online classrooms*, pp. 47-52. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, Inc.