Strategic Pedagogy: Pursuing Best Practices for Teaching Asynchronous Online Health Economics Courses

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Abstract

This chapter employs eight years of experience and research to develop recommended best practices for choosing a textbook, producing course videos, role-playing discussion forums and random block examinations when teaching health economics online asynchronously. Best practice recommendations include picking a textbook that has prebuilt slides, fits the student audience, provides some practice exercises, and has a relatively long shelf life. For video production, I recommend developing a high-quality, short introduction video and producing as many minimally edited videos as possible. To improve learning and engagement in discussion forums, I suggest a role-playing discussion forum. I am also a proponent of random block examinations with a time constraint and visibility constraint to deter academic dishonesty. The chapter concludes with a final recommendation for other helpful resources.

Introduction

As a relatively small but fast-growing field, health economics (HE) is becoming a more highly demanded course at both the undergraduate and master's levels. Combined with the recent development and vast expansion of distance education, teaching HE well in the online classroom has come to the forefront and presents a variety of serious challenges. More specifically, the rather small size of the field leaves instructors with relatively few prebuilt resources such as textbook slides, online homework options such as *MyEconLab* (Pearson Education, 2019a), or test bank questions on which to draw. Rapid changes in the field through policy shifts such as the Affordable Care Act also make it difficult to develop thorough materials that are current and easily updated.

Background

Online higher education has been on the rise in the U.S. in recent years. According to Seaman et al. (2018) and Allen et al. (2016), the following are important recent trends in online U.S. higher education, where a student is anyone enrolled in any two-year or four-year degree-granting U.S. higher education institution:

There was a 5.6% increase in the number of distance education students between Fall 2015 to Fall 2016, up from 3.9% between Fall 2014 and Fall 2015.

Approximately 31.6% of all students took at least one distance course in Fall 2016, up from 28% of all students in Fall 2014 .

The total of 6.4 million distance education students in Fall 2016 included 3.0 million enrolled in distance courses exclusively while 3.4 million were enrolled in a combination of non-distance and distance courses.

Public institutions contain the largest portion of distance education students. Approximately 68.9% of students enrolled in distance education courses in 2016 were enrolled at a public institution.

Setting and Student Profile

The experience setting for this chapter is the Paul and Virginia Engler College of Business at West Texas A&M University located in Canyon, Texas, approximately ten miles south of Amarillo, Texas in the Texas Panhandle region of the United States. In 2012, the college received its AASCB accreditation and, as of 2019, holds U.S. News and World Report rankings of #18 for its online Bachelor's programs, #45 for its online Master of Business Administration (MBA) program and #26 for its Master of Science in Finance and Economics (MSFE) program. The college also holds a #24 ranking on the Princeton Review's list naming the top 25 online MBA programs in the world for 2019.

A typical undergraduate student taking HE at West Texas A&M University is a first-generation, non-economics major in business school. Each undergraduate student taking HE is required to complete prerequisite courses in principles of macroeconomics and principles of microeconomics. Master's students taking HE online at West Texas A&M University are typically working professionals located throughout the United States and the rest of the world. It is common for each class to contain students who possess or are working on advanced medical degrees such as a doctor of medicine (MD), doctor of pharmacy (PharmD), or doctor of nursing practice (DNP). Students taking the course may have little or no prior experience studying economics.

Choosing a Textbook

Ancillary materials for HE textbooks are limited because of the relatively small size of the HE textbook market. Consequently, a few general principles can help instructors find a textbook that comes closest to the ideal. First, find a textbook that has any prebuilt slides regardless of how well the slides follow the presentation of material in the textbook. Second, choose a textbook that best meets the profile of students taking the course. Third, identify a textbook with some practice exercises or a limited test bank. Finally, pick a textbook with the longest possible shelf life.

Recording Course Videos

With the founding of *YouTube* in 2005, the rise of *Khan Academy* in 2009, and the beginning of massive online open courses in 2008, the use of video has become widespread in online higher education (Graham, 2005; Noer, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016). Concerning best practices for video in an asynchronous online course, there are two primary considerations—the quality of video and the quantity of video.

With quality and quantity in mind, there are a couple of best practices for instructors to consider with video. First, develop a short, professionally produced, high-quality course introduction video. A high-quality introduction can help set the tone for the course, acquaint students with the instructor, and provide a focused, general overview of the course. Keeping the length to approximately five minutes or less can also keep production costs under control. Course introduction videos can also help market particular programs.

As a best practice for the quantity of video, an instructor should record as many minimally edited lecture videos as possible. When possible, video segments should be kept to 20 minutes per segment or less, as research by Guo et al. (2014) suggests that shorter video segments are more engaging.

Role-Playing Discussions

Role-playing may be one of the best practices in transforming discussion forums into a worthwhile distance learning experience. Research such as Joseph (1965), Alden (1999), Buchs and Blanchard (2011) and Correa et al. (2016) provides examples of role-playing in the in-person economics classroom. However, there is generally a paucity of research on role-playing in the HE classroom. As a relatively new development, Brown (2017) deploys role-playing in the HE distance learning environment in the United Kingdom. As a general overview, the approach Brown uses splits students into groups of four students with each student having one assigned role and all groups having the same assigned issue for discussion. Students complete a post in their individual role and also contribute to a group report to summarize and reflect on the group's findings..

Brown's work serves as the basis for the role-playing discussion forum approach I recommend. Building on Brown's approach, I extend it by introducing a new, fifth role into the scenario, the Foreign Diplomat; adding expanded details into the assignment instructions for each participant ; as well as using a different grading rubric. To begin, students are randomly assigned to small groups of four to five students at the beginning of the term. Roles within each group are also randomly assigned and posted in advance of the forums that take place during the course. Those are the roles of a Reporter, Civil Servant, Economist, Politician and Foreign Diplomat.

Random Block Exams

According to Lang (2013), academic dishonesty is not a new or heightened issue instructors are facing. In fact, Gallant (2008) highlights a quote from an Ivy League academic administrator in 1928 that bemoans academic dishonesty at that time among students. More recently, McCabe et al. (2012) review a wide array of data and surveys from 1990-2010 and report that more than two thirds of college students engaged in academic dishonestly of some kind.

Adjusting an exam's format, such as using a large pool of randomized questions and testing with time constraints, can bring the probability of academic dishonesty in unproctored and proctored formats into closer alignment, as suggested by Vachris (1999), Shuey (2002) and Serwatka (2003).

Given the concerns of academic honesty and resource constraints online asynchronous instructors face, a best practice is to build a large bank of randomized multiple-choice and short-answer questions with a time constraint on exams

Other Helpful Resources

There is an excellent online resource, consistently recognized by experts : the *Teaching in Higher Education* podcast (Stachowiak, 2019), which contains interviews with a wide array of experts in various areas of higher education. The podcast serves as a professional development tool that provides listeners with ideas for use in campus and online environments in addition to ideas for resources to improve effectiveness and efficiency.

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