



Making the Connection

Technology has made the quest for knowledge more convenient for today's students. QU Online enables them to take a course without entering the classroom, and the Arnold Bernhard Library is a mouse click away.

BY JANET WALDMAN

MATT WATCHES THE HOUR HAND INCH TOWARD 8:30 P.M. With another half hour of accounting class to go, this graduate student stretches his legs and stifles a yawn. He was alert when class began at 6:30, but the long day has taken its toll.

I hope she doesn't call on me now because my brain is fried, he thinks. He looks up to meet the professor's gaze as she says, "How about you Matt, we haven't heard from you tonight."

His face reddens as he shifts in his chair. He considers her question, then says, "Um, I really haven't thought about it." Off-the-cuff opinions have never been his forte. Pensive by nature, he prefers putting his thoughts in writing.

Written responses to instructors' questions are a perk of sorts for students taking online courses, where answers require less poise and more profundity. Students can reflect in the comfort of their living room, bedroom or anywhere else they can access the Internet.

Leeanne Griffin '06, who earned a master's in journalism, thinks she learned as much or more from classmates in her QU Online courses than in the "live classrooms" because there was more discourse online. "When you're typing a response to a professor or classmate in an online setting, it gives you the chance to stop and think about your answer and formulate the best response possible." It can take more time, as well.

ate students who return home for the summer, but want to catch up or get ahead and not worry about credits taken at other schools not transferring to Quinnipiac. They are especially appealing to graduate students, who prefer to fit courses into their lives around work and other commitments. Undergraduate enrollment in QU Online courses last summer was about 1,280, about 70 percent of QU Online's clientele. Grad student enrollment was 445. Enrollment does not translate to number of students, as some take more than one course.

Online graduate courses are offered year-round, and grad students constitute the fastest growing niche for online classes in the country. Although there are usually weekly deadlines, online courses are asynchronous, which means students can accomplish the work at their own pace, any place and time they choose, as long as there is an Internet connection. Grad students save money on the gas they would use, commuting, parking and traffic woes are eliminated, and time away from their families is minimized.

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—CYNTHIA GALLATIN, ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR ONLINE PROGRAMS

Students often find that online courses require more work, and professors definitely find that. The tradeoffs are convenience, flexibility and more options. Communication technologies, which allow us to connect any time and any place using cell phones, Black-Berrys and laptops, are enabling more and more students to earn college credits and even entire degrees without "going to class." Students and teachers agree that distance education presents rewards as well as challenges, one of which is how to create interactivity and social presence.

Expansion in offerings

Since QU Online began in 2001, its summer course offerings have expanded from 13 to 72. The courses are convenient for undergradu-



"Graduate students already have experienced the social advantages of attending on-campus classes and don't need to be physically present to feel a part of the University," said Cynthia Gallatin, associate vice president for online programs. For students ages 18–22, the campus experience is part of their education, she says. Ironically, undergraduate students living on campus often choose to communicate with one another via social networking web sites like Facebook and MySpace.

Quinnipiac is expanding options for graduate students. In the works are three new master's degree programs to be offered exclusively online pending formal approvals: a post-professional degree in occupational therapy; a master's in interactive communications through the School of Communications; and a master's in professional and organizational



communication through the College of Professional Studies.

In addition to the array of graduate courses the University offers, Quinnipiac's College of Professional Studies allows students to choose courses offered completely online or in a blended format (combining online learning with three half-day Saturday on-campus meetings per term). Geared to the adult learner, CPS offers bachelor's and master's degrees in organizational leadership. And, students get a degree from a traditional, bricks and mortar university.

A CPS student approached Gallatin at Commencement last year to praise the program. "He said he needed the degree to keep up in his field, and we made it possible. He would put his kids to bed and sit down to work on his degree at home," she says.

To those who worry that online education can lead to the so-called "McDonaldization" of education, Gallatin says: "We place a cap on our online courses so they don't get too large, which provides for a personalized experience. Many faculty members and students have intensive online discussions and create personalized relationships. Online education at QU strives to be innovative and personalized—not commoditized."

Professors observe that graduate students generally are more disciplined about time management than undergrads. They have chosen to juggle work and school to fulfill a personal or professional goal, so learning independently may be a bit easier for them while the younger student may benefit from the supervision of a professor in a class that meets "on ground."

Nearly 3.5 million students were taking at least one online course during the Fall 2006 term, representing about 20 percent of all U.S. higher education students, according to the Sloan Consortium's annual report on the state of online learning in U.S. higher education. Institutions cited improved student access as their top reason for offering online courses and programs.

How do online courses work?

Students taking an online course log onto Blackboard, the University's course delivery system. They consult the course "module" for

that week, which outlines learning objectives, assignments, and provides Web links to required and supplemental readings. Students frequently are asked to participate in a discussion board, where they can post answers to questions and see their classmates' postings in sequence. This takes the place of in-class discussions. There are typically weekly deadlines for completion of assignments. Many courses, and science ones in particular, foster learning using rich media, such as slides, simulations, animations or podcasts.

Education researchers have noted that in online education, the educational paradigm is transformed from teaching to learning, and the instructor's role becomes that of learning facilitator rather than instruction provider.

'KEYBOARD ENTRY' TO LIBRARY

The Arnold Bernhard Library overflows with books and journals, yet students can write top-notch research papers accessing library resources from the comfort of their suites. Many students are introduced to the library's online resources and can access them via the University's web site. For example, students can access full-text articles from scholarly journals using Proquest or one of the many other databases. They can read, download, print or e-mail to themselves. If an article is not available in full text on Proquest, that database may link to the full article in another database or indicate that the library has a paper copy.

With QCat, they can find a book on their research topic, its shelf location in the Bernhard library, and a diagram leading them to it. If the Bernhard library does not own the desired book or subscribe to the desired journal, a student can request it and the library staff will borrow it from another library. Other databases that see heavy use are LexisNexis Academic and the Jstor scholarly journal archive. For a listing of resources visit www.quinnipiac.edu/x874.xml



Online courses are not for procrastinators! Leaving work until the last minute is tempting but dangerous because professors expect students to spend 12 to 15 hours a week of a seven-week course completing activities, the equivalent of an on-campus class. Regular participation equals attendance. "There's no down time or hiding in the back of the room," Gallatin says.

Thomas Coe, associate professor of finance, adds, "There's no physical clock that says you have to be in the classroom on a certain day, and there's less supervision on the part of professors." He began teaching online courses in 2003. He teaches each summer from his family's home outside Sacramento, Calif. "That's distance education," he says with a laugh.

Coe also made use of Blackboard when he was called to his previous home in a suburb of New Orleans to deal with home damage sustained during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. He was able to give his students assignments and feedback in between helping his wife clear debris. Online courses also enable Quinnipiac to stretch its resources. Sometimes, there are not enough rooms or professors to meet the demand of students taking core requirements in the academic year, and these students are served online in the summer.

Professors plan their course by partnering with one of QU Online's instructional designers, according to Frances Rowe, associate director of QU Online. "It's important to understand what the faculty member values about his or her teaching as you are trying to help with an online implementation of a course or program." She said some instructors use PowerPoint presentations and others use Adobe Breeze, like PowerPoint but featuring the professor's voice.

Professors can gauge students' grasp of materials by monitoring

the discussion boards and providing feedback either individually or via the boards. Sharon Kleinman, professor of communications, taught a graduate course last summer called Mobile Communication and the Culture of Efficiency. Kleinman sent weekly e-mails to students summarizing the goals to be accomplished that week. She frequently sent individual e-mails to students, commenting on their postings as well.

Coe teaches Financial Analysis and Decision Making online. While some of the course involves quantitative work, Coe also asks students to write about current events and trends in finance using the discussion groups feature of Blackboard. Some professors in on-campus classes also use this feature to supplement discussion when class is not in session. For example, journalism professor Margarita Diaz asked students in an on-campus magazine writing class this fall to post articles they wrote on Blackboard and critique each other's writings before class to stimulate discussion and use class time more efficiently.

There is a perception that teaching online takes more time, Rowe says. "This perception may be more of a matter of allowing ourselves to be interrupted throughout the day by e-mails or responding to discussion posts." Rowe encourages professors to adhere to certain times of the day for responding to students and to keep a correspondence log in a word document from which they can cut and paste. "You never know when you might want to repurpose a well-written response, and you'll find yourself searching for that thread," she says.

Interactivity is vital

Some critics of online education say it cannot match the intellectual exchange that in-person classes offer. "The personal touch, spontaneity and faces of the professor and classmates are missing, but the make-it-or-break-it aspect is the interaction with students," Gallatin says. "Professors go from being center stage to guiding students in the learning process and are needed just as much," she adds.



Occasionally, Coe will host a synchronous session, when students in one of his courses log on at the same time and pose questions about work they do not understand.

Composing responses to questions and responding to others indeed can feel like more work than traditional classes, where day-dreaming still occurs and lazy or quiet students let a handful of eager participants do the lion's share of the contributing. For these students in particular, Coe thinks more written discussion can lead to better comprehension.

"Online courses definitely are more work," says Jonathan Blake, professor of computer science, who teaches both types. "Summer courses are accelerated, to begin with, and there is something comforting about the notion of someone telling you what to do in a classroom, the rhythm to the process, but in online courses, you are responsible for the work. If you don't have the push or drive to get the work done, you get an F," he says.

"On the other hand, some students totally fly and want to be challenged, and they love online courses," he points out.

Blake said professors everywhere wondered whether online courses would threaten their jobs. “The sky has not fallen, and that worry has faded away,” Blake says. He strives to create interactivity in his online courses. In addition to the Breeze presentations, he has inserted full-screen humorous flash videos that show him ordering pizza, and yelling at students to “Wake up and pay attention!”

Another of Blake’s challenges was to help students with software code writing from a distance. “Computers do exactly what you tell them to, which is good and bad. If your code is not working, I say, ‘You wrote it—you change it.’ This invokes power and fear at the same time. So, I have them submit the code to me. Then I edit their program and make a video of me with running commentary. I send it to them, and they can watch me actually editing their code on screen.”

Blake said a typical online course of this sort has seven students. Not all take advantage of his tutorial, but it has made a huge difference to those who do.

Joshua Kim, a part-time instructor in the College of Professional Studies, uses a webcam to inject his voice into his online courses. “Webcams allow faculty to easily post short videos in Blackboard that allow intimate, informal and personal communication. By being able to ‘talk’ directly to my students, I can comment on course logistics, give advice on assignments and provide feedback for student questions and work,” he says.

Kim used a webcam in his Online Leadership Consulting course in conjunction with Adobe Breeze Meeting to hold real-time, face-to-face class meetings and discussions every Tuesday night. “The ability to see each other while speaking and listening (while sharing notes and ideas in the online whiteboard) allowed for efficient and rich communication and collaboration,” he says.

Student impressions

Common student gripes about online courses include not getting to know classmates, not feeling like part of a “real” class and written workloads that increase when courses involve 20 or more students, all posting to and reading the discussion boards.

Griffin, an assistant online producer for *courant.com*, says she learned a lot from the narrative journalism course she took online, but didn’t care for that format in her computer-assisted reporting course. “There were situations where I needed some hands-on instruction from professors and classmates,” she says.

She also said it can be difficult to gauge classmates’ emotions in typed responses. “You might inadvertently take offense to something someone has written. Short of writing everything in italics, bold, or dotted with emoticons, you don’t know what tone your classmate might be taking when they write.”

As a graduate student living more than 50 miles from campus, she says the flexibility and time savings she realized outweighed any negatives.

Coe, like most of his colleagues, enjoys interacting with students in a real classroom. “We like to share our knowledge and see its influence on others, and I really enjoy speaking with students. But, I understand the attraction of online courses and will provide what our students want,” he says.

It comes back to tradeoffs. “People miss out on seeing the beautiful Sleeping Giant Mountain, but they don’t have to worry about parking,” Coe adds.

MULTITASKING MANIA

Sharon Kleinman, professor of communications, is among the 110 faculty members who teach online at Quinnipiac. She also is the editor of *Displacing Place: Mobile Communication in the Twenty-first Century* (Peter Lang, 2007), a collection of essays by experts discussing how cell phones, laptop computers, iPods, BlackBerrys and other mobile information and



communication technologies have spawned a multitasking revolution that has positive and negative consequences.

The book’s title conveys the idea that place is often irrelevant, Kleinman says. “People no longer call places, they call people. One of the first things we ask when calling someone or answering the phone is ‘Where are you?’” she says. Kleinman taught a graduate course online last summer titled *Mobile Communication and the Culture of Efficiency*.

Kleinman and other professors embrace the opportunities that technology makes possible. She, like other faculty at Quinnipiac, thinks wireless technologies have introduced more options than were intended. For example, students in face-to-face classes can be tempted to multitask—doing homework for another class, checking their e-mail and conversing with friends via instant messages. Professors often surmise that the smile playing around the student’s lips has little to do with their lecture.

“I asked a student in class to shut down her laptop the other day because I want people to be where they are! It’s very easy to get off task with mobile information and communication technologies at our fingertips,” she said.

Thomas Coe, associate professor of finance, says students multitasking during class is a new variation on the old “comic book hidden inside a textbook during class” trick. “We have these tools, good or bad. They are here,” he says.

“Online education is mainstream—a third of our students take at least one online summer course. Yes, they are more labor intensive for professors, but I appreciate the convenience that they offer to students and professors, and I want to be on the cutting edge,” Kleinman says. In 2006, she taught part of an online course from Dresden, Germany, where she was attending an academic conference.

One essay in her book was written by Gary Pandolfi, an instructional technologist in Quinnipiac’s Academic Technology department. In it, he recommends that professors use technology to free up classroom time for enriching activities rather than lectures, which can be posted online. In his essay, he notes that students are looking not just for content, but how that content is considered by experts in the field—their professors.

Kleinman’s book also includes an essay by Penny Leisring, associate professor of psychology, about mental health professionals conducting “therapy at a distance” via cell phones.