

Find Out before You Start

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Some guidance on making your way through the sometimes confusing process of integrating online and media resources into your teaching and scholarship

Before you begin your work, be sure you know the answers to the questions I have posed here. Although you may begin with much enthusiasm, if you don't know what to expect when you are actually depending on these tools in your teaching and what to be careful of, you will become disillusioned quickly. Of course, the most frequent problem is that you will find yourself extended beyond your abilities and your patience.

Technical Support

Your department chair or dean might be able to point you in the right direction with respect to technical support. You might also ask your faculty development office, your library, or your teaching center. It is important to remember that you will need many kinds of support—not all of it will be technical.

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

- What course delivery options are available?
 - Must your students pay more for taking a course in a learning management system?
 - Is enrollment in courses in a learning management system handled differently in any way?
 - Is training in using the learning management system available?
 - Whom do you call when you are in trouble, confused, or just plain lost?
 - Is technical support available when you are away from campus or when you need help on the weekend or on holidays?
 - Must a faculty member know HTML to create online materials in the learning management system?
 - Does your department or school or institution provide server space for your efforts?
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Rewards

- Will the server space be adequate?
- Does the server administrator make backups of your materials?

PORTALS

- Is a portal system available to your students so that you can provide them campus, program, and department information?
- Can faculty ask that information be pushed to students through the portal?
- Who controls portal content?
- Does the portal contain links to the library?

COMMUNICATIONS

- Do faculty have an easy tool to create a homepage with telephone number, office hours, office location, and so on?
- Is it clear to students and those on campus where faculty and department homepages can be found?
- Do all departments and programs have easy-to-find homepages that provide basic contact information?

MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

- Are student technology assistants available?
- Does your campus have a media production center?
- If your campus has a media-production center, must you pay for their work? (Ask at the media-production center, but don't depend upon getting a terribly clear answer.)
- If you use such a production center, must you work in the center to assist course-material developers?
- Will you be required to build your own media content?
- Can you scan images at the media center?
- Can you create graphics?
- Do you know how to optimize your materials for appropriate and accessible web presentation?
- Does the media center provide guidance on ADA compliance?
- Do you want to use audio or video materials? If you do, who will help you create, edit, and prepare these materials for appropriate dissemination?
- Does your institution provide database capabilities for instruction?
- If it does, will you be able to find help in building and delivering database materials for your students?

Rewards

For quite a while, administrators seemed very enthusiastic about enhancing their programs and their campuses with digital resources. Since the return on this investment has not really been as grand as many had hoped, supports for new programs, for enhancements, for experiments in teaching are not as plentiful as they were formerly. These projects are expensive, so be sure that you are provided for before you launch something that you may find yourself unable to finish or continue.

Restrictions

MATERIAL

- Is money available on campus to support your work? (Your department chair or dean might be able to answer this question, or you may ask at the provost's office.)
- If you begin a project with a good deal of enthusiastic institutional support, can you count on that support for a period of time?
- Because most online or enhanced courses require a good deal more effort than traditionally taught courses, can you expect a student assistant?

ACADEMIC

- Is your work counted favorably in RPT decisions? If you are an untenured faculty member, be clear on this. The work you are considering is very time consuming. (You should ask your department chair and your dean.)
- Are non-tenure-track faculty members afforded the same privileges and rewards with respect to technological innovation as regular faculty?
- Are opportunities available for off-campus faculty training and attendance at conferences where educational technology is discussed?
- Are venues available on campus for you to share your work with others, to show your colleagues and students what you have accomplished?

Restrictions

MATERIAL

- Does your institution provide you the hardware and software you will need for course development?
- Who will maintain the currency of your course materials? (This include checking links, making sure that links to plugins are appropriate, and so on.)
- Will you be able to work from home on the system you have with the connectivity available to you?

ACADEMIC

- Does your Academic Senate have guidelines or restrictions about what materials you may place online, how much material you may place online, and how much in-class time you may replace with online work? (Ask your Academic Senate representative.)
- Do you own your materials once you put them online?
- Who retains the copyright to materials you create? (Ask your dean.)
- If the question of ownership arises, if you have used something you should not have used, if someone else uses your materials, does your institution provide legal guidance or representation to deal with the problems?
- Who is responsible if your materials are found not to be in compliance with ADA standards?
- Can someone else use your course materials?
- Can your materials be censored?
- What if other faculty object to your materials?
- What if you object to the materials of other faculty members?

Your Students

SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

- What support is available for your students in using your online course materials?
- If students are at a distance, how do they get support—phone, mail, email?
- Is student support available 24 hours a day, seven days a week?
- Are on-campus workshops available for students?
- Are independently produced CBT or online workshops available for students?
- Are these materials and workshops reviewed by faculty?
- Are these materials produced by faculty?
- Do these materials confer academic credit?

STUDENT READINESS

- How prepared are your students to use the learning management system your institution has selected?
- How literate are your students with respect to the information in their field?
- Do your students understand copyright issues?
- Will you have to include information on copyright and intellectual property in your classes?
- Do your students have some understanding of appropriate online behavior (“Netiquette”)?

ACCESSIBILITY

- Will some of your students face special challenges accessing course materials?
- Have you considered ADA compliance in putting together your course materials?
- Does your institution provide ADA advisors to help you with your course materials?
- Do students with disabilities have access to adaptive hardware and software?
- Do you know where this hardware and software is so that you can provide them this information?

Your Physical Plant

Don’t imagine that the physical, operational aspects of using technology in the classroom are minor. For so long, most of us have just walked to class, have found the chairs and the chalkboard ready, and have begun to teach. The so-called smart classroom introduces a whole new area of concerns as we enter its purportedly wise and friendly confines:

SMART CLASSROOMS

- If you build materials which you will use in class, will you have guaranteed access to an equipped, smart classroom?
- Will you have to bring your own computer to that classroom?
- Do you know how to use that classroom?
- Do you know where the light switches, the sound controls, the on and off buttons are in the smart classroom?

Pedagogical Issues

- Do you know how to open and close the curtains?
- How difficult is it to use that classroom?
- Do you have to crawl around on the floor to set up or to troubleshoot?
- Can you see both your presentation screen and your students in your smart classroom?
- Do you have to dim the lights to present materials?
- Will you have time to set up your classroom in the brief break between classes?

CLASSROOM HELP

- Will someone assist in setting up your classroom?
- Is a technical support person present at all times to ensure that assistance is available?
- If not, is there a telephone with an easily identifiable telephone number so that you can contact help?
- Who will set up for you if the classroom is not equipped?
- What if you have problems or the system fails; whom do you call?

Pedagogical Issues

Many of us take our teaching for granted, and many of us have never really studied teaching itself as a subject. Despite these two conditions, in higher education we seem to have done a pretty good job with the variety of approaches we have adopted: lecture, discussion, lab, practicum, tutorial, and so on. But when we begin to use online and digital enhancements, when we teach a course wholly or even partly online, and when we request that our students make use of new media, our pedagogical approach is problematized. What we may have taken for granted is now not quite so self evident, so matter of fact, so clearly defined.

TEACHING WITH TECHNOLOGY

- Does your institution provide any workshops or courses in teaching with technology?
- Do you have an online or onground group of instructors with whom you can share experience, goals, failures?
- Does your institution provide speakers on various topics concerning not simply hardware, tools, and new products but the large and fine points of actually teaching with technology?
- Can you observe the classes of those on campus teaching with technology? (Models are really important.)
- Do you have access to the online materials of those teaching with technology?
- Does your institution have any standards concerning best practices, student conduct, faculty responsibility in online and enhanced courses?

WORKING WITH STUDENTS

- Have you provided sufficient means for students to contact you?
- Have you accommodated your teaching approaches to different learning styles and different levels and kinds of accessibility?

Pedagogical Issues

- Have you built assignments which will introduce students humanely to the tools they are learning to use?
- Have you allowed for the fact that many students will need not simply instruction in the content of your class but also instruction in the basics of information literacy and computer competence? I *know* that many of you are saying, “Yes, we have a course that covers that.” That doesn’t matter. Students need to hear this information again and again, so build practice with these skills into the assignments you create for your classes.