

Thousand Years in Thirty Virtual Days: Summer Online Courses and the Sophomore Survey

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Abstract

Summer online courses are a recent product of universities seeking a profitable niche in the brave new world of distance education and students in search of challenging and convenient courses that fit into their already packed schedules. As the literature of online learning continues to mature, serious study is now needed to address the unique concerns of summer online programs, including how course duration affects best practices and how the model might affect student populations. This paper considers how a private, residential university confronted the principal challenges of designing a reading-intensive summer online course for an abbreviated semester aimed at first-time online students.

Introduction

Tempus fugit. Time flies. As a professor of literature, I have often found myself introducing this familiar theme to students new to the dead languages of Latin and poetry. From the comfortable vantage of an 80-minute class, I can begin with Andrew Marvel's familiar warning "To His Coy Mistress" without glancing at my watch: "But at my back I always hear / Time's wingéd chariot hurrying near." I understand, theoretically, the anxiety that "time's chariot" could evoke in Renaissance readers, but not until I became involved in the world of online learning—and more specifically summer online courses—did I feel the weight of its approach bearing down upon me.

The passage of time is also a recurring theme in research on distance education. Few of the standard handbooks have failed to notice the unique time commitments for teacher and student moving to online instruction from the traditional classroom. Most enumerate the benefits of continued thought and reflection afforded by asynchronous discussion, a medium defined by its position "out of time." Though online learning is typically described in terms of overcoming distance, much of its early promise draws on its ability—real or imagined—to free teachers and learners from the limits imposed by time as well.

However, many of these early studies and the teaching experience on which they have been based begin with certain assumptions about these online education. Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt, for example, spend the bulk of *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace* discussing courses taught to non-traditional students during the traditional long semester. They recount stories of highly motivated, articulate graduate students struggling with the subtleties of the emerging medium. In 1999, this focus was understandable, as these were the courses and students that fueled much of the growth in this area in the 90s, but as they acknowledge in their most recent study, *The Virtual Student*, the learners and contexts we find online today are far more varied. They cite a 2002 report from the National Center for Education Statistics which showed that “interest and enrollment in online courses spans all age groups,” including 57% of “traditional undergraduates” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 3). Today the duration and design of the virtual semester is just as varied. While many colleges offer online terms following the 15-week or 8-week on-campus calendars, others offer staggered enrollment focused on content coverage rather than course duration. Most recently, traditional universities have become attracted to the promise of moving summer programs online, offering students alternatives to summer school on campus. Summer classes have long provided universities a way to increase four-year graduation rates as they guard tuition hours which might be lost to transfers. Yet in the rush to move summer offerings online, course designers and teachers need to guard against selling out the curriculum that is the heart of these new programs.

In 2002, Abilene Christian University, a comprehensive university of around 4,800, approved an online summer program focused on retaining residential students returning home for the summer. Major British Writers I, a survey of English literature, was identified as one of the most commonly transferred titles from state schools and community colleges, so the choice made sound fiscal sense. Since the summer online program represented a new institutional priority, the courses and their designers were provided an unusual level of support, guidance, and budget for development; however, the program’s unique niche—summer online courses—was a relatively new concept with very little existing literature to help light the way. Our experience over the last two summers teaching multiple sections in two different tracks suggests that summer online teachers and designers benefit from the existing literature, but course designers of summer programs must consider the unique challenges of course duration and student population as they adapt to abbreviated online semesters.

The Course

Proponents of distance education suggest that one of its principal benefits is the time online students are allowed to consider, reflect upon, and then respond to course material. As Tisha Bender notes in her *Discussion-Based Online Teaching*, “Time means something different online than in the campus class, as the online class exists within the more elastic and subjective realm of a virtual dimension. This, though, can prove to be advantageous in that it does not call for immediacy; rather, due to its asynchronous nature, students have time to reflect and think deeply about issues before responding” (Bender, 2003, p. 180). Paradoxically, summer school by its very nature is compressed, trading the luxury of prolonged reflection for intense focus and (ideally) single-minded attention.

A typical summer course at ACU meets 2 hours a day, 5 days a week, for 4-5 weeks. Introducing on-campus students to a “survey” of important authors and texts in the summer is always challenging, requiring both creativity and compromise. Early in the development process I understood that our summer online course would entail its own unique challenges. Many of the courses we consulted in development would take the first week of a long semester to familiarize students with the syllabus and begin building community. Course units or modules would then follow, one a week, providing students the opportunity to do the assigned reading before reflecting in group chats or online discussions. At this pace, I feared my survey would barely have time for Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Swift, the equivalent of a Western Civ. class that covered the last three centuries with short summaries of the Industrial Revolution, World War I, and the Cold War.

The obvious challenge becomes how to allow students time for careful reading and reflection within the abbreviated summer format. In 2002, we developed a barebones outline of 15 reading assignments that could cover key themes and genres from the Anglo Saxons to the Enlightenment. As a compromise, the summer online program developed a model that would allow students to take courses either in the typical one-month summer semester or in a newly created two-month term that would present the same assignments at a pace still twice that of a long semester. Teaching these sections side by side provided us a unique vantage on the challenges that accompany course duration.

Given the number of readings we hoped to cover—already pared down from summer surveys on campus—we chose to follow the same basic assignment cycle for each module, allowing the readings themselves to introduce variety to the course. Each module moved from a short lecture or learning activity meant to introduce background material or key themes from the reading to a culminating small-group discussion. Asynchronous discussion was chosen as the principal communication tool because it can be easily adapted to the model familiar to our classroom teachers, would encourage students to engage individual texts more deeply while allowing some flexibility in when they contributed even at the break-neck pace of the 5-week course. Though two alternative assessments were introduced in place of major exams, the discussions that accompanied each module represented the main venue for students to process their reading with peers and with the professor.

The Pre-Module

Early on we recognized that covering 15 modules in 5 weeks would be difficult enough without losing time up front to syllabi discussions and technical difficulties. ACU's program has developed two or three sophomore-level courses a year targeted at first and second-year students, many taking their first summer courses. In our first 5 sections of Major British Writers, 51% of students enrolled were Freshman and 26% were Sophomores (compare this with a larger summer program at James Madison University with dozens of course offerings where only 4% Freshman and 19% Sophomores [Alberico & Mazoué, 2004]). Together with the course designers, technology support staff developed a pre-module that every summer online student had to complete before being officially enrolled.

In addition to testing technical proficiency and hardware compatibility, the pre-module introduced students to several foundational assumptions behind distance learning. This is an essential step in helping students understand their commitment up front, as Palloff and Pratt note: "Be clear about how much time the course will require of students and faculty in order to eliminate potential misunderstandings about course demands. Students sometimes assume that taking an online course is the softer, easier way to earn credit. They learn quickly, however, that this is not the case" (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 30). Clarifying expectations is doubly important for abbreviated summer online courses. Though few of our students came with summer school experience, several brought their own preconceptions about distance learning. As one commented in her final portfolio, "I have been involved in three other online courses from a different college and they did not even come close to comparing with this English course from ACU. The others were extremely simple, and though they counted for both college and high school credit, the workload was rather small. There were not near as many assignments due, and the grading system was definitely not as difficult." As more and more students enter college with a variety of online education experiences, course designers and instructors must be more purposeful from the beginning in establishing clear expectations for their courses.

During this pre-module, students also moved through a typical assignment cycle where they were introduced to the course syllabus, completed a web exercise, and posted to the discussion board for the first time. Before Beowulf's first boast, students were reading about academic expectations, successfully contributing to the discussion boards, and beginning to build a fledgling online community. As important as downloading plug-ins and learning discussion board etiquette might be, the greatest benefit of the pre-module was in setting realistic student expectations about work load and time management. We learned that clarifying the level of time commitment can not begin too early. Another 5-week student commented,

"I didn't think that it would be very difficult and I felt that I would probably be able to breeze through the assignments given without any problem. I found out after completing Module 0 that I was completely wrong in this assumption." The importance of completing this step before the first "class meeting" can hardly be overstated, and once developed this material can be reworked easily to fit the needs of later designers and summer online courses.

The Assignment Cycle

Given the amount of reading already a part of any sophomore survey, we wanted to maximize the time students would spend reading and working with specific texts. In our first two years, we believe that following a consistent and predictable assignment cycle has simplified the number of hours students spend in any module, providing them more processing time in group discussion. Early on we were presented with many exciting models and strategies for group collaboration online, but given the time-limits imposed by a summer semester, we decided to limit more elaborate assignments which might require learning procedures rather than poetry. This approach is in line with the best practices for undergraduate education discussed in both Bender and Palloff and Pratt in emphasizing "time on task" in online courses (Bender, 2003, p. 176; Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 132). Providing students both "deadlines" and "structure," this assignment cycle can make the confusion of early weeks easier to manage and comprehend.

For much the same reason, we tried to avoid extensive use of synchronous, or real-time, tools in summer assignments. More than in a long semester, any summer course taught online must keep its focus on small, short-term goals. I agree with Palloff and Pratt's suggestion that "minimizing the use of chat" is an important way to focus students' energies on material rather than on methods: "The scheduling concerns involved in setting up a time for a chat session, coupled with the intensity of sessions that involve more than just a couple students, can create a significant degree of anxiety" (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 85). While synchronous discussion is the medium of choice for our students when socializing, chat-heavy courses can create particular problems in summer terms when the pace is so much faster. Since anxiety is an unavoidable part of a compressed, reading-intensive course, limiting logistical frustration where possible is essential. (When Palloff and Pratt discuss time issues in the 1999 book, their focus is largely the emotional and psychological effects of overload and "information addiction" [pages 46-55].)

Asynchronous discussion allows summer students the ability to complete their posts at their own pace in a collaborative forum that doesn't depend upon the timely contributions of every group member. In a presentation on teaching composition online, Sarah Cheverton and Jim Mazoué identified collaborative assignments as the most significant obstacle to student success in a 4-week course. They found that group work in a summer term became an obstacle rather than an effective tool in a general composition course (Cheverton & Mazoué, 2003). Though I personally rely heavily on collaborative work in longer semesters, the potential to disrupt the ongoing reading assignments seemed too great in a summer term.

One exception to this IM avoidance was a series of online events and forums that brought class members together with their professor or other guests. Some of these scheduled chat sessions involved answering questions or addressing concerns. We also used more unusual online events to help break up the routine of each unit. One such event introduced students to Margery Kempe, a medieval mystic, through a sort of virtual ventriloquism. Students were invited to a lively conversation with a dead author, voiced by a resident specialist. On another occasion, we introduced a discussion of dramatic performance and theatrical themes in *Twelfth Night* with a chat with an experienced Shakespearean actor and director on campus. Students were asked to consider "the challenges of bringing a 400 year old text to the stage" as they discussed how student actors would go about producing the play for a modern audience. These events combined material prepared earlier with student questions e-mailed before or during the moderated chat, and transcripts were posted for those with time conflicts.

In our second summer, even isolated uses of group chat were eliminated. To simplify student dependence upon group-members in completing their work, we retooled major project assignments that asked students to seek and provide feedback at several stages. We recognize the benefits of this kind of step in team learning and the writing process, but within the confines of the summer survey these added steps can add days to the time needed to complete individual assignments. The online events and interviews were also converted into self-running Flash animations which can more easily be implemented as the course moves into our long-semester offerings, either as an online or hybrid alternative to face-to-face surveys. Asynchronous discussion represents the real strength of reading and discussing literature online, and we are confident that the variety provided by course content combined with a simple, familiar assignment cycle provides our students the best opportunity to succeed.

Rigid Flexibility

The most frequent comment in student evaluations in our first summer was for greater flexibility. In attempting to avoid a self-paced upgrade of a '50s correspondence course, we established an overly rigid schedule of due dates and deadlines. The scheduling for the 5-week and the 10-week courses moved students through a single module and discussion every 2-3 days before beginning the cycle again. The routine itself provided a useful structure or framework for our semester, but it ignored two important aspects of summer teaching: summer work and summer travel. In their final portfolios, students talked of the expected technology-related complications, but we were surprised to learn more than half of our students—even in the 5-week course—were working full-time as well as taking other classes online or in town.

Summer online programs must strike a balance between this kind of strict control, moving students through a course in lock-step, and the isolation an absence of deadlines and interactions can produce. Bender has speculated on the potential disconnect between the openness and flexibility of asynchronous learning and the very idea of a deadline: "The asynchronicity of the online environment induces reflection and encourages one to respond when ready, when one has thought deeply, when one feels stimulated, when one is inspired. In this context then, does not a due date seem rather jarring?" (Bender, 2003, p. 108). But she goes on to argue for a balance between a student's "convenience" in a course and "certain time obligations" natural to the particular class (p. 109). In a summer term for first and second-year students, the absence of any accountability would only encourage procrastination. The answer is not to do away with deadlines, but students taking on their first summer classes along with first full-time jobs for many require some built-in flexibility. One student from a 5-week section described the early anxiety:

I was extremely nervous at the beginning of this semester. The first few assignments really scared me and made me feel like I was going to be spending more time than I had allowed for this class. I later found out that if I worked hard enough, I could get it all finished and turned in on time. I learned a lot about time management in this class. I have been working a full-time job the entire month that this class has been in session and have still been able to get every assignment finished, well and on time. I am extremely proud of my success in this course. . . .

The workload in this course was by far the most challenging. I felt that I barely had enough time to finish one story before I was supposed to be starting another. . . . I think that my initial reply would be that there needs to be a lighter workload. Now that I really think about it though, I think that maybe there just needs to be a little more time for each assignment to be worked on.

Greg Kearsley warns of inexperienced online teachers and heavy workloads filled with "online collaboration, research, or writing that are very time-consuming, without realizing how long it takes to complete these assignments," especially he notes, "for novices and newcomers" (Kearsley, 2000, p. 127); however, after educating students in the reality of summer school, one alternative to content concessions would be greater flexibility. In our final debriefing sessions, course instructors representing more than 70

years of teaching experience agreed that the course would no longer be a survey if we assigned students less.

In our second summer, we moved from our 2-3 day assignment cycles to 1 or 2 week units in which all of the modules for each period are open and available though discussions still “begin” every few days. Given a week or two to complete the assigned reading and online discussions, students are unlikely to work too far ahead unless driven by work schedules or upcoming travel plans. Students able to maintain multiple IM conversations simultaneously will hardly be phased by responding to new posts on *Dr. Faustus* as they are working through Shakespeare’s sonnets. An additional concession allowed students to skip a discussion just as they might miss a face-to-face class as long as they kept up with readings and material presented in the modules. Missed classes for illness or travel are already an expected part of on-campus surveys but have not yet been factored into our online program.

Whatever the allowance, some consideration must be made for the exigencies of summer online. As one 10-week student memorably suggested,

Make it more flexible! If I have a wedding to go to in Mississippi, I don’t want to be worrying about getting online to make posts between cutting the cake and catching the bouquet. If I am traveling across the country for a week, I don’t want to be worried that my grade will suffer because I couldn’t access the work to complete ahead of time. If my computer crashes and I have no internet access for two weeks, I don’t want to be worried that my grade will suffer during that time, or that by the time I have access, I’ll be too far behind the rest of the class.

Just how much “absence” to allow depends largely on the duration of the course since, as in this example, dropping out of a month-long class for a couple weeks would represent almost half the semester, but the cries for flexibility should be heard.

Time-Intensive Learning

Though new to the medium of distance education, I have taught dozens of survey classes with hundreds of students both in the traditional classroom and in study abroad semesters. I have perhaps become inured in course evaluations to the complaints of workload for any class that assigns more than 50 pages a term. In spite of such pleas, I have come to see the time students invest struggling with challenging texts as an opportunity to introduce college sophomores to the importance of careful reading, intent focus, and nimble thinking and writing. Several comments from students in both the 5-week and 10-week courses make this case better than I can.

Many of the strengths of online learning coincide with objectives related to many general education courses. For example, the primary objective of our survey is to “develop skills to analyze and interpret texts and authors through strategies of close reading.” As Ken White and Bob Weight have noted in a discussion of time management, becoming more effective and efficient readers is essential to student success: “Most online courses—besides being completely textual themselves—are accompanied by a textbook(s) . . . There are skills that one can employ to assist learners to be more proficient readers . . . and active readers” (White & Weight, 1999, pp. 75-6). One of the 10-week students confirms this strength even as he complains of course workload:

I think the amount of work in one day was a challenge. I do not like sitting down for long periods of time and reading or working on a computer. So even though I said the e-journals and discussions were the best ways for me to learn, they were also a challenge. They required me to sit for a long time and really reflect on what I had read.

Another course objective common to many sophomore courses in and out of English departments is to “write effectively as a result of clear thinking, extensive reading, and careful observation.” In this textual medium, it is not surprising that students would become more effective communicators; as one noted, the online class “allowed me to find my voice as a writer.” In mid-term evaluations our first summer, some students seemed frustrated by the independence and personal responsibility that come with the new medium: one 10-week student complained, “we’re not actually taught anything about the pieces of literature. All we do is write our own opinions or how we understood the literature and others comment on our responses. We are never taken through the works with a teacher explaining what everything means like what we get in class”; however, by the end of term, we had many more converts, with over 90% responding that the course “challenged me academically” often or very often and 95% that it “required creative and original thinking.” Earlier complaints had largely been replaced by comments like this one from a 10-week student:

I have learned not to confine my responses or opinions of a literary work to what I believe the professor is looking to hear. Rather, I have unboxed my thinking and allowed myself the freedom of expression that I’ve never really utilized. Because of this, I have found myself exploring and questioning new ideas and ways of thinking, reaching far beyond the text itself.

High expectations combined with a workload roughly comparable to on-campus summer surveys were clearly intimidating for many students, and we saw significant attrition early; however, refusing to design a softer, easier version of a reading and writing-intensive course yielded successes beyond those related to literacy. In their final portfolio reflections, students from both course lengths argued for the extra-curricular benefits of time-intensive summer courses:

I think I am most proud of my time management skills. . . . I was not able to sit back and relax while trying to finish an assignment. An assignment was given and it had to be finished and turned in the next day. This class really didn’t give me time to procrastinate and helped me to understand that I cannot sit around and instant message or talk on the phone while I’m doing my homework. I had to learn how to concentrate on one thing instead of multi-tasking like I am used to.

“Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.” This quote by first lady Abigail Adams describes my philosophy of learning. Through this course and previous others, I have come to realize that hard work with a fierceness to consume the material pays off. The reward is a grade or just the satisfaction of learning. While on the journey of learning, obstacles need to be overcome in order to discover personal growth.

Conclusions

I have learned a great deal from those who have come before me. I know the weight of experience represented by Kearsley and others when they warn new teachers of online overload. I heed the call of Palloff and Pratt as they preach against the sin of including “too much material for the time allotted to a course. The pace of an online course is slower; it takes longer to explore various topics through asynchronous discussion than it might in a face-to-face lecture or classroom discussion” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 84). But in the fast-paced world of summer online courses, this languid pace is no longer a serious option. As Marvel opens his complaint to his dilatory mistress,

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love’s day. . .

As you'll remember from your own sophomore survey, the poem glides elegantly through a dozen entrancing lines before the speaker jars us back into reality with a single conjunction and its insistent warning: "But at my back I always hear / Time's wingéd chariot hurrying near." The reality facing summer teachers on-campus and online is that time flies, and whether in 5 weeks or 15, syllabi must be distributed, pages must be read, and meaning must be discovered. As one 5-week student wrote, somewhat poetically, "This semester has been like a slap in the face. It has been painful, educational, intense, and over before I knew it began." Teachers and course designers new to the unique challenges of summer online need to plan carefully to ensure that they understand the limits and opportunities imposed by this new medium.

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