"Charting a new course: development and delivery of a doctoral survey course in health informatics"

Phyllis C. Self, Ph.D.
Vice Provost, Academic Technology

Dolores G. Clement, Dr.P.H.
Associate Dean, School of Allied Health Professions

Lynne U. Turman, MLS
Education Services Librarian, VCU Libraries

Pascal V. Calarco, MLIS
Acting Head, Library Information Systems, VCU Libraries

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, VA

There are both challenges and rewards to creating a new course and in particular introducing allied health professionals to the field of informatics. The authors of this case study poster believe that critical to healthcare delivery is the integration of informatics across the healthcare enterprise. Thus, when in 1998, VCU’s School of Allied Health Professions launched an innovative, interdisciplinary, Internet-based doctoral program we sought to require a health informatics course into the program. Students in the program are geographically distributed and represent a wide range of ages and disciplines. The health informatics course is offered during the program’s third year. This case study poster will illustrate not only the differences and similarities of the content and delivery of this course to other U.S. graduate-level informatics curricula but also present a variety of lessons learned.

Lessons learned fall into the broad categories of student-instructor communication, instructional technology, and learning resources required to support this online survey course. In the area of student-instructor communication we learned among many things that even doctoral students require very explicit assignments and will complain about deadlines and workloads. Personality conflicts among students do appear in the online environment and resolution of these conflicts online is challenging. While it is difficult to keep discussions focused using asynchronous technologies when students are interacting at different times of the day and throughout the course, we will share some successful techniques.

In the area of technology we were much more ambitious about incorporating multimedia technology than was possible given the restraints of Internet and computing technologies available to the students. As a result we moved to the lowest-common denominator of the technologies available to our students. Much time was spent troubleshooting the use of CD-ROMs, a proxy server, and readable print outputs and keeping web links up-to-date. We found that students printed a large part of their course readings and assignments much more than we expected.

In the area of resources we found that Up-front planning and work paid major dividends during the course delivery. Weekly planning meetings prior to the course as well as continuing throughout the course assured coordination between the three instructors who team-taught this Internet class. Because the course was Internet-based and team-taught we were able to get back to students quickly even when we were out of the office at conferences or on annual leave. This course truly engaged teaching and learning anywhere and anytime. The authors will share their plans for course revision and opportunities for external collaboration.