

Can you really teach courses online?

Tips and techniques for leading instructional courses via the Internet

It used to be that teaching a class meant standing in front of your students, lecturing from your handwritten notes while scribbling on a blackboard. Although that is still the preferred method of many educators, the benefits of teaching a course online are catching on. The *Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing* states that "advances in information technology literacy and the abundance of personal computers has placed E-learning in increased demand."

"Online learning provides a high level of education on many topics," says **Pamela Jeffries, DNS, RN, FAAN**, associate professor at the Indiana University School of Nursing in Indianapolis, who began teaching online courses about six years ago. "We can provide what the students need. I love the versatility and accessibility."

Jeffries' colleague and mentor, **Diane M. Billings, EdD, RN, FAAN**, agrees. Also a professor at the Indiana University School of Nursing, she has seen firsthand how online tools can promote learning.

"Educators must understand the fact that their teacher power is extended, as they can reach many more people who can devote more attention to the course," says Billings. "Instead of being pulled from the unit and thinking about their patients, now [nurses] can focus."

Utilizing the Web: What are my choices?

There are different models that can be used for online learning, says Jeffries. One model is a full Web-based course, in which the instructor never has face-to-face contact with his or her students.

Another model is a partial, or Web-enhanced, course, in which there is still face-to-face interaction in the classroom, but students are referred to the Web for assignments.

When developing an online course, instructors can also decide whether to use a synchronous or asynchronous style, says Jeffries. A synchronous course requires the students to be online for instruction at a set time (e.g., Wednesdays from 6 p.m.-9 p.m.). A course that is asynchronous leaves its course materials on the Web at all times for the students to complete at their convenience. Billings says she believes in having an asynchronous course, because it is more adaptable to students' schedules.

"People can do it on their own time, so if someone has to go take care of some family problems, he or she is able to kick back into the course," she says. "The flexibility wouldn't have been there otherwise."

The online advantage

One of the biggest perks of Web-based courses, says Jeffries, is the flexibility they provide for both the teacher and student. Not only can the material be accessed at any hour, but the teacher and student are not required to be in the same place at

the same time. There are also economic and cost-saving benefits to an online model, says Billings.

"While it's an initial investment, over the long run, many more people can be educated, and the competency tracking tends to occur," she says.

The bottom line, says Jeffries, is to make sure the course engages the student and provides interaction.

The rich resources of the Internet can result in another important benefit to E-learning-it's fun. "I enjoy it, and I think the participants do, too," says Billings.

Virtual walls to break down

Some educators may be wary of teaching online because of the lack of customary face-to-face interaction. They may feel that students will not retain as much knowledge as they would in a traditional classroom environment. However, a recent study in the *Journal of Environmental Education* compared traditional and Web-based versions of an education program, focusing on their effectiveness in raising knowledge. The students "who received computer-assisted instruction significantly outscored their peers who were taught traditionally in posttest knowledge scores."

The lack of a face-to-face meeting may also have educators thinking that the students might become inattentive to classwork without their knowledge. But there are ways to keep tabs on a student's attendance.

"I can tell if they're on it for five hours or five minutes," says Jeffries. "I know what times they come in, when they were last on . . . Course software has that feature."

More than anything, online learning provides educational mobility and career advancement, says Jeffries.

"Without the online platform, those two pieces would be hindered," she says. "The bottom line is that there's going to be better, improved patient care and more evidence-based practice," says Billings. "It's powerful and it's a shift that needs to be made. The tools are in demand just in time."

References:

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