Online Higher Education in The Business Under Pandemic and Emergent Conditions

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Abstract

This study aims to examine how faculty members can utilize IT-based group assignment functions in higher education under online, hybrid, and conventional educational settings. For this purpose, the author reviews the related articles and discusses proper pedagogical techniques and practices. Based on such considerations, suggestions on how to utilize the group assignment box in the Desire to Learn (D2L) online educational platform for students in the conventional classroom, online, and hybrid classes are offered. Students, faculty members, and practitioners in the business and other disciplines are expected to derive implications on how to manage flexible online educational modules for those dealing with unexpected changes and issues.

Keywords: Pandemic, online, asynchronous, synchronous, higher education, business education

1. Introduction

Since 2020, the online transformation of education in response to the global pandemic has been widely observed in various countries (e.g., Holton & Sandle, 2020). Since there has been growing interest in virtual pedagogical techniques in higher education settings (e.g., Moloney & Oakley, 2010; Paudel, 2021), this study thus focuses on how to manage asynchronous online education with finite resources under various contexts. Given the dynamic and turbulent situation with the current pandemic, there is also a need to examine ways to manage online education modules to ensure a high level of durability. For instance, it is expected that certain students can hardly prepare their IT equipment for online access due to the pandemic-induced quarantine.

The issues resulting from current situation can also influence the type and practice of online education. Unlike normal times, there will be certain urgent priorities for individuals in emergencies. If they can utilize a minimal level of internet access and other support, it would still be possible for them to continue their education despite unexpected environmental changes. However, it is probable that both students and faculty members can have no online access for a while during heavy blizzards. Hence, there is a need to take into account such problems and influences on students when designing and managing online higher education modules these days.

Given the recent situation like the pandemic (e.g., Abel, 2020), some online education practices can be applied to help individuals to continue their studies. To allow for the flexible communication in virtual education, conventional methods like online discussion boards can be used. Students may be asked to share ideas or opinions on the online discussion board in an education module during a certain period of time. Moreover, they can also share audio or video files, or written narration to present and communicate their ideas more effectively. Learners can thus utilize various possibilities within online discussions.

Therefore, it is expected that academia provides various options like these for those acting quarantine or lockdowns. For this purpose, this article focuses on the ways of virtual teaching based on different educational tools and contexts. After reviewing and discussing the related literature and practices, the author then introduces how to manage online higher education modules with group projects and idea sharing based on the Desire to Learn (D2L) platform. Faculty members or students interested in this option may benefit from a broader understanding of how to continue their studies under resource constraints and/or in emergencies.

2. Background and Pedagogical Responses

There has been growing interest in how to manage online education to help students in the higher education settings (e.g., Grandzol & Grandzol, 2006; Moloney & Oakley, 2010; Paudel, 2021). Scholars like Moloney and Oakley (2010) have focused on the success factors of virtual education like institutional encouragement, proper curriculum, and online learning teams in several U.S. universities and colleges. When we pay attention to both external and internal factors, it becomes clear that countries without abundant online resources or in an emergency face overloading of server capacities and too much online traffic. In addition, students may also face unusual circumstances like being served with self-quarantine orders. Even those on online education during normal times may be faced with a totally unexpected situation that they are not prepared for. For instance, it is difficult for a student to repair his or her IT devices while serving a stay-at-home order. Students dealing with similar issues may find that they lag behind other classmates due to unordinary circumstances that they have no control over.

Scholars like Jordan et al. (2013) have studied asynchronous online teaching with a focus on its flexibility. Given this characteristic, instructors are able to create a virtual learning community across borders and time zones through asynchronous educational methods. It is possible for a student to lead a discussion topic and other students in different time zones to reply to the topic during night-time for the first student. This education setting can also be used for volunteers facing emergency situations. While certain volunteers are busy helping people in natural disasters and social chaos, they can also complete their class assignments and tasks with asynchronous methods during their rest times. Since the volunteer students may confront unexpected situations, flexibility is important for them to manage their various tasks, including course assignments. It is probable that they can face three consecutive days of emergency after two days of relative peace. With asynchronous modules, they can complete their tasks and share their opinions and questions during the peaceful times and check the replies and feedback after the emergencies.

Many students in higher education these days are expected to work part-time or full-time while studying. Therefore, flexibility is important in helping students cope with their studies and manage their lives under the economic impact of both the pandemic and inflation. It is also conceivable that commuting students may face rare traffic jams due to climate conditions like snow storms. Asynchronous modules allow them to focus on dealing with emerging issues for a moment and return to class activities and tasks afterwards. Such assignments will ask students to review, complete and submit the assignments in a certain amount of time. These can be a valuable option for students under various external circumstances.

Therefore, there is a need to examine how to provide various asynchronous online education modules to support those in emergencies in managing both situational factors and coursework. In the next section, the methods of group discussions and other functions on online platforms are presented to reflect this viewpoint. The author also discusses how to apply these methods in the design of different types of virtual courses for students under difficult conditions. Instructors should be able to use the valuable know-how in this article to design and encourage group activities based on one of the widely used online educational software for higher education.

3. Application: Group Assignment Box in the D2L

As discussed above, online education modules can be an alternative to those under emergency situations. To interest faculty members and practitioners in this option, the author has provided an example of how to manage a group assignment box based on the D2L based educational platform in a U.S. northeastern regional state university (refer to Figure 1 and 2). Even though this module uses the D2L, it can be applied to other types of pedagogical software with similar functions.

Instructors can utilize group functions in the D2L platform as follows. Faculty members can set up groups and then assign students by using the group menu as in Figure 1 and 2. They can also let students choose their own groups and the instructor can then register each individual. In this online module, each student can upload his or her files to the group locker or virtual file saver and share with members. Those who cannot participate in the classroom session due to athlete schedules or other reasons can contribute to the group activities by posting their ideas or works through this function.

It is also possible for students to continue asynchronous discussions on their projects based on the group discussion and locker functions. They can share ideas on how to assign tasks and manage schedules in the discussion board. After the initial draft presentation file is posted in the locker, feedback can be reviewed through the bulletin board as well as in group emails. Such communication tools available in the D2L are expected to enhance collaboration and idea-sharing among members with less available time.
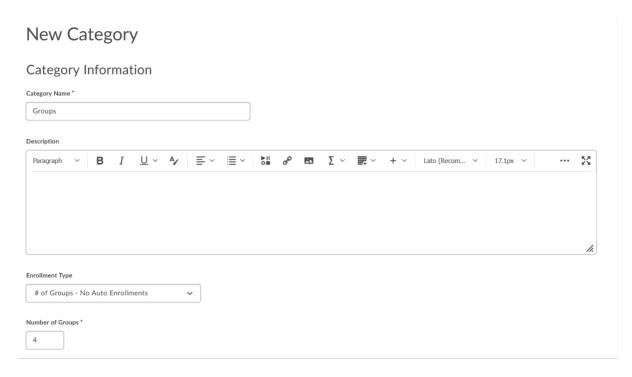
Figure 1. How to set a group in the D2L-based educational platform

Students can also benefit from the formal group assignment function. Instructors can design this group assignment box in the same group setting menu in the D2L. A representative can submit an entire presentation or assignment file to this menu. Even though certain members under emergency situations may not participate in this process, they can submit their parts later to the same submission box as a part of a group.

When a synchronous presentation over video conferencing programs like Zoom, Team, or Skype is not possible, instructors can allow student teams to submit presentation files with video or audio recording files. If the local internet resource does not allow for the use of large files, written narration file in text formats can also be used as a substitute for the presentation. Faculty can moreover contact the students with school emails linked to the online modules. It may help working students communicate with instructors and manage classes despite their busy schedule.

The utilization of an online education module with a group assignment box is expected to offer such advantages to both conventional and hybrid educational settings. In a classroom setting, it can be used to allow learners to submit progress updates of projects. For example, instructors may ask students to participate in group activities on "Preparing slides on SWOT analysis of a case company" for a 15-minute presentation in the classroom. Each group is expected to post draft slides of the day to the virtual locker. In hybrid courses, faculty members can also utilize online platforms for students. During the classroom sessions, participants can continue to enhance group cohesiveness, assign roles, and reschedule. They are expected to make progress on their projects and communicate with colleagues through similar virtual file-sharing and discussion.
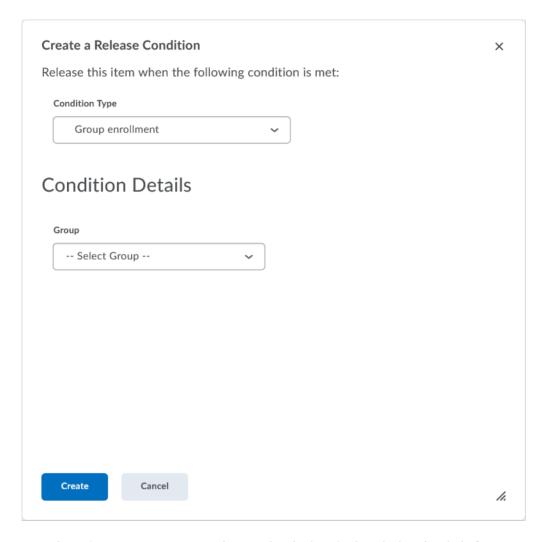
Figure 2. How to set a group assignment box in the D2L-based educational platform

4. Discussion

One of the benefits of an asynchronous online education module is to provide students and instructors flexibility and more options (e.g., Jordan et al., 2013). Both domestic and international students may return home and continue their studies through various types of educational platforms even during the pandemic. While being with and caring for family members, they are also able to review their visual and/or audio materials, ask questions, and complete and submit assignments for their classes. It may enable students to both alleviate stress and achieve their academic goals during difficult times.

Particularly, such benefits can even be extended to those crossing borders during the pandemic. In certain countries, it was expected that overseas visitors needed to follow obligatory self-quarantine policies for weeks (e.g., Alava & Guevara, 2021). International travelers may use this period of time to continue their studies despite time differences and other issues. For instance, students in their quarantine areas with Wi-Fi can review video and reading, complete assignments, and share ideas on online discussion boards or over emails with classmates even across different time zones.

In addition, individuals can fit in their travel schedules for family reunions or other visits due to other types of emergencies. It is possible that some of them need to wait until the local internet recovers or becomes available at home or at an airport due to unexpected climate conditions like a hurricane. If they are allowed to complete tasks flexibly based on asynchronous settings, this can help them to fulfill their course requirements while adequately

responding to such situations. This feature appears to play a greater role during condensed sessions like the summer or winter semesters, which span several weeks.

Furthermore, group assignment functions will enhance these benefits of online educational modules during emergency conditions. Even as students are quarantined due to local policies or global travel, they can still communicate and collaborate with group members to discuss topics and achieve their academic goals online. They can also contribute to projects by sharing their draft slides even after discussion time. If a student is unable to participate in the Zoom presentation due to unexpected circumstances, other members can still share related tasks with the member. This experience may help students manage their online group projects dynamically in future.

5. Limitations and Implications

There are however several limitations to this study. Firstly, it focuses on suggesting and showing how to utilize a group assignment box. Although it can benefit instructors and students struggling with unusual schedule change due to quarantine or other emergencies, researchers are recommended to empirically analyze the benefits of this pedagogical technique in a real educational setting as a next step. In addition, this study also introduced the D2L technology. Although it is possible to apply pedagogical practices introduced here to other platforms, future scholars are expected to pay attention to other systems as well. Since there can be differences and similarities among different pedagogical platforms, instructors need to check whether functions like team-oriented submission, group emails, and/or discussion boards are also available. There can be also international differences in utilizing IT technology as implied by Guo (2019). Future studies may need to examine how to encourage other types of activities like role play and scenario simulation within online modules.

Despite such limitations, this article underlines certain implications for those interested in virtual higher education modules even with limited IT resources. Firstly, the online module based mainly on text and discussion boards will help them access remote classes easily. Since it requires a minimum level of online traffic, it can be used in areas where many people still have difficulties in stable high-speed internet access. In addition, this type of technique can be used to transform offline courses to online ones with minimal capabilities during emergencies. As can be seen in 2020, it is conceivable that educators need to rush to online courses in a short time due to unusual environmental issues like the pandemic.

It can also be utilized with a minimal level of training and experience because of its reliance on widely used transitional technologies like bulletin boards, emails and chatting. It can also help universities and governments manage finite e-resources efficiently. Although certain types of courses should use remote teaching methods that require a lot, there can also be classes comprising online modules mainly based on text. Virtual education modules with group assignment boxes focused mainly on ordinary document files enable instructors to manage their courses flexibly to encourage their students to continue to be involved in their studies during quarantine or other unexpected barriers to participate synchronously in group activities.

6. Conclusion

The global pandemic in 2020 has resulted in an outburst of online education in the business and other disciplines. Many higher educational institutions rushed to convert physical courses to IT-based pedagogy like visual communication, educational webpages, and various types of online content. Although these new and creative methods enhance students' learning experience, it is also important to search for proper educational alternatives for emergent situations like this pandemic.

Therefore, individuals and organizations need to transform their educational experience in a relatively short period of time, in response to social, economic and psychological pressures, as well as changing course requirements. Due to the urgency of the situation, like in quarantines, sometimes students can hardly obtain or repair needed IT gadgets or access online testing centers. The asynchronous online module based mainly on text supports faculty and students in overcoming such issues. This encourages those in emergencies not to give up on their studies despite their immediate obstacles. Even for those with better technology, it can be a basic communication channel in overcoming unexpected social and/or economic gaps between students.

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