

Turning Online Lectures into Interactive Dialogues

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Abstract

The major shortcoming of online coursework is the curtailment of the give-and-take lecture model. Virtually all lecture information is passed onto the student in a linear, static format (e.g. printed notes, PowerPoint's, etc.). The delivery method is efficient and can be effective for conveying the fundamental information. Distance learning courses have been sharply criticized for essentially giving the students the notes without making them attend class. There is little opportunity for students to actively engage the material by asking probing or even tangential questions that represent the hallmark of higher education. There have been some attempts to engage students ranging from on-line chats to email exchanges with the professor but for the most part these activities are either underutilized or over hyped.

This paper proposes a holistic, contingent approach to online learning. The student's learning experience is a mixture of short readings, listening to brief lectures, step-by-step problem solving, and quick assessments. The student has the opportunity to explore the information according to their interests (within reason) and understanding. Assessments using contingent branching (e.g. quizzes that ask progressively more difficult questions with correct answers or easier questions if the student is missing mid-level questions) customize the learning to each student's level. Students having difficulty can request or be sent to remedial material and highly-motivated students can be directed to advanced topics.

The contingent approach is illustrated using Macromedia Captivate. This software has the capability of organizing modules such that users can voluntary select or automatically be directed to the most pertinent information. Competing software (e.g. Camtasia, PowerPoint) have similar capabilities but are not as adapt at setting up contingent paths. In this paper I provide a case study of how Captivate can incorporate a holistic, flexible approach to learning that mirrors what we see in the best traditional classrooms in tandem with the automation and distribution power of online learning.

Note: This paper was not available when the proceedings went to print. The author will provide handouts at the conference or via the web or email.