

Websites and Lectures: Higher Education at a Middle Eastern Women's College

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Abstract

It is no longer a surprise to find that Higher Education is moving into the era of technology at an increasing rate. It has become vital that university instructors adapt instructional methods to include technology. An inventive way of including technology in the course room is by developing a course webpage. A course webpage will not only allow instructors to be creative and innovative, but will also provide a database which will encourage self-learning, a basic pillar on the path to life-long learning. This small-scale humanities study used a quantitative data collection method in order to answer the research questions involving whether course websites enhanced the instructional learning experience of course participants. The research study took place at a private woman's college in Riyadh, KSA. The study findings showed that the use of course websites enhanced the instructional experience of the course participants in a positive manner.

Keywords: Academic achievement, Internet, instructional technology, higher education, webpage.

Introduction

The present paper describes an extension of the teaching and learning with a website experience which started in 2008 in a completely different context and country. The precursor to the current websites was started at the Official School of Languages¹ in Antequera (Spain). The first website was started with a free website creator called "Wetpaint". The mission at the time was to cater for the needs of a mixed ability class for future Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)² teachers who were learning English with the objective of working in a bilingual school.

Wetpaint proved to offer too many limitations for the needs which were demanded by both the teacher and the students. The need for a user friendly, easily accessible site drove the focus towards "Google sites". It must be said at this point that Dr. Medina had a working knowledge of computers and the Internet, but had never created a website herself. The simplicity and variety of tools offered, tilted the balance in Google's favor. These websites require the most basic computer knowledge, are almost like editing a word processing document, yet at the same time allow for the incorporation of videos, sound, power points, own site links as well as exterior links amongst many more options. On the other hand, Dr. Mohamed's expertise with various technological tools contributed to the enhancement of the existing model. The combination of the researchers' experience and backgrounds has led to the results detailed in the following paragraphs.

General Context and Goals

Internet, social networks and cellular phones are undeniably with us to stay; they are evolving at a head-spinning pace; they have become both a source and a tool. The websites were created in order to keep up with the educational trends and explore the possibilities they have to offer. The websites were also used as a learning center for the students. These websites act as a place where students can sequentially follow what is carried out in the classroom. Websites are a place of reference and communication with both the teacher and other students. With this said, it then becomes imperative for educators to adapt their instructional styles to incorporate the technological explosion which has influenced the multiple intelligences of the college population of this era.

The mission of any institution of learning is to instill upon its students the ability to foster the skills necessary to become life-long learners. In this endeavor, the researchers implemented the use of a course website in order to enhance the learning experience of the course participants. The limited instructional time placed upon instructors at the higher educational level does not will itself to the implementation of additional instructional learning support within the context of the course classroom. In order to combat this instructional barrier, universities

¹ *Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas* (Official Schools of Languages) are government owned institutions which are fully funded by the Andalusian Ministry of Education (regional representative of the Spanish Ministry of Education). They offer professional preparation in foreign languages as well as in the co-official languages of the Spanish territory. They range in size and location. The student profile is varied as well because access is granted from the age of 14 onwards. They also offer different types of tuition: in class, blended learning and distance education.

² Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), refers to teaching subjects such as science, history and geography to students through a foreign language.

have additional learning supports such as tutoring and writing centers. The question then arises, “what if students are not able to access these additional learning supports?” and “how can the instructor provide assistance without demoting learner autonomy?” Hence, the implementation of the course website which allows for learner autonomy and provides the additional learning support within the context of the course classroom. The mission statement of Prince Sultan University clearly states, “In its efforts towards a successful and responsible life-long learning, PSU integrates modern technology, pedagogy and human values for the advancement of scientific research, productivity and leadership towards a more meaningful social life.” Within the context of the university mission statement and the outcome of the courses, the researchers implemented online course webpages as additional instructional tools to promote course participants’ learning during course time as well as outside of it. The researchers applied two models of the online course website which consisted of one public webpage, while the other webpage remained private. The public webpage was accessible on the World Wide Web, while the private webpage was only accessible through an invitation from the instructor. Both models of the webpage provided course participants with supplementary course material and additional lecture material to promote further understanding of the weekly course lectures. Individual course participants accessed the course webpages as frequently as they needed in order to fulfill the course requirements. Overall, having course webpages, which allow instructors the capability to meet the additional instructional needs of their course participants, enriched the teaching experience of the researchers.

Relation to Educational Theories and Research

There were four theoretical frameworks, which guided this research, the expectancy-value theory, achievement goal theory, service learning theory, and technology in the course room.

The expectancy-value theory is based upon the work of John W. Atkinson in 1957, which states students’ motivation to succeed and achievement behaviors are influenced by their beliefs about how successful they are able to complete an activity as well as how much they value the activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The expectancy-value theory was later developed further by Martin Fishbein (1970). This theory states that the amount of effort that students are willing to expend on a task is the product of the degree to which they expect to succeed at the task, how much they value the task, and how much they value success on the task. In order to place value on a task, students must first place value upon themselves (Corenblum & Armstrong, 2012). Within the context of the presented research study, course participants were provided an instructional tool in which they had the capability to successfully achieve. The course webpages acted as a motivational catalyst which would allow participants of the course the ability to achieve academic success.

The achievement goal theory explores the rationalizations for participating in achievement behaviors. Ford (1992) indicates that there are levels of goal achievement in which individuals are motivated to achieve tasks. The achievement goal theory assumes that goals are cognitive representations and that they are potentially accessible and conscious (Pintrich, 2000). Covington (2000) suggests that achievement goals influence academic achievement. The course webpages allowed its participants an opportunity to take part in the instruction manifesting achievement behaviors.

The service-learning theory provides students with real-world learning experiences which compliments textbooks and course-based learning. According to Erickson and Anderson (as cited in Wilkinson, Doepker, & Morbitt, 2012) service learning is most often defined as “a pedagogical technique for combining authentic community service with integrated academic outcomes”. John Dewey (1938) defined service learning as embodying the concept of individual learning by doing. Course participants within the context of the research study embodied the service learning theory by using the course webpage to take charge of their learning coupled with the real world element of technology to heighten their learning experience.

Technology in the course room has evolved from overhead projectors, PowerPoint slides, and liquid crystal display projectors to course management systems such as Angel, Blackboard, and WebCT (Tansey, et al., 2009). Students’ use of blogs, wikis, and social bookmarking has been of particular interest to educators who perceive these technologies as beneficial in higher education (Kumar & Vigil, 2011). The technological revolution has placed an emphasis upon the use of alternative technological educational tools such course webpages, blogs, and social networking to enhance learning in the course rooms of higher educational institutions. The researchers’ implementation of a course webpage emphasizes the modern development of encompassing innovative technology to compliment classroom practices.

The Process

After being allocated the subjects for the semester, the need was found for organization of both the students and the teachers. This need included activities such as helping the students locate subject materials with ease, facilitating a chronology of relevant events in the subject, organizing the contents, accounting for the classroom experience, recording queries and so on.

What better or more permanent method of keeping track of a subject than through the Internet?
 Each subject of instruction was allocated a main page with subordinate pages added as were needed. This format can be seen in Figure 1.

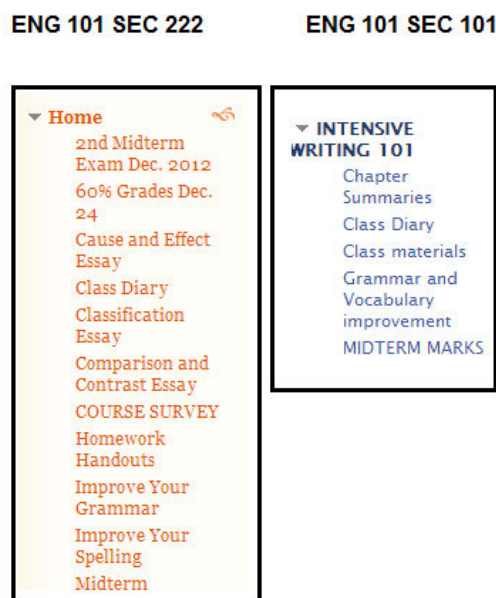


Figure 1. Sidebar sample for Intensive Writing ENG 101(Sections 222 and 101).

The structure agreed upon was a main page containing the course objectives, contents, assessment, in other words, all the relevant information pertaining to the subject, which might be needed by the student at any particular time, and a page for the class diary.



Figure 2. Comparison of the two sites created for ENG 101(Sections 222 and 101).

Coordination between the two researchers was complete for Intensive Writing 101 (ENG 101) because both taught the subject during the first semester. Despite the coordination, as can be deduced from the aspect of the web pages present, each researcher maintained their teaching persona and autonomy.

The following step was organizing the subject, for instance, the content which would be taught, the procedures, materials and methods which would be required. For ENG 101, four stages were detailed. In stage one, students carried out a self-evaluation of their writing skills, writing experience, the essay goals that they were aiming at, and target areas of improvement.

Stage two was dedicated to organizing thought processes. At this stage, students were to produce a mind map using an online mind mapper³ in order to organize their ideas to produce descriptive and expository essays. The three topics offered for the essays were: 1) The Olympic games a showcase of mastery and determination; 2) Humankind is running out of new, creative ideas; 3) Internet shopping: a new addiction. Reading texts based on

³ Online mind mappers suggested were: ThinkBuzan.com; mindtools.com; mindmeister.com; and freemind.sourceforge.net.

these topics were also offered as a background for their development. The mind map received 10% of the grade and the essay 15%. The rubric used can be found in Appendix 1. The mark obtained constituted the First Term mark.

For the third stage, templates were provided for the five main essay types (expository, classification, compare and contrast, cause and effect, process analysis). Students were to sign up to produce one of them. During this stage, the importance of revision, re-writing and proof-reading was also dealt with.

In the final stage, students went back to their writing portfolios and carried out a self-evaluation of the work produced during the semester, comparing the first writing works with the writing produced at this stage. They also carried out an oral presentation as a self-reflection on their work.

For the Second Term mark, students chose from a selection of background readings, they created a mind map which was their only reference material on the day of the exam. Dictionaries were not allowed.

For the Final Exam, a similar procedure was followed. However, since the five instructors which shared the subject and their instruction did not follow the same pattern, the students were not only allowed the use of the text provided, but also, two alternative subjects. It was interesting to see the choice the students made because the students who followed the instructional approach incorporating the websites in 10% of the cases chose the alternative topics arguing that the text provided was too difficult to follow in the exam context.

Outcomes through the survey results

Four surveys were carried out during the semester in order to keep track of the students' progression and feedback. Survey One was attached to the First term essay in October, 2012; Survey Two was attached to the Final exam essay in December 2012; the Final Portfolio Self-assessment Survey was carried out in the last classroom session also in December 2012; Survey Four provided information on the usefulness of the course webpage. A brief summary of the Final Portfolio Self-assessment Survey together with the results of Survey Four are presented in this section.

Due to the excellent results obtained during the initial experiences with the websites dating back to 2008, the researchers were expecting a successful outcome for students who actively participated in the use and consultation of the course websites. The students who actively participated in the course instruction using the websites as a core part of their study and organization presented far better academic results than those who did not follow the website based course instruction, exceeding the initial expectations of both the students and the instructors.

Coupled with improved academic results for the students, the researchers have found that using a course website:

1. provides a daily log of classroom performance;
2. promotes creative and critical thinking;
3. engages and motivates;
4. allows students to be up to date even if they have to miss one or more sessions;
5. removes trouble with not copying the right information during a lecture;
6. is a constant reminder of the mission and vision statements of both the University and the Department;
7. is environment friendly because it saves on ink, paper and electricity.
8. provides long-term reference material.

The Final Portfolio Assessment Survey asked the students of the two Sections three questions:

1. Is self-evaluation useful?
2. What have you learnt from this self-evaluation?
3. Are you more aware of your progression now?

The possible replies for Question 1 were:

- a) very useful
- b) useful
- c) not useful

The answer options for Question 2 were:

- a) it is good to reflect upon my learning process
- b) it is good to stay updated
- c) nothing

The responses available for Question 3 were:

- a) yes
- b) there is no difference with or without the self-evaluation
- c) no

Twenty-one participants from Section 222 took the survey while only thirteen participants returned the survey in Section 101. The results can be seen in the following table.

Table 1 – Self-evaluation survey results.

Question	Section 222	Section 101
1.	57% very useful 43% useful 0% not useful	63% very useful 30% useful 7% not useful
2.	38% good to reflect 62% stay updated 0% nothing	78% good to reflect 15% stay updated 7% nothing
3.	95% yes 5% no difference	93% yes 7% no difference

A closer study of the results offered the researchers several conclusions: a) each group had its own personality; b) the majority of students who completed the survey found the use of websites very useful or useful; c) there was a reduced group of students who did not think the use of a website was necessary to follow the course; d) most students in Section 101 found self-evaluation a positive way of reflecting upon their learning process while most students in Section 222 found self-evaluation a good way of staying updated; e) a reduced group of students in Section 101 did not learn anything from the experience; f) most students in both Sections felt they were more aware of their progression through the use of self-evaluation practices; g) a small number of students from both Sections found there was no difference in their awareness through the self-evaluation practices; h) students were not used to self-evaluation processes so they had to be periodically reminded of deadlines and assignments. The final conclusion that can be drawn from this small-scale study is that in the context described, the use of self-evaluation practices produces beneficial effects both on the academic results of the students as well as on their awareness of the learning process, in contrast with the more memoristic approaches which they are accustomed to.

In order to measure the usefulness of the websites in course instruction for the combined courses of the two researchers (English Pronunciation, Information Resources, Intensive Writing and Research Writing), a Final survey was carried out using the online questionnaire service *Survey Monkey*⁴. The survey received a total of 78 responses from a combined total of approximately 150 students. The full survey posed to the students can be found at the instructors' websites⁵. In order to present an idea of the usefulness, academic improvement and motivation provided by the incorporation of a course website, four of the eight questions are detailed below:

Question 1. How many times a week did you access the course webpage?

- a) 0 times a week
- b) 1-2 times a week
- c) 3-4 times a week
- d) more than 5 times a week

Question 4. Was the course webpage a useful additional instructional tool?

- a) not useful
- b) somewhat useful
- c) useful
- d) very useful

Question 6. Did the course webpage have a positive or negative influence upon your learning experience within the course?

- a) a positive influence upon my learning experience
- b) a negative influence upon my learning experience

Question 8. Would you like to have a course webpage available in all your courses?

- a) yes
- b) no

The results detailed in Table 2 support the original notion that it is becoming vital for higher education to incorporate the technological advances that are rapidly expanding at other educational levels not only on account of their technological utility but also as a result of the improvement provided in regards to the multiple intelligences and diverse learners present in the classroom.

⁴ <http://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/education-surveys/>.

⁵ <https://sites.google.com/site/drcmedinagarriquer/home/important-survey> and <https://sites.google.com/site/eng101intensivewriting/home/course-survey>

Table 2. Website survey.

Question	Response
1.	a) 6 never b) 64 once or twice a week c) 7 three or four times a week d) 1 more than five
4.	a) 1 not useful b) 7 somewhat useful c) 24 useful d) 43 very useful e) 3 no reply
6.	a) 75 positive influence b) 2 negative influence c) 1 no reply
8.	a) 71 yes b) 7 no

Conclusions

From the feedback received and briefly detailed in the two Tables, the researchers concluded that a course website was an engaging and motivating process for students when interacting with the teacher and their fellow students. The students acknowledged the website added a new instructional dimension to their learning by means of putting the knowledge acquired into practice. This positive feedback has provided the basis for the instructors to continue incorporating websites and technology into their instruction; it has been enhanced by including the suggestions made by the students; lastly, it has furnished the instructors with a motivating foundation to build on their own experiences.

Contingent upon the data results, it would be highly recommended that the instructional staff at higher educational institutions implement the use of course webpages. Overall, course participants found that having a course webpage accessible to them as an additional instructional tool aided them in having a positive learning experience within the course. Teacher educators have to find ways to leverage skills with new technologies in informal environments in activities and projects in coursework (Kumar & Vigil, 2011).

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Appendix

Table 3. Rubric for expository essay⁶

	3	2	1	0
INTRODUCTION Background/History Thesis Statement CONCLUSION	Well-developed introduction, engages the reader and creates interest. Contains detailed background information. Thesis clearly states a significant and compelling position. Conclusion effectively wraps up and goes beyond restating the thesis.	Introduction creates interest. Thesis clearly states the position. Conclusion effectively summarizes topics.	Introduction adequately explains the background, but may lack detail. Thesis states the position. Conclusion is recognizable and ties up almost all loose ends.	Background details are a random collection of information, unclear, or not related to the topic. Thesis is vague or unclear. Conclusion does not summarize main points.
MAIN POINTS Body Paragraphs	Well developed main points directly related to the thesis. Supporting examples are concrete and detailed. The narrative is developed with a consistent and effective point-of-view, showing the story in detail.	Three or more main points are related to the thesis, but one may lack details. The narrative shows events from the author's point of view using some details.	Three or more main points are present. The narrative shows the events, but may lack details.	Less than three main points, and/or poor development of ideas. The narrative is undeveloped, and tells rather than shows, the story.
ORGANIZATION Structure Transitions	Logical progression of ideas with a clear structure that enhances the thesis. Transitions are mature and graceful.	Logical progression of ideas. Transitions are presented equally throughout essay.	Organization is clear. Transitions are present.	No discernible organization. Transitions are not present.
STYLE Sentence flow, variety Diction	Writing is smooth, skillful, coherent. Sentences are strong and expressive with varied structure. Diction is consistent and words well chosen.	Writing is clear and sentences have varied structure. Diction is consistent.	Writing is clear, but sentences may lack variety. Diction is appropriate.	Writing is confusing, hard to follow. Contains fragments and/or run-on sentences. Inappropriate diction.
MECHANICS Spelling, punctuation, capitalization	Punctuation, spelling, capitalization are correct. No errors.	Punctuation, spelling, capitalization are generally correct, with few errors. (1-2)	A few errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization. (3-4)	Distracting errors in punctuation, spelling, capitalization.

⁶ Adapted from:
http://web.gccaz.edu/~mdinchak/101online_new/rubric_narrativeessay.htm

Introduction/Conclusion _____
Main Points _____
Organization _____
Style _____
Mechanics _____
Total Points _____ = grade of _____

Grade equivalent (15 points maximum):
A = 13 – 15 points
B = 10 – 12 points
C = 7 – 9 points
D = 6 points
F < 6 points

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