Distance Education and Programware: The Benefits of Universal Design for Learning Principles

Teaching courses at a distance has many advantages and disadvantages. We know that many institutions get involved in distance education for all the wrong reasons. For instance, they may be concerned more about market share and less about the quality of education, more about saving money and less about providing unique learning experiences, more about reaching new students and less about creating interactive and dialectic learning environments, and more about bringing in higher numbers and less about systematizing quality retention strategies. Many institutions, in fact, purchase large-scale course management systems like WebCT and Blackboard and squeeze instructors' well-considered praxis into limiting constraints. The result is delivering a watered-down education.

The use of databases and new media tools, however, either through course management systems in order to develop what some are calling “programware,” offer more engaging opportunities for students, teachers, and administrators. With such tools, courses can be delivered in ways that meet individual students’ changing needs. The key to creating success is in post-process approaches to maximizing flexibility. This includes representing information in a variety of formats, providing multiple entry points to content and engagement, and increasing student interest and motivation.

The following panel offers pros and cons to using databases and new media tools on various academic levels in English, and in various projects, as well as pointing out new models for professional development such as the eDaptive facilitator approach, new media module sets, and smart prompts. Schools represented include universities, colleges, and two-year community colleges.

For instance, Texas Tech University started the first online Ph.D. program in Technical Communication and Rhetoric. Collaboration amongst students in the program has led to its success, but the collaboration is multifaceted in ways that most programs do not plan for. Dallas County Community College and Texas Tech University teamed up to develop a hybrid course delivery of composition that includes high-production value videos and user-centered anonymous peer-response through databases, while also providing “smart” content through video and audio podcasting. Texas State Technical College has been moving in the direction of using WebCT to deliver AP courses to local high schools in south Texas. San Antonio College has been using innovative, new media software to develop video-based professional development packages for teachers and students.

What these programs and projects have in common is that they have thought through principles of universal design theory with their students, teachers, and administrators first rather than dictating content through preexisting delivery mechanisms.
Database-driven applications and new media content offer valuable teaching and administrative opportunities such as teaching students audience awareness and how to appeal to the readers’ sense of authority, emotion, and logic given different rhetorical situations.