Virtual Classrooms Increase Velocity on Information Highway

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Back in elementary school, a new lunch box and a pencil were all you needed on the first day of school. In the age of Internet-based education, however, the hardware requirements are a little more involved—but the classroom is still there.

A handful of accredited HIT and HIA programs now offer courses via the Internet, with more planning to offer them in the future. And HIM educators face a new challenge: creating and teaching classes that are positive virtual classroom experiences for their students.

Program in Progress

Moraine Park Technical College, in West Bend, WI, launched three Internet courses, including a course in its HIT program, last fall. Although only a handful of students enrolled in the first class, instructor Gloria Madison, MS, RRA, says that interest in the class is building and she expects it to eventually approach the size of a traditional class—about 15 to 20 students.

The course is conducted in a virtual classroom created by software called Learning Space. The program includes a "course room" in which students can e-mail the instructor, ask a question, or converse with other group members in the classroom; a media center, which contains handouts, lecture notes, and worksheets; and an assessment section or grade book. "Everything is done using the software," Madison says.

Although the software's capabilities are extensive, technological requirements for the students are relatively few. To take the class, students must have computer access, a modem, and Microsoft Office software. When they enroll, they are authorized to dial in to the school's server and use a password to gain access to the software.

For Madison, being an Internet instructor has meant finding new ways to connect with students. "On the Internet, unless a student reaches out to me, I really don't know if they understand the material until it's assessment time," she says. "In class I got immediate feedback; online I have to work harder to know if they're really getting it."

But she has found that the class has its selling points. "You can take the course whenever you want—you're not confined to a time slot," Madison says. "This is a perfect option for people who are working or have other commitments—it releases the structured walls around education."

Students can also customize the course's syllabus to fit their own learning pace. And, as in any class, they can still make new friends—or at least pen pals. "Students get to interact with people from all over the country they would never otherwise get to meet," she says.

Program in Planning

HIA students at Dakota State University (DSU), in Madison, SD, will log in to Internet classes for the first time this fall. Although this is a new venture for the HIA program, director Dorine Bennett, RRA, has been drawing on the expertise of the university's distance education office and other departments that have conducted Internet courses for as long as three years.

Course lectures and assignments will be published weekly on the Web; students will generally e-mail assignments to the instructor. The only part of the process that will not be online is testing, although that is a possibility at some later date, Bennett says. DSU instructors are planning to implement an electronic method, such as a listserv or a bulletin board, to encourage discussion and student interaction. Each week, new questions will be posted and students will be asked to answer and discuss them. "We want to keep them on track, so we do have interaction and discussion," Bennett says. "In an Internet class, people sometimes feel that they are alone." Getting involved in a discussion helps to dispel this feeling of isolation, Bennett says.

Bennett expects the class to consist of a mix of current students who have not yet entered the work force, and returning students who are already employed and may already have a credential. The mix of students, she says, is mutually beneficial. "The students can learn from the experience of managers, and the managers can learn from the questions and ideas of entry-level people." Since geography is not an issue, a student can take the Internet course anywhere—as long as they have computer access.

One of the challenges of putting the course together, Bennett says, is keeping up with the changes—and limitations—of technology. Students are required to have Internet access that includes a Web browser and e-mail. If they have questions, they can turn to the school's computing services for support. And if there's an old-fashioned computer crash, they won't be left in the dark. "We will work with that student until the problem is resolved," Bennett says.

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Other AHIMA-accredited schools that offer Internet distance learning include: (see the school list attached to: "Taking the Plunge: Deciding to Return to Schools" for details)

HIT programs

Arapahoe Community College, Littleton, CO
Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, FL
St. Phillip's College, San Antonio, TX
Weber State University, Ogden, UT

HIA programs

College of St. Scholastica, Duluth, MN
Stephens College, Columbia, MO

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