

## ONLINE DELIVERY COURSES: WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

Julia Jackson, BAH,CST

Program Director, Surgical Technology

Baker College

Flint, Michigan

### **INTRODUCTION**

Horrifying! Intimidating! Confusing! Frightening! Overwhelming! These are words commonly used by instructors to describe the thought of online delivery courses, but this does not have to be the case! That which they know little about intimidates most people, the same is true for online teaching. Actually, online courses can be a positive addition to surgical technology programs. The key is training and preparation. The most difficult part is deciding where to begin this adventure into the world of technology. This article is intended to suggest methods to incorporate this unlimited source of information, the Internet, into your curriculum. In addition, it will discuss some of the common problems encountered by instructors teaching online courses.

Students are Internet savvy and look to school web pages for information on programs. In fact, many of the students entering our colleges today have been online since grade school. "According to a national public Radio report in March of this year, 75 percent of kids between the ages of 12 and 18 in the United States went online in January 2001" (Johnstone, July 2001). These students have expectations that they can get the information they need online. It is up to colleges to meet this challenge and grow with the technology boom.

### **TYPES OF ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS**

#### *INSTITUTION/SCHOOL WEB SITES:*

Most institutions have a web site today and it is important to become familiar with your school site. Some schools help faculty create personal web pages. Many departments have home pages, which allow students to view facilities, review requirements, and submit questions regarding the programs. These are sites that we, as instructors, do not have to manage, which allows a relatively painless transition into the world of web-based information.

#### *DISCUSSION BOARDS AND CHAT ROOMS:*

There are online discussion products (sites and software) on the Internet that allow you to create a private discussion board or chat room for your students. Some sites charge a fee to install software or for the site license, others are free. All require Internet browsers, such as Netscape or Internet Explorer. Some of the online discussion products include Discus, WWWThreads, WebCrossing, or WebBoard4 (Syllabus.com, June 2001). One free site I have used is Delphi Forums (<http://www.delphiforums.com>). This site is simple to get to and walks the site administrator (you) through the process of creating the site. This is an excellent way to introduce students to the online environment without overwhelming yourself or your students with this new course resource.

## ONLINE DELIVERY COURSES: WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

Julia Jackson, BAH,CST

Program Director, Surgical Technology

Baker College

Flint, Michigan

### *PRIVATE ONLINE CLASSROOMS:*

These are sites that function to run courses online. Individuals or institutions can use the sites to administer online delivery classes. I have set up my own "mini classroom" on a site called Blackboard (<http://www.Blackboard.com>) this enabled me to test the waters before jumping into them. This site is free of charge for certain features, most of which is all you will need to use this as a resource to your on ground surgical technology course. Our school has an online college and we also contract with Blackboard.com to run our entire online program. My first term using this technology I did not administer any formal assignments online, but I did require the discussion board on a regular basis. I posted my syllabus and course outline on the site as well. The system is user friendly and has an online instruction manual that is useful. Most people that are computer literate and can perform most word processing functions such as downloading, saving, and copying files and attachments can really do this. My school gave me the opportunity to pilot a hybrid course (part on ground and part online) during my second term using Blackboard. I was able to administer quizzes and homework assignments online, as well as link to related sites for research. We had a term paper due and I placed links to databases and libraries, as well as the APA web site for students' use. If you know a web site address you can create a link to it through Blackboard.

This site also manages an online grade book for the instructor. In addition, it corrects exams and assignments and records scores in the online grade book, which can be saved and printed. Students' grades are easily accessible and can be edited, if needed. I found it to be a great additional resource to the program and I received positive response from my class..even the ones who were most reluctant initially.

The feature most helpful was the discussion board. When students are out four days a week in clinical externship, they are able to share experiences with fellow classmates everyday. Questions, comments and kudos were posted on a daily basis. The great thing is students take an active role in the learning process; they start to answer each other's questions and I facilitate the conversations to keep things on track.

Another free site is the Manhattan Virtual Classroom (<http://www.manhattan.wnec.edu> or <http://www.manhattan.sourceforge.net>), which was developed by the Educational Technology Manager at Western New England College. Manhattan uses modules that the instructor chooses to design the course Web site. Examples are assignments, lectures, chat room, student lounge, and discussion boards. This is also accessed using an Internet browser (Manhattan for Distance Learning: User Friendly and Free, Syllabus, pg 45).

## ONLINE DELIVERY COURSES: WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

Julia Jackson, BAH,CST

Program Director, Surgical Technology

Baker College

Flint, Michigan

### **HOW TO GET STARTED ONLINE:**

#### *INSTITUTION/SCHOOL CIS DEPARTMENT:*

The first place to start is your school computer information systems department; find out what is available to you to avoid creating something that is already in place. These are your "go to" people, otherwise known as information technology staff. They understand all the language and technical requirements, if you come across something you don't understand, ask them, it's their job... they actually enjoy this stuff! In addition, it is very helpful to research your school online delivery department, if applicable. Usually, the information, resources, and requirements for online courses are on a school Web site.

#### *VISIT INTERNET SITES:*

Take time to research each area of the site. What I also find helpful is to go to many school Web sites and look into the requirements and set up of programs and pages. Surf the net, just as if you were a student. Go to each of the sites I named or do a search to find more, there are many out there. Try to set up a practice site, my first discussion board was for my family, to keep in touch; it was good practice. I did not have to worry about confusing students while I was learning; it was very basic.

#### *TAKE AN ONLINE COURSE:*

Many online courses are delivered in an accelerated format and are available year round. One of the best experiences I have had learning this technology was taking online courses as part of my degree. Most schools support professional development and some reimburse tuition for these courses. Why not increase your knowledge base in a subject and learn the online delivery format at the same time? Try taking an online course during the summer or your less demanding time of the school year. Some courses last as little as six weeks and are a nice alternative to driving and fighting traffic, especially in the winter. Your school may even offer free classes to faculty- take advantage of it. The keys to an online course are to remain self-motivated and self-disciplined because the burden is on the student to stay on track. It is important to communicate questions to instructors during the course as soon as they come up. Don't put things off until the deadline and stay organized. Does this sound familiar?

#### *CREATE YOUR OWN WEB PAGE:*

As I stated previously, many schools provide faculty with opportunity to create personal Web pages. Contact your CIS department to find out how to set it up, some have mini sessions to train you to create a Web page. Another option is create a personal/family Web page; there are many sites on the Internet that

## ONLINE DELIVERY COURSES: WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

Julia Jackson, BAH,CST  
Program Director, Surgical Technology  
Baker College  
Flint, Michigan

allow you to create your own site. Search within your Internet service provider (AOL, MSN etc) to find out if you have the template already included in your software or program.

## **TYPES OF PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN ONLINE COURSES**

### *STUDENT FOCUSED:*

Lack of technical knowledge and Internet etiquette is a common problem with online delivery; many schools require a short orientation/training session prior to registration for an online course. A problem I find is that I actually run a hybrid course and I do my own student training. An option is to require that each student complete a short training assignment prior to the beginning of class. I post a survey and ask each student to complete it before the first day of class. It gives me an idea of each student's background in healthcare and goals each may have set for themselves. These surveys are on the course site and don't have to be downloaded, they are taken online and the system records and submits them to me; I have the option of printing the results.

Language is another common problem in online courses. Language problems range from poor grammar to certain expletives. It is important to post and inform students of acceptable language without being too restrictive; they have to be able to speak freely. This means if a student feels like venting about a bad day, don't censor it, but do keep defamation type language off the board. I encourage students to vent, but not to use names. Inappropriate language is aggravating to other students as well as the instructor.

Weak participation is more common initially than toward the end of the class. In the first few weeks, some students don't feel they have anything relevant or important to say. I ask questions directed at these students to encourage participation. Give the students time to gain comfort with the environment before sending emails for lack of participation. In addition, I require a minimum number of "quality" discussion board posts each week. A quality post does not consist of " I agree, or yes, you are right". It has to be your own thought or response to someone else's thought. Many are comments on reading or cases during clinical rotation. If students don't post the minimum, there are no points given for participation that week. These points add up too, they can be 10% of the grade for the term.

## ONLINE DELIVERY COURSES: WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

Julia Jackson, BAH,CST

Program Director, Surgical Technology

Baker College

Flint, Michigan

### *INSTRUCTOR FOCUSED:*

Lack of technical knowledge and Internet etiquette is also a problem for instructors. Many of us don't have the experience that our students have with the Internet and computers, in general. Taking a course or training session is the best way to learn the concepts and functions of both software and the Internet. Remember, the more you do it the better you become at it. This can also be a trial and error process; we learn from our mistakes.

Another problem encountered is modifying lectures to the online delivery format. Instead of an outline during lectures, students download the entire lecture and read it. It is important to stick to the facts, most online lectures are shorter than traditional lectures in length, but are posted more often. The learning begins with the actual online assignments. It is important to have the student relate what he or she has read to the assignment or the profession. Students can be assigned a weekly summary to bring it all together. In the case of a hybrid class, the lectures may be given on ground and discussion/assignments take place online. This is my preference for surgical technology education.

One word you will see as an online instructor is "facilitation". We become facilitators or moderators versus instructors as the online portion of the course proceeds. We guide the discussion and direct questions to those that need it. There will always be some students that meet the minimum requirements and some that post numerous messages every day. Much of it depends on the student's comfort zone. I let students answer each other's questions before I answer; this increases confidence and encourages teamwork and support of fellow students. According to Denise Baird, of Franklin College, " This is one way to 'force' students to take . . . more responsibility for their education. When I used the online discussions . . . it showed the students that I think they have great ideas and questions- reinforcing their ability and responsibility in their own learning process" (Hybrids: the best of Both Worlds, Syllabus pg. 44).

Monitoring participation is one of the more time consuming tasks associated with online or hybrid courses. It is important to find a routine that works for you and stay with it. Messages on a discussion board can add up quickly, so it is best to log on and read daily. It can be aggravating to have to sift through hundreds of messages because you have not been online in days. It is important for the students to see your presence in the class, even if it is not in a dominant role; in fact, it should not be dominant- the student discussions should be. It is a good idea to send personal or private reminders regarding language and grades via email. Most boards have the capability to email directly

## ONLINE DELIVERY COURSES: WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?

Julia Jackson, BAH,CST  
Program Director, Surgical Technology  
Baker College  
Flint, Michigan

from the discussion board without leaving and entering your personal email program. In addition, instructors can email the entire class at once from Blackboard or other sites. Another helpful tool is group work and case studies. This can increase participation and make it easier for you to monitor student discussion. Separate discussion boards within the site can be created for each group to complete the assignment, and then the group posts their work on the main class board for all to read and comment upon. This is a great discussion generating project as well as a valuable learning experience.

## CONCLUSION

Online delivery does not have to be intimidating, overwhelming, or horrifying; just like anything else, it takes practice. We encourage our students to hang-in-there in those first few weeks when learning to scrub, gown, and glove...we need to do the same with technology; this is new to most of us as well. I urge you to incorporate the Internet into your surgical technology program on some level. It has proven to be a great supplemental resource for both my students and me.

## References

Johnstone, S. M., (July 2001). "What Should Be Capturing Faculty Attention?"[Online]. Available:  
<http://www.syllabus.com/syllabusmagazine/article.asp?id=4159>

(June2001). "You Know What I'm Saying? Online Discussion Products"  
[Online]. Available: <http://www.syllabus.com/syllabusmagazine/article.asp?id=3697>

(2001, March). From Classroom Space to Cyberspace. Syllabus.14 (8). 42.

(2001, March). Hybrids: The Best of Both Worlds. Syllabus. 14(8). 44.

(2001, March). Manhattan for Distance Learning: User-Friendly and Free.  
Syllabus. 14(8). 45.

[www.baker.edu](http://www.baker.edu) [accessed 7-23-01]