Online Workload Management

Increased workload is one of the most frequently cited concerns by faculty who are considering teaching an online course. It is true that an online course can present an instructor with workload related problems. However, Lehman and Conceição argue that this isn't necessarily an increase in workload as it is a different type of workload. They say:

> "Designing, delivering, and evaluating online instruction often entails a distinctive type of workload in comparison to face-to-face instruction depending on the different components of the design process (such as content type, course format, strategies, instructor role, technology, and support) and influencing factors (such as number of courses taught, learner enrollment, level of instruction [undergraduate/graduate], etc.)" (Lehman and Conceição, 2010).

In their report on effective workload management strategies for the online environment, Ragan and Terheggen set out a series of strategies for faculty members teaching online courses. These strategies are grouped into two categories – teaching strategies and course revision and improvement strategies (Ragan and Terheggen, 2003). These strategies are summarized below:

Teaching Strategies for reducing faculty workload

1. **Clarify and enhance students' technical skills before class begins.** By providing students with an online tutorial or other orientation material covering "technical skills, support services, document and file management, netiquette, time management, study skills, resources, and policies concerning academic integrity and intellectual property" before class starts, faculty can reduce the amount of time spent covering non-content specific material once class begins.
2. **Provide a detailed syllabus**. The syllabus is a valuable tool that can communicate to students all they need to know about the course. Students will also be able to "identify activities that may require new skills or extra time." A detailed syllabus, like an orientation tutorial, can limit the number of student queries on non-content related material. It also creates a central area where students know to look for information throughout the course.
3. **Define the operating parameters of the course.** By defining at the very beginning all your expectations for interactions between members of the class, many questions from students about the "frequency, response time, and quality of the interactions" will be eliminated. Reviewing timelines and student responsibilities will help students manage their workload and reduce faculty workload.
4. **Create feedback rubrics (formatted explanations or outlines).** These rubrics can cover "administrative and orientation information," direct students to appropriate resources for support, and "can be used in the compilation of a Frequently Asked Questions archive from which to cut and paste responses to students." While feedback rubrics require effort to develop, they can save faculty time during the class, and can be reused for the next iterations of the same course. This strategy ensures "consistent feedback across students, clear expectations provided to students before assignments are due, and higher quality student output because students fully understand the assignment criteria beforehand." A set of reusable feedback statements in a Word document can be utilized to make grading more efficient as well (Lehman and Conceição, 2010).
5. **Establish a routine.** Planning for regular interaction within the course and with students, as well as making frequent, but short course interactions, can help prevent the development of a backlog of

activity. Faculty members should set a routine for participating in course discussions or responding to student emails. Besides helping to reduce workload, this can also build student confidence in the instructor.

6. **Use the Learning Management System to record course transactions**. Leverage Blackboard features to track and record student activity, such as through the assignment submission system or the grade book.
7. **Foster group dynamics**. Creating a dynamic where students can interact and learn from each other will reduce the amount of necessary faculty intervention and participation. This can be done in several ways:
    a. "Establishing a method of peer review on projects, etc.
    b. Involving students at the start of the course in peer review activities
    c. Establishing ground rules for peer review in order to support an atmosphere of trust
    d. Having a large-group activity prior to small-group activities
    e. Providing opportunities for student training without the weight of grading."

    However, keep in mind that "peer feedback and interaction cannot replace regular individualized feedback" from the instructor. Students "may grow frustrated if the faculty member interacts infrequently and fails to provide an expert opinion on topics being discussed."
8. **Encourage interaction from the beginning of the course**. By integrating an initial activity into your course that encourages students to interact, faculty can help create "a sense of community and confidence." This can also orient students to the course and bring to the forefront any technical problems from the start. This interaction can be as simple as having students post an introduction and bio on a discussion board thread.
9. **Be consistent and efficient with communication.** By utilizing public posting areas for frequently asked questions or making general email announcements to the entire class, faculty can reduce the number of individual responses to student queries. If instructors use these methods consistently, students will come to rely on them for answers (Ragan and Terheggen, 2003).

Course Revision Strategies to Reduce Workload

1. **Continually evaluate your course**. Design formative evaluations to gather information from students throughout the course, even students who did not complete the course if possible. This can identify "weak components of a course that can be addressed through moderate revision," allowing for a "smoother, less time-consuming delivery" in future courses. Ragan and Terheggen suggest information gathering could be in the form of an "electronic suggestion box," by using the discussion board for an informal series of questions, or through "chat rooms set up for specific information gathering purposes." This information can be used to develop a FAQ that you can present to future students.
2. **Conduct a pilot run or an external review**. Having another faculty member take your course for a test drive can help identify potential stumbling blocks before they happen during the semester.
3. **Build a revision cycle into the course.** By taking into account the time that is needed for continuous revision and setting time aside for it when planning the course, faculty can avoid a sudden overload of work.
4. **Develop a method for managing dynamic course elements**. Dynamic course elements are the parts of the course that are most likely to change. These can be hyperlinks to external resources or references to page numbers in textbooks. These can be handled in several ways – page numbers, for instance, can be replaced with heading or subheading names, which aren't as likely to change. Links to external

resources can be placed in one easily accessible area, like the syllabus or a reading list page. This will allow them to be quickly located and changed as necessary.

5. **Develop and maintain a course history.** This can be the most time intensive of the methods. It involves "archiving course improvements including student feedback, narrative by the course author or instructor, as well as keeping on file information related to third-party software, supplementary reading materials, exams and answer keys, permissions records, and other external elements of the course" (Ragan and Terheggen, 2003).

Lehman and Conceição worked with experienced faculty to determine the most common strategies they used to manage workload when teaching online, and discovered that these strategies could be grouped into four categories: design, support, teaching, and time allocation (Lehman and Conceição, 2010). Lehman and Conceição's findings are summarized below:

Design Strategies

1. *Pre-planning and anticipating course responsibilities*: For example, create a table with hours to be spent during the course, with built-in flexibility that allows you to modify content and activities during the course.
2. *Prioritizing and automating course activities:* This was achieved through consistency in course design and the use of automation when possible. By portioning the course into modules that are similar in scope and sequence, the course will move at a predictable and regular pace. Workload can also be reduced by taking advantage of the quiz feature in Blackboard and by using quiz banks from textbooks (Lehman and Conceição, 2010). In addition to Lehman and Conceição's suggestions, Sheridan suggests using a program like Dreamweaver to design course pages, using templates whenever possible, allowing you to do global updates – updating multiple pages on your site simultaneously (Sheridan, 2006).

Support Strategies

When teaching online, being aware of all available supports, whether from peers, the institution, or external organizations, is key to managing workload.

1. Learn about all the technical support provided by the university, what is and isn't covered, how to request it, and how quickly to expect a response.
2. Drawing on the experience of your peers when planning your course can help avoid common pitfalls. Sheridan suggests organizing a group of instructors on campus who are also teaching online and supporting each other with technical or content difficulties (Sheridan, 2006).
3. Be aware of web resources or organizations like historic or cultural societies with resources that can reduce the need to build things from scratch (Lehman and Conceição, 2010).

Teaching Strategies

1. *Administrative tasks:* These can include sending weekly announcements clarifying course expectations or informing students of any course changes, offering virtual office hours and prompt responses to student messages, and using Blackboard to monitor student participation. Similarly, Rick Sheridan

suggests creating a "What's New" section to let students focus on newly posted assignments or materials without having to dig through modules (Sheridan, 2006).

2. *Facilitative tasks*: When courses have large enrollment, workload can be managed by limiting the number of postings that can be made to discussions, or by reducing or eliminating group work. For courses with smaller enrollment, group work can be used to give students some of the responsibilities for class leadership.
3. *Evaluative tasks*: When evaluating student work, workload can be managed by using group rather than individual grading, peer grading, automating quiz grading through Blackboard, or developing a grading rubric. Sheridan believes that for high enrollment courses in particular, it may be necessary to replace some personalized individual grading with peer, computer or self-assessment options (Sheridan, 2006).

Time Allocation Strategies

1. *Blocking out and organizing time* is key for managing workload when teaching online. Block out a time during the day or weekend for responding to learners, communicate these commitments to students, and then stick to it so that students know what to expect. Anticipate and set aside time when there will be heavy grading or discussion. This will keep the pace from slowing down despite a shift in course dynamics (Lehman and Conceição, 2010).
2. *Scheduling discussions:* Goldman suggests planning all discussion in advance, and scheduling discussions based on the workload in the rest of the course. Goldman also recommends informing students of your own role and commitments, and emphasizing that the earlier they participate the better, that "last minute, fly-by and tail-gating responses should be avoided" and that both "instructors and students are expected reply within 24 hours to any direct question." Finally, Goldman suggests praising early responses and leveraging their comments to re-direct or deepen the discussion, as well as emailing late responders and encouraging them to get involved earlier in the week (Goldman 2011).
3. *Creating content ahead of time*. By preparing PowerPoint slides and lectures in advance, as well as selecting all resources ahead of time, faculty can spend the course time focusing on teaching. This content can then be reused in subsequent courses (Lehman and Conceição, 2010).

Work Cited

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