

William Roberts
OMDE 608
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Individual Response to Case Study

Introduction (Executive Summary)

The project under consideration concerns the Arts History program at the University of Maryland University College (see Appendix B). The Program Chair wishes to consolidate the activities of the course offerings in order to reduce attrition, increase student morale, and advance the institution's image as a modern, global, educational leader. The Program currently offers seven courses in Arts History, all of which are offered entirely either online, or face-to-face with some online support. The students are enrolled either in the United States or Europe and the courses are administered from either the University of Maryland University College (for the US students) or from Oldenburg University (for the European students). The fact that the program is 'split' across two continents has created a feeling that the students are not obtaining standardized content, an issue that the Program Chair wishes to rectify. Additionally, the students have complained that they feel isolated in their course work and distant from other students in the program. There has been a noticeable decrease of student interest in the Program over the past several years. The Program Chair would like to stem attrition and increase student enrollment. Finally, the institution would like to demonstrate its ability to capitalize on new technology, provided it offers educationally sound viability. The aim of this individual response is to offer a remedy for the student and Program issues while maintaining the international image of the institution.

Overall goals of the proposed support system

The goals of this study encompass the needs of three constituents: the Art Program, the

student, and the institution. The Art Program wishes to improve the consistency of the classes that are offered in the U.S. and in Europe. The institution has invested heavily in marketing their international image and they are looking for more ways to integrate the activities of the U.S. and European classes. The students in both U.S. and Europe are technically savvy but have complained that the art courses seem to be out of touch with today's world. Both European students and American students have also expressed a desire to feel as if they are more connected with their U.S. counterparts. The students feel isolated from a social connection not only with their peers, but also with instructors and the institution.

The proposed project seeks

- to allay the students' concerns by increasing opportunities for student to student, student to instructor, and student to institution interaction;
- expand the international institutional image;
- unify the dissimilar nature of the Art Program with an ultimate goal of abating attrition.

Elements of the system now and possibly those for the future/priorities

The current technical system, a proprietary learning management system called WebTycho allows for interaction, primarily text, between students and instructors. There is only limited opportunity for synchronous interaction. Instructor feedback is also primarily text based. The instructors do a good job of responding to students within 48 hours but the lack of visual and audible contact creates a sterile environment which lacks the warmth that art students especially value. Student services such as counseling, financial aid, and advising are made available through a student portal on My UMUC. While some students have the advantage of accessing these services in person, such is not the case for a majority of students. Again the text based contact is adequate for content dimension of communication but inadequate for the relationship

dimension. As Ryan points out “today’s optimal learning environment relies on increasingly specialized learning support staff.” (127) Therefore, the current project must include provisions for students to feel connected to institutional support services.

How to achieve the goals and objectives within the existing resources of the case study

The issues in this case stem from a widely split venue for the program offerings. Therefore, the proposal relies on the unifying advantages technology offers. The suggested solution is to increase the online presence of the program in order to take advantage of the synchronous and asynchronous strengths which are already present at the institutional level. To accomplish this, the IT department will create a presence in the form of a virtual campus in the online world of Second Life. The project will offer a dual focus on the course interaction between students and instructors, and on providing the student with greater student services interaction.

Hundreds of educational institutions worldwide have already created campuses, classrooms and educational opportunities in Second Life, so a presence by UMUC would be in keeping with already established educational endeavors. Second Life offers ample opportunities for students to engage in socialization in real time. Wang and Hsu have observed that “. . . interactions between avatars give SL great potential to strengthen online learners’ sense of community.” (77) Students can interact via text chat or by voice chat. The interaction is in the form of avatars which are created by the students, each can be visually distinctive and can encompass personality traits that render each avatar unique. The institution also will have an opportunity to keep in constant contact with the students to offer such services as financial aid, registration, counseling, tutoring, and other services. Brindley notes that it is important for institutions to ‘assess learner needs within the context of the mission of the institution.’ (Brindley, 1995, p. 27) For the institution, the virtual experience offers a rich visual component and an opportunity for each

student to co-construct a virtual world that is not available in the strictly text based environment of My UMUC. The connection between student and institutional services should be strengthened in this environment.

By creating a virtual campus on Second Life, students can meet in the form of their own avatars and interact socially and academically. Within the virtual campus, classrooms will be created for professors, who also will be represented as avatars, to meet with the students at predetermined times. Interaction will be accomplished via text and voice chat. Classes can visit virtual art locations which have been previously established online. Second Life already offers, the Sistine Chapel, the Dresden Art Gallery, MOMA, and various art collections. (See Appendix A for some examples). These locations offer excellent representations, not only of the art, but of the venue presenting the art. Therefore a student can get a better feel for the painting and its actual surroundings. The students will feel a greater sense of connection since they will experience art along with groups of fellow students, all in avatar form. This virtual presence of classmates helps to build the level of interaction and camaraderie that has been missing in the strictly text oriented world of WebTycho.

How to organize and staff the services

The support staff for this project, housed at the Maryland campus, will consist of one full time employee from the IT Department who will design and implement the Second Life virtual campus. The design and development stage should take 6-9 months. Once the Second Life campus is built, a part time employee can be used to maintain the sim (campus simulation) and to act as a resource person to assist the subject matter experts (professors) and support personnel. Students will be able to contact financial aid, counselors, librarians, book store, career planners, tutors, and any other student support category through the Second Life campus directory. An

example of a directory from the Northern Virginia Community College campus is shown in Appendix A, Item 4. Training will need to be provided to individuals from these student services to show them how to interact with students in the Second Life environment. Also a training module will be developed to assist students who are not as technically savvy to teach them how to create their Second Life avatar and to negotiate the Second Life environment. The advice of Wang and Hsu is useful while designing this project, “avoid throwing’ learners into the SL environment without first giving them specific instructions.” (81) Finally, the project will follow the advice of Wang and Braman to initiate a pilot trial before actually opening the virtual campus to full course operation. (Wang & Braman, 2009, pp. 237-239) The rationale for using Second Life is supported further by Wang & Braman:

Those researching on Second Life out performed most other teams of students not only through the volume of written material produced, but more importantly through its quality in terms of the amount of background research conducted on the topic by the group. Students working on a Second Life related topic received 90% or above, which was on average higher than the majority of other project grades. (239)

Sufficient research like those cited above, have legitimized the motivation to utilize Second Life as the basis for this project.

Evaluating the practice

Evaluation must include feedback from students, professors, and support personnel. First it must be determined if the service has been delivered in such a way that it can be accessed by the constituents. Complaints from any of the parties using the Second Life campus might indicate issues of browser incompatibility, or difficulty accessing and/or maneuvering in the

virtual environment. As Thorpe points out it is important to determine that the learner support system has been delivered. (Thorpe, 2004, p. 252) Second, did the Second Life campus help to create a sense of community among the students *and* professors? This can be determined by a post-course questionnaire and survey. Third, has the project mitigated attrition? Answering this question will take longer to determine than one course period. However, observing subsequent enrollments could indicate that the project has either been successful or not. It is important to note here, that the attrition rate could be unrelated to the online virtual campus. Finally, have the institutional student support services reported access activity through the Second Life campus? It must be assumed that an increase in student contact means that students are accepting of the virtual world as a delivery method to contact the university.

Rationale for the choices

At the heart of the problem is a desire by the students to increase the cohesiveness of interaction within the Arts Program. Ryan cites Laurillard identifying “. . . ‘dialogue’ as the core mechanism of student learning.” (Ryan, 2004, p. 127) A strong dialogic interaction is a cornerstone of constructivist learning. The ability to share knowledge and co-create experiences has been a challenge in many online delivery systems. The realism and immediacy which characterize Second Life seem appropriate to fulfilling the goals of this project. Warburton says, “a virtual world provides an experience set within a technological environment that gives the user a strong sense of being there.” (Warburton, 2009, p. 415) Creating a sense of community is an important educational concept that is a strength of virtual worlds. The social learning described by Brown and Adler attests the value of a learning community, “. . . social learning is based on the premise that our understanding of content is socially constructed through

conversations about that content and through grounded interactions. . .” (3) UMUC may well be allured to virtual world learning to emphasize their cutting edge continental image.

Whereas traditional schools offer a finite number of courses of study, the ‘catalogue’ of subjects that can be learned online is almost unlimited . . . for any topic that a student is passionate about, there is likely to be an online niche community of practice of others who share that passion. (Brown & Adler, 2008, p. 12)

By manipulating the learning setting the use of Second Life applies to all of Perkins’ five facets of the learning environment. (Perkins, 1992, p. 46) While all five elements, information banks, symbol pads, construction kits, phenomenaria, and task managers, fit nicely within the virtual framework, the concept of phenomenaria offers the most enlightenment. Whereas classrooms may be viewed as microcosms, the virtual world allows students to experiment and experience phenomenon in a more realistic macrocosmic milieu. The rationale to use Second Life as a tool for delivery of multiple student services and course work takes advantage of its strengths and offers a cost effective opportunity to address the problems of the Arts Program.

Conclusion (200)

The IT Department has been charged with addressing issues of content, student support services, institutional marketing, and teaching strategies. The proposed answer is to provide a new channel for communicating these issues via Second Life. Other universities have experienced positive educational results by incorporating Second Life as noted by Wang & Braman, “. . . the involvement of Second Life activities in the classroom does result in a positive learning experience in educational setting [*sic*].” (243) The presence of the University’s campus in a public virtual world also entices potential students who happen upon the campus online and become interested enough to enroll; therefore the Second Life campus serves a marketing

function for the University. Using virtual technology to address the challenge proposed by this case study may pave the way for increased use of the virtual campus by other professors and may become a beneficial delivery system for the institution's student services. If successful, the project will be a positive marketing tool for the university, an exciting pedagogical vehicle for the faculty and a rewarding educational experience for the students.

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APPENDIX A



1. The Prodigal Son c. 1640 by Jacob Jordaens (1593 - 1678) from the Dresden Gallery in Second Life



2. View of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel recreated on the campus of Vassar College in Second Life



3. Paintings available for sale from For Art's Sake Art Gallery in Second Life



4. Student Support Services at Northern Virginia Community College in Second Life

APPENDIX B

The following is the background for a case study of the Art Department at the University of Maryland University College

1• what is the larger context and what factors in that context are relevant (e.g. what country, type of funding for education, political system, competition from other educational providers--this can be cursory but should be addressed)

The subject of the case study is the Art History minors program within the University System of Maryland in the U.S.A. The program as part of the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) received approximately 8.5 % of its total budget from the state's general funds in FY 2009, with the vast remainder derived from tuition fees (UMUC 2009 Budget Analysis, 2009). In a comparison within the same state system, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, received about 25% from state funds (UMB Budget Testimony, 2011). It is therefore in a superior position to ride through state-level deficit cycles. Also as a result of the economic turndown, many adults are returning to school to improve their chances in the job market. The program's students, due to mission of the University consists of a high percentage of non-traditional and minority students. The student body also contains a large contingent of U.S. military personnel, serving across the globe, making the program's student pool diverse and highly dispersed.

2• who is the educational provider (e.g. what type of university, college, school, corporation with in-house training)

The Art History minor program is part of the School of Undergraduate Studies at UMUC. As such, it consists of seven courses that cover aspects of art throughout the ages and through historic examination of specific fields, such as cinema and painting. An example would be

ARTH 380: Masterpieces of Painting, an online course, which is described as an “Analysis of selected masterworks of painting, intended to reveal the creative process, the personality of the artist, and the cultural context.” (UMUC Schedule of Classes, 2010). As part of UMUC, the program is regionally accredited through the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

3• what are the characteristics of the provider (e.g. size, location, age, culture, pedagogical stance/educational philosophy, type of courses and/or programs offered, numbers of students, geographical spread, organizational structure, current teaching model and support services)

The program consists of classes ranging in size from 5 to 25 students, that are either strictly face-to-face, or strictly online. Therefore, the support for various classes within the program varies to a degree. The online courses in the program take advantage of an array of support options supplied to all UMUC online classes via its LMS, WebTycho, as well as through a student portal website, My UMUC.

WebTycho is the gateway to several levels of support ranging from access to the instructor and assistants, typically via conference threads, course content, syllabus, private chat area and email. Others means may occasionally be utilized on an ad hoc basis, including the use of third party chat and conference software, etc. Another type of support available within WebTycho is the Library Services section, which offers 24/7 accessibility to databases, tutorials on APA, etc. The student portal offers additional types of support, including the technical support center, UMUC 360 Support, academic calendar, student academic and financial records, etc.

The face-to-face students enjoy the same support offered to online students via the same access to the student portal, as well as live access to their instructors and assistants, who are available for in-person office hours.

4• what kinds of resources are available (e.g. staffing, technologies, partnerships, general budget

situation)

The program is suitably staffed with instructors to handle both geographic locations. The US part of the program is handled by UMUC while the European part of the program is handled by Oldenberg University in Germany with whom UMUC partners many of its undergraduate and graduate programs. While the general budget is not an issue, if the program drops below a financially viable threshold then it would be either cut back or eliminated. UMUC has access to a proprietary LMS that they use for their online classes. There is a good support staff in place to handle technical issues for the students and faculty as the needs arise. The school also offers a strong library and research facility that is accessible for students in both regions.

5• who are the learners (e.g. characteristics, behaviour, needs)

The US based Art courses attract students from a wide age and geographic range, however, the upper age range has not gone past about 50 and tends to attract a younger demographic. The European based courses attract students from a more diverse cultural background and more homogenous age demographic; overall both US and European classes are about equal men to women. Students typically come to the program with some talent and or previous experience in producing art in some form.

6• what are the desired learning outcomes (e.g. content expertise, specific skills mastery, learning skills)

The Program Chair has said that he would like the students to experience similar artistic encounters even though they are geographically separated. The students should be able to describe artistic styles of composition, and brush techniques; they should be able to distinguish characteristics of art from different periods. Not all students are required to master the skill of art depending on the track that they take within the program, however all students are expected to

become skilled observers.

7) What are the major challenges (e.g. limited resources, isolated students with limited access to technology, need for staff development, competition from other providers, high drop-out rates, low learner satisfaction).

When students have not achieved success in the program, challenges such as the isolation of students with limited access to technology, need for staff development, high dropout rates and poor learner satisfaction may be the reason. Challenges for the implementation of such a program would begin with the need for buy-in from key top management. Program directors, as well as faculty members will have to participate in the pilot in order to proceed. Support setbacks should be identified. These setbacks should be talked about in ways that are applicable to the student. The amount and support for faculty and students need are to be assessed and planned for and then delivered. Issues of content ownership, security, and technical requirements need to be explored. Policy issues and assessment strategies need to be present to achieve the appropriate outcomes. This requires a comprehensive account of ways to receive the necessary support. The ability to plan a thoughtful response to these challenges will dictate the future quality of distance education.

8) What are the major opportunities (e.g. student demand, unique programs, partnerships with other providers or business sector)

The University of Maryland University College and other higher education institutions share resources to pursue common goals in areas of online service support provision as well as in offering distance education courses and programs. A perennial issue for online DE has related to the expressed need from students to feel more socially connected to their fellow students and faculty within the class. If class members are not able for whatever reason to meet physically,

distance education support technologies can offer one of the richest environments in which to meet and collaborate in a virtual and indirect manner. These technological applications will be part of the unbridgeable gap between the values of distance education institution enterprises when it comes to providing and supporting distance education. The breakdown of physical barriers also allows for the potential for explorations and interactions that go beyond the boundaries of any individual class and institution.

Concluding problem:

Since the University wishes to maintain its international posture while providing the individual contact for which the school is well known, the program chair of the Art Department has asked us to offer some suggestions that will help create a more unified feeling within the program. The challenge will be to design support services that are unique enough to accommodate students who come from two different continents while creating a sense of oneness with the greater institution.

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