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Course Design for Quality Online Education: Effective Strategies from the Viewpoint of
Undergraduate Teaching Assistants

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Course Design for Quality Online Education: Effective Strategies from the Viewpoint of Undergraduate Teaching Assistants

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Original Research

Abstract:

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March of 2020, campuses across the nation transitioned either mostly or fully to an online learning format (Johnson, et al. 2020). Two Undergraduate Teaching Assistants sought to determine which course design features, if any, best support student educational achievement during this sudden transition to online learning. Using a reflexive thematic analysis, Undergraduate Teaching Assistants sought to discern effective course features based on their personal experience with the in-person class, anecdotes from students in the online class, and quantitative analysis of student feedback surveys. After review and analysis, it was determined that 5 course features best supported educational achievement.

Purpose:

This research aimed to answer the question: from an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant viewpoint, what course design features helped support undergraduate educational achievement during a sudden transition to a 100% online teaching format? Due to the exploratory nature of this study, apriori hypotheses were not advanced at its outset (Caldwell et al., 2020).

Methods:

- Following instructor request (JDT), two Undergraduate Teaching Assistants (CEH, JDS) independently sought to discern which, if any, of the course designed features used by the instructor supported educational achievement. Analysis involved one online upper-division, general education, writing-intensive kinesiology course, which took place during the 2020 Spring Quarter.
- Undergraduate Teaching Assistants used anecdotes from their own experience to assess the effectiveness of design features in recreating a learning environment similar to the in-person instruction that they had in Winter 2020. (Figure 1)
- Undergraduate Teaching Assistants then evaluated which, if any, specific design features identified in the previous step were effective. (Figure 1)
- Students enrolled in the course were solicited to generate their own list of course design features felt to be effective. They could also put "none." Participation was anonymous, voluntary, and via mid-and-end-of-quarter surveys. Students also provided comment to explain their responses. (Figure 1)
- Using methods for reflexive thematic analysis (RWJ Foundation, 2008), Undergraduate Teaching Assistants compare the course design features they felt were effective to the feedback provided by students in the online course. (Figure 2)
- Results were then compiled into tabular form for further thematic analysis. (Figure 3)

Results:

It was determined through careful analysis of the diverse data sources that 5 design features helped to support educational achievement during a sudden transition to online instruction:

1. Discussion boards
2. Summary slides
3. Reminder emails/slides
4. Video lectures
5. Posted lecture slides

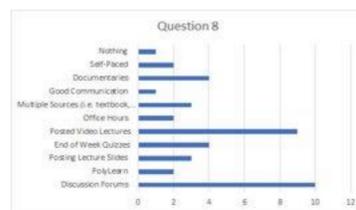


Figure 4: Student responses when asked “What is at least one design of the course or how it is delivered that you feel is supporting you as a learner?”



Figure 5: This image is a screenshot example of the summary slides that were included in each video lecture, another design feature that was deemed very effective by students in the course.

“The consistent communication was very helpful! It really helped me be organized and also know when and where to look for information”

Note 1: Feedback from a student on the Midcourse Survey

“I like that you give us the slides so I don't have to copy them down”

Note 2: Feedback from a student on the Midcourse Survey

“The video lectures were very thorough and well explained, they expanded on explained material rather than just reading information on the slides”

Note 3: Feedback from a student on the Midcourse Survey

Discussion:

Our results show each of the five course design features were deemed compatible to in-person features. These results lead us to discuss where we would like to see our study go from here, possible alterations to our study in the future and suggestions for related reading

One place to take our study from here is to further compare our results, using the same methodology, with different classes sizes and social climates. We would be interested to see if the same themes translate across different classrooms and groups of students.

It should also be noted having both Undergraduate Teaching Assistant experiences, as an in-class student and online instructor, was necessary to properly follow our methods. Future UTA’s might only have a virtual class for reference as a student, which may alter, yet hopefully not hinder, how they approach these methods.

For further reading, please review the work of Raabe et al. (2019). Raabe et al. provides principles for how educators can assist future Undergraduate Teaching Assistants in enhancing their peer mentoring skills. Peer mentorship has various positive effects on developing relationships as well as promoting educational achievement. This is comparable to the position that Undergraduate Teaching Assistants hold, serving as the bridge between professor and student.

References:

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Johnson, H., Mejia, M. C., & Cook, K. (2020, March 30). COVID-19 shutdown forces colleges to ramp up online learning [news report]. *Public Policy Institute of California*. <https://www.ppic.org/blog/covid-19-shutdown-forces-colleges-to-ramp-up-online-learning/>

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RWJ Foundation. (2008). Reflexivity. In *Qualitative research guidelines project*. Retrieved from <http://www.qualres.org/HomeRef1-3703.html>

Methods Revision Table:

Design Feature Instructor Assumed Effective:	UTA Anecdote of effectiveness as students:	Specific Design Features that fill especially effective:	Student Response
Discussion Boards	Discussion Boards help emulate conversation in an online setting the same way we had in class as students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This includes expecting an “inclusive and constructive dialogue” at the outset of the course, which was a clear expectation for in-class discussion as well. When making a claim a student was expected to provide reference to the claim. Students were required to reply to one peer, which stimulated. 	“I think that the forums are very helpful to me as a learner because they provide me with insight from other students about the course material, often showing different perspective I would not have thought of and also giving me an overall better understanding of that week's material.”

Figure 1: Shown above is a screenshot of the table used to organize UTA methods of reflexive thematic analysis

Student Perceived Support in this course:

- 1) Corresponds to mid-quarter survey
- 2) Corresponds to end-of-quarter survey
- 3) Corresponds to talk with a buddy survey

Course Design Feature:	Student anecdotes on feature:	% of students responding positively to course feature:
Discussion Forums	<p>1) “I think that the forums are very helpful to me as a learner because they provide me with insight from other students about the course material, often showing different perspective I would not have thought of and also giving me an overall better understanding of that week's material.”</p> <p>“Forums, they provide insight from others and motivation to read in depth.”</p> <p>2) “The weekly discussion posts were very helpful in me getting to know other students in the class”</p> <p>“The discussion board posts really helped us learn how to incorporate both the fundamental theories and our own thoughts in a meaningful and...”</p>	<p>1) At least 80% of students included this in mid-quarter survey as helpful.</p> <p>2) 66% of students believed weekly discussion boards helped achieve their “Willing to Learn” goal, based on End-Of-Quarter Survey</p> <p>3) 79% of students used bold words in Week 9 Board. 34% of students used bold word in Week 2 (first week of content)</p>

Figure 3: The image above is an organization table UTA’s used to organize student response to effective course features from the student-feedback surveys.

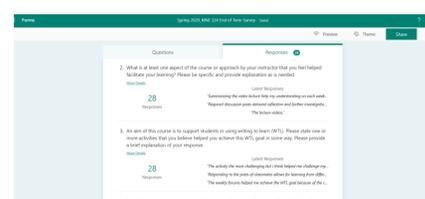


Figure 2: Shown above is a mid-quarter survey with which student feedback was used to qualitatively understand how students responded to certain course design features.