PROPOSAL:
Virtual Sign Posts: Communicating With Icons in Online Courses

Purpose: The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate the importance, function, and design of icons in online courses.

Background: Distance learning environments are primarily visual. Icons are images that link to areas of the course and represent links and course tools. Research indicates that visual conventions such as color, shape, and clustering can convey meaning and enhance performance. Research also shows that icons can also give the impression that a system is easy to use.

Sources of Icons: Course Management Systems provide icons sets, which are easier for faculty to use because they are built into the courseware. Some schools even set standards for icon use in courses. While this practice creates familiarity and consistency for students, it restricts faculty freedom to design course interfaces. Faculty at schools without such policies can modify their courses to fit the atmosphere they want to create. They can create their own icons or obtain graphics (animations and gifs) from a number of sources fairly easily.

Icon Function and Design: Some faculty who use systems such as WebCT and BlackBoard argue that student learning is more important than aesthetics. Others argue that course appearance is a key factor to consider when designing a course. Most important, icons can organize the learning environment by providing a graphical representation of topics and the sequence in which students should view them. Icons can also help students find and access information, identify types of information and tools, emphasize/attract attention, convey a tone/personality, and provide visual appeal. The color, look, positioning, grouping, “layering,” and labeling of icons is important. In addition, effective icons are simple, distinct, consistent, and attractive.

Samples: Attendees will view samples of screens from online courses that provide models of ineffective and effective icon design.