Expanding Course Offerings, Attracting More Students

Traditional distance learning can be dull and predictable: A student staring at a computer screen, trying to absorb the course content from page after page of reading, with feedback from a faceless instructor. But with today’s blended learning models and lecture capture technology, it’s possible to transform distance learning courses into an extension of the campus classroom and deliver a rich experience to students regardless of location. Education also becomes more extensible, reaching students when and how they want it — in the classroom as well as on laptops, tablets and smartphones.

This transformation comes just in time to help higher education address its core challenge of serving more students with fewer resources. Using technology to expand distance learning programs helps institutions maintain education quality, without increasing the burden on instructors or requirements for new facilities. Online courses also give faculty and departments flexibility to adapt course and program curricula to reflect the dynamic changes in subject matter, student learning styles and employer expectations.

Today it’s clear that higher education cannot meet student needs through classroom-based instruction alone. Many colleges and universities seek simple, cost-effective ways to:
• Begin or expand distance learning programs to stay competitive and capture more tuition revenue
• Serve changing student needs and demographics
• Help faculty deliver online courses that are relevant, current and engaging
• Enroll more students within the limits of existing classroom space

But how can an institution avoid creating distance learning courses that become the neglected stepchildren of on-campus programs? The answer lies in using blended learning technology to blur the lines between in-class and distance for both the instructor’s delivery and the student’s participation.

A blended learning model, with lecture capture technology at its core, can help institutions provide high-quality distance learning courses quickly and affordably. Blended learning courses meet the needs of both distance and local students, as well as institutional strategies for delivering high-quality academics, even as budgets decline and competition offers students more, faster and often lower-cost options for meeting their education goals. In a recent survey of students, 84 percent of respondents stated that the ability to study both online and in class improves their understanding of course concepts.1

“Our online classes are serving more adult learners who often find it difficult to schedule classes around one or two jobs,” says Claire Stuve, educational technologist at the University of Toledo in Ohio. “But lecture capture eases students’ fears about being too much on their own in an online class.”2

“Traditional Distance Learning and Today’s Blended Learning: Understanding the Differences

Delivering courses to distance students has come a long way from the traditional technologies used, including videoconferencing and information, podcasts and videos uploaded to static websites. Yet the blended learning model builds upon and enhances current delivery methods, content and technologies for distance learning. This model helps educational institutions make more courses available to more students in more ways, in an economical approach that matches the realities of budgets and program organization.

Course delivery methods. A blended learning course can encompass live or recorded lectures to support traditional online-only learning and virtual study groups. It also can be delivered in a flipped model that mixes classroom and online instruction with individual work (online or offline) and virtual study groups.

Course content. Much, if not all, content that is currently delivered in distance learning courses is suitable for blended learning. But some classes may not be suitable, such as those involving in-class activities and discussion for learning instead of information transfer through a lecture. For courses such as these, a technology which includes participation tools would be necessary. Additionally, some courses may not be appropriate for lecture capture because of the nature of the content, or for privacy or cultural reasons.3

Technologies. To remain competitive in the expanding marketplace for distance learning, an institution needs an internal, enterprise-wide solution for course capture and management.4 Look for a solution that:
• Minimizes demand on instructors and the IT department for ongoing operation, maintenance and user support of the lecture capture system as well as related tools for publishing and course management
• Enables scalability and integration with content management systems to easily accommodate more students, content and courses
• Provides simple, PC-based personal recording tools for instructors to create short videos and podcasts that integrate with other online content for the course
• Allows the institution to apply its branding to content and interfaces and allows students to personalize course content for their needs

[A lot of students take our online classes when they go home for the summer. This lets them stay within their familiar University of Toledo program instead of taking an unfamiliar class at a college that is closer.]

CLAIRE STUVE, EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGIST, UNIVERSITY OF TOLEDO
Blended Learning Advantages for Delivering Distance Courses

Together, the blended learning model and lecture capture solutions offer notable benefits for higher education institutions that want to solve the conundrum of “so many students, so little space.”

Serve more students and reach new markets. Blended learning courses can alleviate “bottleneck” courses — those required for graduation, where enrollment demand exceeds available seats. Students who experience delays in accessing these courses may not graduate on time, which may prompt them to change schools or simply drop out.

With distance courses, an institution’s market can also expand to cover the world, as well as to serve students with special needs or those who may not be able to attend on-campus classes. Distance courses can also capture more tuition fees from current students. “A lot of students take our online classes when they go home for the summer,” says Stuve. “This lets them stay within their familiar University of Toledo program instead of taking an unfamiliar class at a college that is closer.” At the University of Toledo, it is possible for students to complete all courses online in certain programs.

Instructor benefits. Recorded lectures and learning modules can be a tremendous time-saver for faculty even if they don’t have a distance learning course. By requiring students to watch a recorded lecture before class, an instructor can focus on discussions and interactive learning activities during the session. A lecture recording that is stored in the content management system can be better and more easily integrated with other content than is possible with videos that are simply uploaded to popular online sites. And with the ability to reuse content, instructors can easily update and improve a course for a new term.

Student benefits. Compared to traditional online-only distance courses, the benefits to students (and their institutions) include:

- Increased achievement, satisfaction, retention and likelihood of on-time graduation
- The ability to view a lecture as it was presented in the classroom and use it to prepare for exams, lab sessions and other learning activities
- Easier integration of distance students with their cohort in comparison to viewing standalone podcasts, Web videos and online documents
- The ability to make learning more social through participation in virtual study groups organized for each online course

The Proof is in the Test Results

Do all of these new technologies and new ways of learning really make a difference where it counts — in student test scores? Initial studies indicate that the answer to this question is “Yes.” Researchers in a study conducted by the University of Texas at Austin found, “For all of the courses, students who viewed the pre-recorded lecture and participated in the class activity did better on the post-test compared to students who did not view the lecture capture but participated in the class activity.”

Another study, conducted by the University of Sussex, determined that recorded lectures and other content improved test performance for some students.

Expanding Distance Learning Offerings at the University of Toledo

A strong online initiative at the University of Toledo in Ohio has produced a new distance learning department and 400 new online courses in the 2011-2012 academic year alone. Each faculty member is now required to teach at least one course online.

Lectures recorded with capture technology are a core element of the online courses. The University has installed lecture capture units in varied classroom types and has licensed personal capture technology that allows instructors to record short videos that supplement the classroom presentations.

The expansion of online courses with recorded lectures has been well received by faculty and students. Faculty like the lecture capture technology because it does not involve equipment setup or file uploads. They also report not seeing as many students during office hours or receiving as many emails with basic questions.
More than one million students in 6,000 classrooms at 500 institutions across 30 countries rely on Echo360 technology to enhance their educational experience. Echo360 digitally records and shares instructional content live and on demand, allowing institutions to reach more students while lowering costs. Through Echo360, students engage with their peers through collaborative tools and review information from instructors online, at their convenience and across various devices. The company has been recognized with a Product Line Strategy of the Year Award from Frost & Sullivan, is CSIA-certified for outstanding customer service, and was named a Visionary Vendor in Educational Technology by IT research firm Basex. For more information, visit www.echo360.com.