

Minutes: CEPP Meeting of October 16, 2001

Members of CEPP present: Sandy Baum (Chair), John Berman, John Brueggemann, Pat Fehling, Frank Gonzalez, Doug Humphrey, Mike Meguerdichian, Pat Oles, Linda Simon (minutes), Janet Sorenson

Guests: Gary McClure (Management & Business), Elaine Rubenstein (Biology), Paty Rubio (Foreign Languages and Literature)

John Brueggemann began the meeting by inviting the three guests to talk about their experiences delivering on-line courses. Our goal is to help CEPP define distance learning (dl), clarify issues and policy questions related to dl, and find reliable criteria that distinguish courses suited to dl rather than to a classroom setting.

Gary McClure responded first, urging us to read the "White Paper on the Role of Distance Learning at Skidmore College," written by the IRC. Gary considers this an excellent document that identifies key issues. He himself is an advocate for dl because it offers a way to keep in touch with graduates and instill a desire for life-long learning. Alums may take dl courses and therefore stay involved in Skidmore activities. Gary has developed a UWW finance course and made the following points:

- The course involves more work and is less effective than a classroom based course
- Even with ways for students to interact, it is difficult for them to interact with the professor
- A successful student needs to be an exceptionally able self-learner
- When a student asks a question, it is hard for the professor to assess the real question that the student is asking
- Often, he has used telephone contact to work out students' problems
- Unless the student is reasonably computer competent, he or she has lots of difficulty with on-line courses.

In spite of obstacles, however, Gary believes we should proceed in developing and giving credit for on-line courses and suggested various ways to improve such courses, including cd-roms and video cameras. In response to a question by Pat F., Gary said that non-mathematical classes are better suited to dl than classes in which blackboard work is essential to student learning.

Elaine R. has not yet taught an on-line course, but is offering a non-lab UWW course this spring. She is revising the course she now delivers, which is a broad introductory course, and is looking for on-line ways to accomplish in-class activities. She believes that discussions become more central in on-line courses than they are in a classroom format. She is dealing with the question of how to evaluate student work and is looking for a textbook that offers on-line support. She also is considering having students take an exam that can be proctored at a college in their vicinity. In response to questions, she admitted that she would rather be in a classroom with the students, but that this format is not usually possible with UWW students who are geographically scattered.

Paty R. has offered an on-line UWW course on Spanish-American women writers, which is adapted from a Skidmore course that she has offered in her department. However, instead of focusing on texts in Spanish, the on-line course uses texts in translation. This is not a course, therefore, that Paty would offer in her department. Among the features of the course are

- An asynchronous chat room
- Weekly assignments to which she responds with lengthy commentary
- A packet of contextual material to support students' analysis of literature

She has found that students really engage in dialogue with one another and thinks dl has greatly improved the quality of education for UWW students. One problem she has encountered is identifying a student's difficulties when there is lack of face to face interaction. Students need to be able self-learners. She needs to work very hard on weekends. Although she thinks her UWW on-line course is a success, still she agrees with Elaine that she would prefer to sit around the seminar room. Seeing students' reactions in person and allowing for spontaneous questions and comments is lost in an on-line course.

To Mike's question about the equivalence of an on-line course to a Skidmore offering, Gary said that whether we grant credit needs to reflect the criteria for a course wherever it is offered. Paty said that evaluating a course is discipline-specific.

In discussing the development of CEPP guidelines for assessing online courses, Paty said that in looking at an on-line course, she would need to see clear objectives and assessment of those objectives. What kinds of exams and exercises would students take? Is there an on-line attendance policy?

Pat Oles suggested that we could evaluate on-line courses in the same way as a classroom-based course, and Paty responded that there needs to be evidence that evaluation is happening.

Sandy suggested that criteria for evaluating such courses should best come from people teaching it.

Pat Oles asked whether we might work with students abroad by allowing them to take on-line courses. Paty responded that this attachment to Skidmore would ruin the "abroad" experience and work against immersion in another language and culture.

There was general agreement that putting on-line components into classroom-based courses should be considered enhancing and improving delivery of courses, rather than a changing the course's identity to an on-line course. Therefore, such enhancements should not need approval by Curriculum Committee.

There was discussion of Skidmore's offering one-credit on-line courses.

At the end of the meeting, John Berman gave out a response from the deans of eleven colleges about granting credit for on-line courses. No doubt we will discuss this response at future meetings.