Developing a Successful Asynchronous Online Extension Program for Forest Landowners

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Abstract

Asynchronous online Extension classes can reach a wide audience, is convenient for the learner, and minimizes ongoing demands on instructor time. However, producing such classes takes significant effort up front. Advance planning and good communication with contributors are essential to success. Considerations include delivery platforms, content development strategies, copyright issues, peer review, user registration, pricing, and marketing. This article shares experiences from developing a comprehensive asynchronous online education program for forest landowners in Washington and suggests strategies for institutions considering the development of similar programs.

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Introduction

Extension forestry programs have a broad and geographically dispersed audience. Traditional in-person programs may only reach a fraction of that audience. Online distance education can potentially reach more people in more places with lower costs and greater efficiency. Clientele access to the Internet has been a past concern of Extension educators (Dromgoole & Boleman, 2006), but high-speed Internet has rapidly permeated communities, even in rural areas (Washington State Broadband Office, 2011).

There are two types of online classes: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous classes are webinars delivered in real time. These are already part of a successful delivery strategy for some Extension forestry programs (e.g., Allred & Smallidge, 2010). Asynchronous classes, which are perhaps less common and arguably more difficult to produce, are classes with pre-recorded content available on demand for self-directed learning. This allows participants to work on their own schedule, and it minimizes ongoing demands on instructor time. Asynchronous Extension classes can reach thousands of people (Green, 2012).

Washington State University (WSU) Extension developed an asynchronous education program for forest landowners called "Forest Stewardship University" (FSU)

(http://Extension.wsu.edu/forestry/FSU/). The goal was to reach new and larger audiences with lower costs and less staff time. We created learning modules using Adobe Presenter (http://www.adobe.com/products/presenter.html), which produces narrated slide presentations that incorporate interactive learning features like quizzes. These modules are streamed via an Adobe Connect server, which functions as the "virtual classroom."

Others have covered in more depth the features of Adobe Presenter and key best practices (Grabowski, 2010; Zamora, Blinn, Chura, & Sagor, 2012). This article focuses on some broader considerations for institutions considering asynchronous online classes, especially if budgets and staff time are limited.

Development Challenges and Considerations

Asynchronous class development can involve significant time and effort. It is inadequate to simply take curriculum designed for live workshops and post it online. Rather, content should be designed for online delivery from the beginning. We lacked the budget for a dedicated content developer, so our biggest challenge was that significant staff time was needed to create or revise content for online delivery. Minimizing staff time had been a goal of the project.

In many ways, online modules function more like multimedia publications than classes. As such, the content should meet publication standards. For instance, using images that were "borrowed" from other sources may work for live presentations but raise copyright issues when publishing online. It should not be assumed that using an image without permission is acceptable as fair use because it is educational, especially if any sort of user fees will be charged. WSU requires written permission to publish non-original and non-public domain images, and other institutions likely have similar policies. WSU also requires written permission to use someone's photographic likeness. Finding and creating images that met these requirements was time-consuming and caused consternation among instructors who did not understand why content they had used for years was suddenly unacceptable.

Peer review may be desired or even required to ensure robust, high-quality content. Professional copy editing of slides and transcripts should also be considered to ensure consistent formatting and eliminate errors. These steps add value to the product but increase the time and effort required.

Planning delivery logistics in advance is important. For example, methods for gathering feedback, assessing knowledge change, and evaluating impacts will determine what type of registration system is needed. The Adobe platform allows quizzes and evaluations to be embedded within the content with results collected by the server, but user registration is needed. Also, if user fees are to be charged, an e-commerce system will be needed that integrates with the content delivery platform.

Production Best Practices

Adobe Presenter is not a stand-alone product; it integrates with Microsoft PowerPoint. This makes it easy to use for those who are already familiar with the PowerPoint interface. It is crucial to start with a good presentation, because the features of Presenter will not overcome deficits in the underlying presentation (i.e., "garbage in, garbage out"). There are several good resources available for improving presentations (e.g., Atkinson, 2011; Skrabut, 2009).

When recording the narration, we found that using a written script is best for several reasons: 1) a written transcript is available in accordance with accessibility policies; 2) the narration is succinct and not rambling; 3) recording is quicker and easier (and mistakes and vocalized pauses are minimized); and 4) the content can be peer-reviewed and/or professionally edited in advance of recording. Instructors who are unaccustomed to using a script may be resistant to this approach. Good communication at the beginning of the project is important for setting expectations and explaining the rationale. One successful technique we used for instructors who struggled with this was to record them giving their presentation without a script, transcribe the recording, and then edit the transcript to create a clean, polished script. When recording the narrative, achieving a proper speaking tempo is harder than it would seem. Some have used professional narrators (e.g., Zamora, Blinn, Chura, & Sagor, 2012), though this can be cost-prohibitive. For instructors doing the narration themselves, newscasts provide good models of a desirable speaking tempo. Practicing beforehand and using vocal warm-up exercises are helpful.

Keys to Success

The key to success with all of these issues is to plan for them. Making decisions in advance, establishing procedures, and communicating expectations up front to instructors can help make the process go as smoothly as possible. The development timeline should be realistic, especially if institutional policies and procedures for online content are not already in place.

Asynchronous online programs are unlikely to get a high volume of use without an effective marketing strategy. This should include a good advertising plan, as well as an incentive system (e.g., continuing education credits or other achievement recognition) to encourage users to both register for and actually complete an online class. Both free and fee-based programs can be effective, but if charging fees, market research is needed to determine proper pricing. WSU is still working through some of these issues with the FSU project.

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