

Success in Online Education

Creating a Roadmap for Student Success

Gordon Drummond

Sessions Online Schools of Art and Design (known to the school's 2,000 students as "Sessions") is an unexpected but instructive success story in online education. Founded in 1997 in the bedroom of a graphic designer's New York apartment, Sessions has grown in 10 years from an intriguing Web site offering a handful of courses into a profitable nationally and regionally accredited school offering literally hundreds of courses and certificate programs in the visual arts. If you want to prepare for a career in graphic design, Web design, multimedia, or game art—or even develop your skill in fine arts like drawing or painting—Sessions aims to

be the most cost-effective, creatively challenging course or certificate program in your Google search.

Why did Sessions survive when many pioneers in online education fell by the wayside? What makes the school's programs one of the most successful art or design programs offered online? How does the school create a roadmap for student success? The following article attempts to answer those questions by sharing some insights gained in 10 years of operation as an online school. This article can be helpful not just to online arts educators but also to anyone developing educational programs for delivery over the Internet.



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IN SEARCH OF CORE PRINCIPLES

What are the core principles for success in online education? Let's begin by examining two of the usual suspects: technology and interactivity.

Since the late 1990s, e-learning gurus have been obsessed with the importance of creating courses using cutting-edge technology and making courses as interactive as possible. One early Internet company that epitomized this approach was Fathom. Fathom was an innovative private company that partnered with a constellation of august institutions including Columbia University, University of Chicago, and the British Museum to deliver an Ivy-quality liberal arts education online to a global audience.

Fathom's instructional designers commanded six-figure development budgets

to create each course, which they used to embed university lectures with extravagant multimedia tools. Picture a history course stocked with Flash movies illustrating the voyage of Columbus or Napoleon's march on Moscow, and you'll get the idea. The technology was cutting-edge, a small fortune was spent on interactivity, and yet Fathom closed its doors in 2002.

What went wrong? There were many factors in Fathom's demise, including low consumer demand for liberal arts courses and a funding crisis caused by the dot-com crash. One lesson I would draw is that technology and interactivity are less important than designing a learning experience that has all the traditional components of a successful course:

- an expert course developer/instructor who knows how to teach;
- well-defined, meaningful learning objectives;
- a clear, well-structured, and engaging presentation of concepts or techniques;
- an approach that emphasizes cumulative, hands-on development of skills;
- a philosophy that connects the classroom learning experience to real-world goals and aspirations;
- an assessment method that enables an instructor to measure student achievement of learning objectives;
- a culture and environment that maximizes student-instructor and student-student feedback and interaction.

These are the core principles that we use at Sessions to make sure our courses are effective for our students. On the surface, none of them are by themselves startlingly new or original, nor do they depend on the use of cutting-edge technology or interactive features. And yet, they are essential to learning, and to be frank, they are difficult for many schools to achieve in an online environment.

It's not hard to see why educators go astray online. Even today, when an institu-

tion or a school department is developing online courses, the process tends to focus on how to make content exciting for Web users. This can result in adapting preexisting content for the Web, and focusing effort on working with external developers or instructional designers to make content more *interactive*. The theory is that online courses should not be *page-turners*; online courses need to be overflowing with rich media assets in order to sustain the interest and attention of students accustomed to increasingly sophisticated online experiences where the world outside the classroom is always one click away.

At Sessions, we've found that focusing on the fundamentals of a successful learning experience is more important than implementing cool technology or interactivity per se. So my advice to my fellow chief learning officers and online education directors is this: forget that streaming-media-Flash-video-XML application your technology team is so excited about. The medium is not the message. Instead, focus on working with your faculty to create great courses. If you're not doing so already, you can begin by working with the following principles:

1. IN ANY COURSE, THE INSTRUCTOR IS INGREDIENT #1

Sound obvious? If so, you're in select company. In my view, too many online schools treat faculty as an afterthought to learning, brought in to support some preexisting curriculum plan supported by textbooks or an assembly of poorly integrated online content created by anonymous authors. The Sessions standpoint is this: the most effective learning experiences are human-to-human. We believe our students will learn better if they study with an instructor whose expertise, personality, and presentational style all combine to create an engaging experience.

Achieving this goal takes effort. First, we try to recruit faculty members who are not

only experts in their specific field but also passionate communicators with a track record in arts education or publishing. Second, our instructional design team works with each faculty member to create a highly personal, individualized course product. No textbooks are required—every lecture, exercise, graphic, animation, and video in the course is uniquely developed for online delivery in an engaging, personal style. You're one-on-one with your instructor, whom you can contact at any time and who will be individually grading all your course assignments.

2. EVEN THE BEST INSTRUCTORS NEED TEACHER TRAINING

As I write this, I imagine department heads bobbing in agreement. Let's face it—in traditional education, faculty members are often resistant to feedback on their approach to teaching. This problem is magnified online. Not only does online communication present some unique challenges, but accepted standards for effective online teaching are still emerging, and schools are unsure of how to train, monitor, or evaluate teaching that occurs in a virtual environment. In this context, students are poorly served by a belief that teacher knows best.

Our philosophy is that teacher-student communication is so essential to the learning experience that we needed to develop our own mandatory best practices teacher training course for all instructors. Since the core task for instructors at Sessions is to critique creative student artwork posted online, our teacher training course focuses on techniques for constructive criticism, including benchmarks, mentoring, encouragement, and identification of strengths and weaknesses. Equally important, these teaching standards are reinforced in biannual performance reviews in which administrators evaluate teaching samples and student-instructor exchanges.

3. MAKE COURSE OBJECTIVES MEANINGFUL

Here's a principle honored more in the breach than the observance. Most online educators agree that course objectives and needs analysis are important prerequisites to course development, but how often is this admittedly tedious process followed? It's a common trap in developing any course (online or off) to focus 90% of your effort on preparing a presentation of content that you feel a course must cover, leaving 10% of your energy for figuring out exactly what students will need to do to develop their skills and demonstrate what they have learned.

At Sessions, we try to reverse that equation. Working with our faculty members, we use a formal course outline process to identify what skills we want students to attain and plan course exercises that challenge students to demonstrate mastery of those concepts. The focus is on designing exercises that are creative and exciting and mirror real-world art and design scenarios—projects that we'd love to do. Once those objectives and assessments are established, faculty members can concentrate on developing course lectures that prepare students to meet those challenges.

4. DEVELOP A KILLER PRESENTATION

It's true that in any online educational environment, the perils and delights of YouTube are but a mouse click away. This means that online course content must engage the student with a clear, well-structured, and engaging presentation of concepts or techniques. This does not mean that the delivery of course content needs to be blazingly interactive or high-tech. It does mean that course content should be a well-organized and professionally edited presentation of information supporting by clear illustrations and animations or audio/video support if necessary and possible. In order to meet these course development goals, Sessions uses a team of instructional

designers that collaborates with faculty members on every aspect of course development: planning, developing, testing, QA, editing, graphics/media, and proofing.

It's unrealistic to expect even the most talented course developer to be an excellent writer/editor *and* graphic designer *and* audio/video editor. So our instructional design team works with each faculty member to supplement his or her strengths and create a multidimensional product. Consistent high standards of quality are only possible through a multiphase development process in which every aspect of the product is tested by a team that has cross-disciplinary expertise in instructional design, editing, graphic design, Web standards, and audio/video editing.

5. LEARN BY SEEING AND DOING

If you cast your mind back to Fathom, the company discussed at the beginning of this article, you'll recall that the company (according to e-learning industry articles at the time) spent hundreds of thousands of dollars embedding Flash-based multimedia in its courses. This multimedia strategy was the favorite of instructional designers and Flash developers alike, since every article on e-learning at the time preached the importance of rich media sizzle and interactivity. The problem with this approach is that people actually learn most effectively through not only reading and viewing content, but also through an active learning process that engages what Bloom's taxonomy calls their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills.

At Sessions, our goal is to teach students practical art and design skills. In our courses, students learn everything from how to correct colors in Photoshop to how to animate characters or mix watercolors. This type of education is only possible because the course content is designed to promote hands-on learning. In developing and delivering each course, faculty members are constantly looking for ways to not

only explain art and design techniques, but also to find ways for students to explore and experience those techniques for themselves as they learn. An active learning experience is one in which an instructor is constantly explaining "here's how it's done ..." and inviting you to develop skills "... now you try it."

6. PREPARE STUDENTS FOR THE REAL WORLD

Our nation's K-12 and college educators are empowered to explore a wonderfully broad intellectual universe in their curriculum. Teachers can approach subjects like differential calculus or late Romantic poetry divorced from any obvious practical "real-world" application of skills learned. Postsecondary schools that deliver a technical or career-focused education to adults have no such luxury. Instead, they are charged with bridging the gap between the classroom and the workplace, by imparting a knowledge of professional practices and standards.

We try to address this challenge at Sessions, as any school should, by making sure our faculty and advisory board members maintain a constant connection to current practices in the professional world. Because our faculty teach on a part-time schedule, we are able to meet our goal of recruiting instructors and course developers who include published authors, professional photographers, architects, illustrators, design agency directors, and Adobe-certified trainers.

Equally important, we use input from external advisory boards to keep informed about changing expectations of employers in the industry. Feedback about what employers are looking for can be extremely useful in helping us plan and develop program outcomes, particularly if that information is provided by external experts who are not influenced by the constraints and demands of teaching.

7. PUT STUDENTS THROUGH THEIR PACES

From time to time, I meet people who don't understand art education and wonder how art or design can be taught online. Setting aside the larger question of how art education works, the question about how to successfully teach online can be answered quite simply: put students through their paces. If you need to determine whether an online student has mastered a specific concept or skill at a satisfactory level, you need to design the appropriate assessment. Your challenge is to develop an exercise that by its very nature forces students to demonstrate the attainment of knowledge or technique.

Our approach (our challenge) in developing assessments at Sessions is to try to give students projects that replicate the scenarios that designers and artists face in a professional environment. When a professional graphic designer gets a project from a business client, he or she works within constraints. The goal of the job is not unfettered self-expression, it's to develop a polished creative solution to a business problem, often working with pre-existing materials or guidelines. To become a professional graphic designer, you need to develop technical, creative/visual, and business/communication skills, and we try to design course projects to help students concurrently address the different cognitive areas that they need to develop.

It's also important to note that course projects at Sessions are designed to be creatively challenging and approached in different ways, so that each student can develop his or her own approach to assignments. Students who approach classes diligently and creatively—and take advantage of instructor feedback—are able to build a body of creative work as they move through the program. It's essential that arts educators give students significant challenges to overcome in school. Students need to be comfortable tackling compli-

cated projects in academia if they are to meet the challenges in the professional world.

8. PROMOTE (IGNITE) COMMUNICATION

One final thought for online educators is that any online course or program must be delivered in a culture and learning environment that promotes student-instructor and student-student feedback and interaction. The main distinction between online education and its traditional classroom-based counterpart is simply the communication tools used. The Internet revolution has provided us with a magnificent set of widely understood tools for communicating anything to groups or individuals. And so one of the most important things an online school, course, or instructor can do is simply set up the structure and the easy to use tools for communication between instructors and students.

At Sessions, we try to promote communication in various ways. One way is by structuring the majority of student-instructor communication around the evaluation of student work, rather than mandating student chats or discussion forum activity as many schools do. Another forum for communication is the DesignSessions online student community, in which students can create profiles, upload portfolios of work, post on discussion boards, create friend networks, and participate in faculty-led clubs. The community provides important peer and professional networking opportunities outside class, and Sessions looks to take this approach one step further in 2009 with an ambitious plan to integrate Web 2.0 community features into its learning management system. The school's search for better ways to teach and learn online is far from over; we need to always keep pace with the evolution of online communication in general.

CONCLUSION

In this article I've discussed some principles for developing effective educational programs online. While the concepts are based on some unique challenges faced by program directors and instructional designers at Sessions Online Schools of Art and Design, I believe they can be helpful to other institutions growing their online programs or indeed delivering any kind of distance education. Unlike many other pioneers in online education, Sessions has

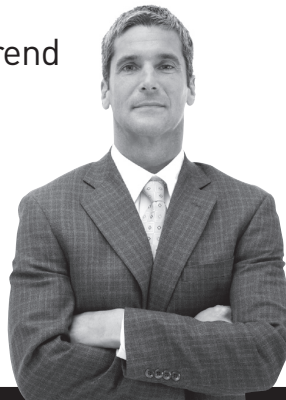
been able to survive and prosper as a school because it has focused on delivering the elements of effective education: great instructors, meaningful objectives, effective teaching, hands-on learning, real-world education, rigorous assessments, and communication tools that facilitate learning. Hitting the mark in each of those categories can certainly be a challenge for any institution, but schools who measure up will create a roadmap for student success.

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