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Supporting Online Learning

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ABSTRACT :

At the University of British Columbia (UBC), the Distance Education and Technology unit has worked with faculties to develop over 70 fully online courses since 1996. We have also watched many other institutions moving into online learning and consequently also into distance education for the first time. There are many reasons why some of these initiatives have failed, but one key reason was that not enough attention, especially in the initial business plans, was paid to the issue of supporting online students once courses were developed. Course delivery is a critical part of teaching online. This article looks at both the organization of online teaching, from an instructor's perspective, and the different strategies instructors can use to support students in their online learning and to ensure that online discussions foster critical thinking and meaningful activities for students. Thus the article discusses setting up a class, appropriate teacher-student ratios, the organization of discussion forums, student orientation, online behaviour and etiquette, and choice of an appropriate platform. Under teaching online, the article discusses student counselling, goals for online discussions, the nature of academic discourse and how to encourage it, collaborative learning, choice of topics, the role of the teacher and the role of students in online discussions, encouraging participation, cultural issues, and cheating. The article ends with a checklist of questions for consideration by an instructor when planning online teaching.

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