Framework for Analysis of Online Course Design

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ABSTRACT
Continued growth in popularity of online education calls for more research in its various aspects. One such aspect concerns online course design, which can differ substantially from traditional academic course development in the use of technology, the design process and the pedagogical approaches applied. This poster presents a draft framework for analyzing the design of an online academic course. The proposed framework is grounded both in empirical research and in existing literature. Accounting for the overall context of contemporary web environment, it tries to capture the interplay between technology and pedagogy in online course design as well as various factors that influence both technological and pedagogical decisions and ultimately shape course development. The interplay of technology and pedagogy and individual contributions of institutional, course content and instructor factors are represented. This work contributes to the theoretical base for the study of online education.

Keywords
Online education, course design.

INTRODUCTION
Offering online courses and full degree programs is a continually growing trend in higher education in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Academic institutions have to respond to the constant increase in demand for online programs and courses – the online enrollment saw a 17% growth from 2008 to 2009 (Allen & Seaman, 2010).

Design of online courses, whether “from scratch” or by conversion of traditional classroom content to the web-based format, differs from traditional course development in significant ways: (1) technology tools used to create and teach the course play a crucial role; (2) the course design is often a team effort involving specialists with different expertise; and (3) the often asynchronous mediated nature of online learning calls for significant changes in pedagogy (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006). These differences necessitate research into online course design as a special kind of academic course development with unique characteristics.

BACKGROUND
Online education has received a lot of research attention, but only a fraction of this growing body of literature deals specifically with course design.

Designing an online course involves tying together pedagogy and technology to achieve learning goals. Web-based courses rely on a mix of tools, often packaged into a Learning Management System, such as Blackboard (West, Waddoups & Graham, 2006). These tools vary in their ability to support different pedagogical strategies from simple information delivery to highly interactive and collaborative learning. The latter is more in line with contemporary pedagogical thought favoring a shift from objectivist teacher-centered to socio-constructivist student-centered approaches (Chen, 2007). Moreover, current web technologies supporting user participation in social interaction, information aggregation and sharing and collaborative knowledge creation that are commonly labeled as Web 2.0 “harmonize with modern thinking about education” (Crook et al., 2008). Yet, much of online course design is still based on the information-delivery model of instruction (Dutton, Cheong & Park, 2004). There thus exists a sizeable gap between theoretical possibilities and pragmatic reality of online course design. In order to begin to bridge this gap, it is necessary to gain thorough understanding of the factors that contribute to its existence.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
This project was motivated by the desire to develop a framework for discussing the interplay between technology and pedagogy in the online course design that captures the key factors that affect both the technology and pedagogy choices and ultimately the course design. The insights from the empirical study on the process of course conversion from traditional to online format (Kampov-Polevoi, 2010) were combined with a focused literature review to construct the framework presented in Figure 1.
One of the main ideas that emerged from both the literature and the empirical study is that there is a natural mapping between technology used in the course and the type of learning the course is designed for (and corresponding pedagogical strategies used). This relationship appears to be bidirectional, that is, pedagogical choices dictate the choice of technology able to support them, while availability of particular technology and its affordances dictate pedagogical decisions. To understand which direction the relationship goes in a particular scenario, it is important to consider the main factors that influence the course design. These factors fall into three main categories: institutional, course and instructor factors. The proposed framework illustrates how individual factors in each group relate to technology, pedagogy or both. This approach allows for analysis of different course design outcomes as results of combination of various aspects of the course development context.

In addition to immediate context of the course design as defined by the institution, the nature of the course and its instructor, there is a broader context of contemporary web environment with its resources, tools and common use practices. This general web context forms the foundation of the proposed framework – any changes and developments in the overall web context are reflected in both the course design and its influencing factors.

CONCLUSION
As Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) note in their comprehensive review of research on online teaching, advancement of research in this area is hampered by lack of suitable theoretical framework or model for studying online teaching. The work presented in this poster is an attempt to contribute to building a theoretical base for the study of online education by proposing a framework for analysis of online course design. The proposed framework has grounded in both literature and empirical research, but should be considered work-in-progress to be refined through additional research inquiry ongoing and planned.

REFERENCES


