

Report on E-Learning Conference Attended May 8 and 9, 2009

By Frank Dowd

The focus of the conference, hosted by Edison State College's E-Learning Department was on introducing new E-Learning software, particularly assessment tools, and building online learning communities. The latter was the focus of an all-day workshop held on Saturday by consultants Dr. Rena Palloff and Dr. Keith Pratt, from Crossroads Consulting.

Friday afternoon was devoted to presentations of Quality Matters Rubric Standards, Waypoint Outcome Measures, and other E-Learning software. A particular focus was Quality Matters software which allows professors to evaluate their courses on specific measures, include the following:

- Course Overview and Introduction
- Learning Objectives
- Assessment and Measurement
- Learner Engagement
- Course Technology
- Learner Support
- Accessibility

The E-Learning committee, of which I am a member, will be assessing our courses using this software, over the summer. This is a pilot project and eventually all online courses will be assessed using Quality Matters Rubric Standards.

Waypoint Outcome Measures is software that can be added to CE-6. Once it is installed, it allows professors to grade assignments according to general education requirements: critical thinking, written communication skills, etc. It is a way to micro-assess how students are doing and create a portfolio demonstrating the level that students have attained in each skill.

Erich Hochmeister also presented e-learning software which can be used to enhance courses in various ways, including collaborative learning, interactive web pages, voice-over for powerpoint, and anti-plagiarism technology.

Saturday's session was devoted to an interactive presentation on "Building Online Learning Communities" by Dr. Rena Palloff and Dr. Keith Pratt from Crossroads Consulting. The focus was on building virtual learning communities and why this is important. In essence, the instructor becomes the "guide on the side" and not the "sage on the stage." The idea is to teach students how to learn and empower them to take charge of the learning process.

We discussed the importance for the instructor to provide an active sense of presence. Learner-to-learner interaction is how knowledge and meaning are created. We talked about the use of icebreakers in the first week to get everyone introduced to the concept of discussion and collaboration as part of the learning process. Several suggested sites were given for sample icebreakers, including:

Facebook quizzes,
www.webquest.org
Moodle.

Dr. Palloff stressed the need for participation. She requires students to interact with her using Skype. This is somewhat tricky as she also has students in China, so they settled on 3:00 PM Pacific time for conference calls.

Using Bloom's taxonomy we discussed the importance of social presence online, and how it correlates with increased learner satisfaction and greater depth of learning. Discussion and participation are vital to the success of an online course. We were told to assign points to discussion and grade it. It is important to distinguish between questions and assignments. Often questions do not succeed in helping students actively learn.

We talked about assessment and academic honesty in the online learning community. It was stated that it is important to build in a choice of assessments, and even ask students how assessments should be conducted. We discussed the concept of calibrated peer review and aligning the learning objectives with exam questions.

We were given the assignment of posting two items on the Faculty Forum:

what would I like to see someone explain further; and
what is something I learned and would like to share.

Overall, I found the conference to be very stimulating and I learned a lot about how online courses work or do not work well. Palloff and Pratt continually stressed the critical importance of librarians and their research skills to distance learning. Mary Myers and everyone there had a very high regard for what librarians bring to the learning process, so that was gratifying.

My personal observation is that higher education and distance learning, like everything else, is now firmly post modern in design and execution. No longer is the professor the source of all knowledge and students expected only to master a body of knowledge. Now the education process is expected to be collaborative. The role of the professor is to engage learners and through a sense of presence, empower them to take responsibility to learn.

Personally, I feel that I have a long way to go to master the skills demanded for this new online learning process, but I am learning it about as well as any other of our faculty members. One of the great things I took away from the conference was the sense that we don't all have to understand and master everything, but that we can collaborate and locate the resources we need to be successful. It was rewarding to talk to other 60-year-olds who were planning on continuing e-learning classes after retirement as they found the challenge very rewarding.

Books to buy for the collection:

Engaging the Online Learner by Conrad and Donaldson
Building Online Learning Communities, by Pratt and Paloff