Online Course Proposal Theoretical Foundations

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Abstract

Higher-order learning, such as critical thinking and deep learning, requires social presence (community cohesion), cognitive presence (complex tasks to be performed), and teaching presence (teacher guidance and support) (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). The proposed course is designed as a learner-centric online learning environment to help learners achieve their course goals while also considering the development of instructor immediacy. It is also essential to consider issues related to accessibility, diversity, equity, and open educational resources when designing courses. Methods of learning assessment and course evaluation were also regarded in the development of the class.

Theoretical Foundations

Online learning can have very different meanings from person to person (Gayol, 2010).

At the University of Tennessee Martin (UTM), ten undergraduate online programs have already

been created which offer courses suitable for learners of various ages and backgrounds. The

proposed course, "A History of Christmas," blends well with this environment. Not only can it

be used as a requirement for students majoring in philosophy or history, but it is also available as

a general liberal arts course for students majoring in other disciplines. In other words, since the

foundation of online courses is already established at the university level, there is no need for

course designers and facilitators to spend time on paperwork such as student admission and

course registration procedures. They can concentrate on course design and implementation.

Additionally, the fact that the target learner is taking other online courses means they are already

accustomed to the typical structure of online coursework. The online learning experience will not

be the first online course for at least some students. This element improves learner success rates

in online courses (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

There are many items designers should be aware of when proposing a complete online

course design. Online learning requires students to prepare for the online educational

environment. Historically, online learning has been affected by the technology available to users

(Gayol, 2010). Due to the global infectious disease pandemic, many face-to-face lessons were

transferred online in 2020. Because of this, most students today are already familiar with the

elements needed for online coursework. Those elements include securing a PC, connecting to the

internet, accessing a learning management system (LMS) (Canvas for the UT system), and using

synchronous video conference platforms like Zoom. Therefore, the technical hurdles for setting up an online learning environment are lower than before 2020. Figure 1 shows the student support services provided by Stewart et al. (2013). Many course design factors support student success outside of the classroom experience (Stewart et al., 2013). Also, the support services at UTM were researched and are reflected in the development of "A History of Christmas."

LMS provides tools and templates that can easily be combined and customized to present online instructional materials. These tools and templates automate the development of common structural aspects of distance education instructions, such as syllabi, quizzes, discussion forums, workspaces, and assignment submission spaces (Harvey & Lee, 2001; Koszalka & Bianco, 2001). However, when designing an online course, tools must be strategically chosen in order to achieve goals. Since Canvas is an LMS introduced by the UT system, it is reasonable to adopt it in this course. At the same time, Canvas includes most of the LMS features that Koszalka and Ganesan (2004) have shown to help designers integrate purely active and social elements into online courses. Therefore, even when Canvas is adopted for this course, the utilization of its function is theoretically supported. In the event that Canvas is not available for use with this course, an alternative is the Google Classroom platform. While it is not as dynamic as Canvas, this free platform offers many desired LMS features.

"A History of Christmas" mainly uses an asynchronous approach. Asynchronous online courses are sometimes said to be less effective than classroom-based courses. Still, many comparative studies show sufficient functionality (Anderson et al., 2007; Asterhan et al., 2010; Kauppila et al., 2011). In asynchronous classes, students have the luxury of time. Postings can occur at the convenience of the participants, allowing them time to read, process, and respond

accordingly (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). However, when considering the design of a learner-centric learning environment, Nipper (1989) states that the need for social connection is a goal that almost supersedes the content-oriented goals for the course. At the same time, recent synchronization technologies and the improved skills of their use have helped to understand the building of communities (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). With these in mind, while most of the course is asynchronous in nature (providing greater freedom for learners with different learning environment backgrounds), synchronous activities are also built into the course to build the communities needed for an online learning environment.

Detailed theoretical justifications for adopting the main activities are given below. Several vital theories support the design of online learning environments that engage learners. These theories include constructivist and social constructivist theories (Dewey, Bruner, Vygotsky, and Piaget, 1916/1997), adult learning theory, e.g., andragogy (Knowles,1980), and connectivism (Siemens, 2008). Drawing on these theories and the community of inquiry model, Conrad and Donaldson (2012) described the effective teacher as one who engages students through welcoming gestures, regular feedback, and behaviors that signal a supportive teaching presence. Because of this, as a welcome gesture, a letter is sent to learners before the proposed course begins. Learners who open the Canvas course shell may misunderstand or be overwhelmed by the materials and content. The welcome letter includes brief information about the course, the necessary textbooks, and instructions to get them started, relieving student stress and apprehension. The letter will be written in a personal and conversational manner to help learners begin to feel a sense of presence in the online course (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010).

This instructor's presence can also be perceived as the instructor's immediacy. Instructor immediacy is the act of reducing the physical and/or psychological distance between people (Schutt et al., 2009). Immediacy includes verbal and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., smiles, eye contact, body language, humor, etc.) (Mehrabian, 1969). Designed with the instructor's immediate behavior in mind, the first week of the course provides an instructor-created welcome video. This video includes an instructor introduction and detailed explanations of the course's objectives and expected outcomes aligned with the goals, instructions, etc. At the beginning of the course, the learner schedules a one-on-one synchronous meeting with the instructor. The instructor's immediacy behavior presented at the meeting is expected to improve students' perception of the instructor as caring, competent, trustworthy, and credible. In addition, the meeting gives the learner a sense of social presence that the instructor is there together. At the same time, the instructor can feel the learner's presence. Lehman and Conceicao (2010) stated that if the presence of others does not develop, learners may feel isolated, leading to a lack of retention in online courses. The personal feedback given at this meeting reveals the instructor's personality and student knowledge. And the meetings are set as a stepping stone to developing a social presence for both learners and instructors. Also, a detailed instructor bio with a picture will be added to Canvas. Including personal but relevant information facilitates comfortable sharing for those enrolled in the course (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2014).

One of the crucial things in a Humanities course is learning to research and read academic material. In this course, journal articles are assigned; the first two will be assigned with an instructional video on reading them. Students then read the article and answer the questions on the worksheet. At the same time, the learner completes a reading journal every week (see

Appendix A). Assignments are due on Fridays and are graded by the following Monday.

Providing feedback on assignments during a course is essential in developing instructional

presence and instructor immediacy (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). The instructor also

simultaneously affirms the learner's ideas and sometimes challenges them. Affirming the

learner's thoughts impacts traits that influence their learning and future, such as self-esteem and

self-confidence, and the instructor challenges the learner's views so that the learner feels a

cognitive existence. It leads to unleashing their potential (Edwards et al., 2011).

Wenger (1999) pointed out that the value of education lies in social participation and that

education should first be addressed in terms of the identity of the participants and the means of

belonging to the group. In the first week of the course, the learner will post a self-introduction on

the discussion board and leave comments on the introductions of other participants. The

importance of developing a sense of community and the benefit of fostering a sense of belonging

and cohesion among students is supported by socio-constructivists (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Therefore, through self-introduction using the discussion board, the course promotes contact

between learners and provides a foothold for forming an online learning community. Palloff and

Pratt (2007) stated, "We believe that through creating a sense of shared values and shared

identity, that sense of belonging emerges, resulting in the sense of community in the online

class." In addition, discussion forums can empower introverted students and contribute to

developing a collaborative online learning community, especially awareness of social presence

among participants (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Based on their ideas, in this course, mainly in the last

week of each unit, the learners post a 150-word summary of critical thoughts on assigned reading

materials, including at least two quotes, on the discussion board. In addition, they post a reaction

to peers' posts. By repeating this activity for each unit, learners are expected to understand each other's ideas and share their values deeply. Repeating this activity during long semesters also leads to perceiving other learners as "real" people and maintaining a sense of attribution-based community. Constructive disagreements in learning are also valuable.

Instructors serve as a gentle guide to the teaching process, and learners are expected to question their assumptions and ideas (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). By doing so, learners in the online classroom will produce learning outcomes suitable for the course (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). However, students in an online learning environment are expected to collaborate rather than perform this process alone (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). "A History of Christmas" includes a group capstone assignment with collaborative activities. If democratic and critical debate conditions are carefully created and respected, students will learn collaborative habits (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Through collaborative activities, new forms of knowledge and meaning are built, that is, the formation of cognitive presence.

Community Building

Community building, discussion, and collaboration between learners improve learning outcomes and ease learner isolation in an online learning environment. In addition, text-based communication in discussion forums allows all learners to participate more equitably. However, there is also a potential dark side to the online community called the "shadow problem" (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). The responsibilities of those who attend the course, the rules and norms that apply within the course, the syllabus, etc., are shared to avoid problems in advance. It is also important to disseminate the norms of openness, integrity, and confidentiality through learning activities. At the same time, the instructor needs to be ready to intervene when students

misbehave or have interpersonal problems (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). To that end, ethical training will be provided to those involved in designing and implementing this course. Movement conveys that instructors should choose communication channels representing high verbal and nonverbal socio-emotional cues (Short et al., 1976). The course treats Christmas as a central subject and is based on the analysis that most students taking the course are familiar with the forms of Christian evangelicalism. However, it is essential to carry out an analysis of the actual learner throughout the course. Also, when dealing with religious studies, spirituality, and consciousness can be more closely intertwined. Instructors need to be sensitive to the different cultures of the online learning environment and establish and convey their sense of boundaries to students (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

Implementing deliverables for an online learning environment requires a wide range of specific skills related to the technology and the produced material's instructive, educational, usability, and accessibility aspects (De Marsico et al., 2006). User-friendly and consistent design and content organization are also essential elements of design (Stewart et al., 2013). The course actively adopts Universal Learning Design for the instructions and materials presented and considers accessibility with Canvas's accessibility check feature. In addition, close captions are added to the video materials that are often used in the course. Users, like students and instructors with disabilities, will be encouraged to test prototypes' convenience early on and participate in course development.

Higher education institutions must take steps to survive in the new paradigm brought about by the Internet (Wiley & Hilton, 2009). Designers are not encouraged to ignore the idea of "open" education when creating new courses at the university. At the same time, as we discussed

in class, changing consciousness, such as changing the direction of the significance of the facility to which it belongs, is a big problem that is not easy. In addition to the videos produced by the course designers and instructors, video materials will also be assigned that can be used primarily as open educational resources (OER) later in the course. Adopting OER is expected to reduce the financial burden on the institutions and people involved in the course. Students can meet their autonomy and social affiliation needs when there is a high degree of openness in format, tool, and interaction choices (Jézégou, 2013). Students are given a more comprehensive selection of options in the Capstone project and encouraged student autonomy. The aim is to increase learner satisfaction with the course and lead to results by gaining learner autonomy.

The processes and methods of learning assessment and course evaluation are similar, including formative and summative types. Different types of student learning assessments measure learning and reduce fraud. There is a need to plan assessments for different learning outcomes (Conrad & Donaldson, 2012). Journal Article Worksheet and Weekly Reading Journal assessments are applied to understand the engagement process through learning goals and how well the information is processed, and knowledge is developed. The same applies to the implementation of quizzes. Performance-based activities include the need for problem-solving abilities and multi-viewpoint assessments (Oosterhof et al., 2008). An example of a rubric for assessing a discussion board provided by Palloff & Pratt (2007) is shown in Figure 2. Such rubrics are actively adopted to assess discussions among students in this course. In online learning, collaborative assessments in which students provide formative feedback to each other are also practical (Palloff & Pratt, 2007), so assessments will be conducted for the Capstone project. Courses are formatively evaluated before the start of the course based on the University

of Tennessee's "Best Practices for Developing and Delivering Online Instruction" (2017). The

UT system aggregates learner feedback on the course at the end of the semester. Summative

feedback allows for future course revisions and updates (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

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Figure 1

Student support services emerge from observations and analysis
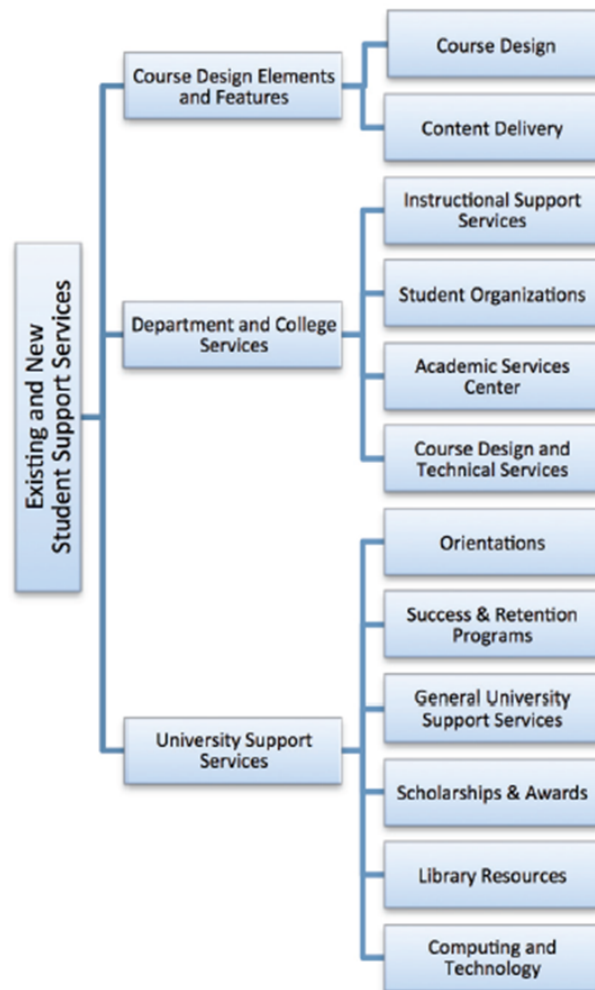
Note: Stewart et al. (2013) provided student support services. Many course design factors

support student success outside of the classroom experience (Stewart et al., 2013).

Figure 2

Discussion Grading Rubric

Criteria	Non-Performance	Basic	Proficient	Distinguished
Includes and applies relevant course concepts, theories, or materials correctly with citation of sources	Does not explain relevant course concepts, theories, or materials. Does not provide citation of sources.	Summarizes relevant course concepts, theories, or materials. Provides citation some of the time.	Applies and analyzes relevant course concepts, theories, or materials correctly. Provides citation most of the time.	Evaluates and synthesizes course concepts, theories, or materials correctly, using examples or supporting evidence. Consistently provides citation.
Responds to fellow learners, relating the discussion to relevant course concepts and providing substantive feedback.	Does not respond to fellow learners.	Responds to fellow learners without relating discussion to the relevant course concepts. Provides feedback, but it is not substantive.	Responds to fellow learners, relating the discussion to relevant course concepts. Feedback is substantive most of the time.	Responds to fellow learners, relating the discussion to relevant course concepts and consistently extends the dialogue through provision of substantive feedback.
Applies relevant professional, personal, or other real-world experiences.	Does not contribute professional, personal, or other real-world experiences.	Contributes some professional, personal, or other real-world experiences that may or may not relate to course content.	Applies relevant professional, personal, or other real-world experiences.	Applies relevant professional, personal, or other real-world experiences and extends the dialogue by responding to the examples of peers.
Supports position with applicable resources beyond assigned reading.	Does not establish relevant position.	Establishes relevant position but does minimal outside research.	Consistently supports position with additional resources.	Validates position with applicable resources and supports the learning of others through the contribution of additional resources.

Note: Palloff & Pratt (2007) provided an example of a proposed rubric for assessing a discussion board. We also actively adopt such rubrics to assess discussions among students in this course.