Combining Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

Karen HARDIN
Cameron University-USA

ABSTRACT

Cameron University has recently developed a degree in MultiMedia Design, focused on developing computer based instructional materials. Multimedia Industry leaders have advised us that the foremost skill lacking in recent nation-wide graduates is the ability to work in teams. With this new degree, students spend a lot of time in front of a computer, authoring tutorials and developing presentations.

Communication skills can quickly be lost; therefore collaborative projects are embedded in the curriculum for each class. One class I teach is Web Communications and Design. (http://www.cameron.edu/~karenh/MM2034)

Students from a variety of disciplines enroll in this class. The class is web-based and can be accessed at any time, but to meet the goal of teamwork communication skills, I structure four to five member development teams. Part of the student’s real-world experience includes an individual assignment to develop a web site for a Cameron University faculty member or Lawton business.

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence and fast-paced evolution of distance learning, educators must balance the need for any time, any place activities with the necessity of teaching team dynamics and face to face communication. Combining asynchronous individual assignments with minimally structured, synchronous, collaborative assignments will increase the level of learning achieved by students.

Cameron University has recently developed a degree in MultiMedia Design, focused on developing computer based instructional materials. Multimedia Industry leaders have advised us that the foremost skill lacking in recent nation-wide graduates is the ability to work in teams. With this new degree, students spend a lot of time in front of a computer, authoring tutorials and developing presentations. Communication skills can quickly be lost; therefore collaborative projects are embedded in the curriculum for each class. One class I teach is Web Communications and Design (www.cameron.edu/~karenh/MM2034).

Students from a variety of disciplines enroll in this class. The class is web-based and can be accessed at any time, but to meet the goal of teamwork communication skills, I structure four to five member development teams. Part of the student’s real-world experience includes an individual assignment to develop a web site for a Cameron University faculty member or Lawton business.

This task seems overwhelming to an individual who has just learned to develop web sites alone at a computer. So, for this assignment, I place them in these development teams. Once in the teams, they appropriate team duties. One student serves as the project manager, another as graphics editor. There is a text editor, layout advisor and multimedia specialist. These assignments allow directed collaboration among team members. Teams decide when and where they will meet. Some may even choose video conferencing to communicate.

In preparation for to this assignment, students spend eight weeks developing three personal pages. They start by writing HTML code to develop a personal resume. Once they understand HTML tags, we transition to using an editor, Netscape Composer. Assignments that they
complete in Composer include a family or hobbies page and an index page. The purpose of these individual assignments is to familiarize students with layout design and development processes as well as the software and hardware. By the time students begin to work in teams, they have a solid understanding of basic web page development and have presented their pages to the rest of the class giving and receiving feedback. Through these activities, students learn to value each other’s input.

To select clients, I begin by emailing campus faculty. This serves a two fold purpose—students get the “real world” experience of working with a client and faculty, whose workloads are sometimes too tremendous to put together the original site, have the initial work done by a trained student.

If there are more students than faculty participants, I select industrial and public education participants. I am discerning when choosing participants because maintenance becomes the responsibility of participants after initial design is complete.

After students are assigned to teams and have selected roles, they meet with their client for whom they will develop. These meetings are one on one and each member reports to the team. They follow an instructional systems design process by analyzing the needs of the faculty/industry and define goals and objectives during the first meeting. At that point, they are encouraged to storyboard ideas with the teams’ input.

Meetings between the contact person and student developer continue throughout the process. Teams continue through the instructional systems design by developing one or more prototypes, testing and revising, keeping the advising contact abreast of development through the process.

After approximately three weeks, students upload their site in development and receive input from me and the rest of the class. After approximately six weeks, development is finished and students write papers, analyzing procedures followed and interpersonal skills used in the team meetings.

**SOME OF THE COMMENTS FROM THE PAPER INCLUDED**

“When we were close to completion, we looked at each other’s pages together and offered multiple opinions. It was great since there were improvements that needed to be done and there were several options.”

“The task seemed overwhelming to me as an individual, but with the groups’ input, it became much more feasible and enjoyable.”

“I enjoyed the project. The people in my group were helpful and friendly. I learned more about chemistry by creating this page.”

“I approached this project with anticipation. I sought out my faculty ahead of time.”

“Overall the projects are successful and showed good design techniques. This was accomplished through group interaction and feedback, though limited due to unforeseen circumstances.”

**SOME PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED INCLUDED**

“During the final weeks of development the group was to meet and review each member’s prototype. With our manager being hospitalized, the group lost its direction momentarily but regained it after a short interlude. However, it was again tossed into chaos when another member was hospitalized. Again the group bounced back and was able to refocus its effort in assisting each other with their individual projects.”

“As a team member, I should have provided a realistic time table and adhered to it.”

A student suggested that the client should have been more involved on the layout and graphic design.

“I should have provided him more options.”

“I practically had to hunt down my faculty member.”
ONE STUDENT RECOUNTED TOPICS DISCUSSED IN GROUP MEETINGS

- The use of appropriate fonts
- Using the lowest resolution possible
- Incorporating tables to constrain pages
- Selecting appropriate graphics
- Balancing text and graphics for good layout and balance
- Selecting links to be incorporated

Analyzing this activity as a synchronous activity, with the objective of building interpersonal skills in a real world experience, the assignment structure was extremely successful. Students learned to work together with assigned tasks and realized that the outcome was much more successful given the input. The success seems to lie in the amount of structure; i.e. assigning job responsibilities, due dates and development procedures. Obstacles and failures became learning opportunities. The revision will come in my communication with clients. I will emphasize their roles and commitment of time. believe assignments like this will continue to develop interpersonal skills that have begun to decline with recent graduates.

STUDENT DEVELOPED SITES INCLUDE

- A Theater faculty member’s page developed by Gary Breeze (MultiMedia Design major): www.cameron.edu/~scottho/
- The student teaching site developed by Kevin Brierton (MultiMedia Design major). www.cameron.edu/academic/graduate/education/teaching/
- The Science/Technology Dean’s site developed by Carla Fitzpatrick (BS Computer Information Systems) www.cameron.edu/academic/science/dean/
- Professor of Education site developed by Oxana Matthey (Accounting major) www.cameron.edu/~marcyb/
- Professor of Psychology site developed by Regina Pomranky (Psychology major) www.cameron.edu/~marydz/

CONTACT ADDRESSES AND Email of AUTHOR

Karen HARDIN
Cameron University-USA
Email: khardin@cameron.edu