

Online Education at Montemorelos University

A Story of Change and Commitment

Online education at Universidad de Montemorelos or Montemorelos University (MU) in Mexico began with a few pioneer educators who, in the late 1990s, began designing Internet courses in Spanish. The university administration showed its support by proposing the following: (1) systematic review of the scholarly literature on distance courses and pilot programs in cutting-edge institutions, (2) the inclusion of online course delivery in institutional strategic planning, and (3) the creation of a special team to increase the use

The university president encouraged MU's deans and departmental chairpersons to set goals to implement these unconventional delivery methods and aided in the creation of the University Internet Team.

By Victor Korniejczuk, Ana Lucrecia Salazar, Patricia Monarrez, Tatiana Quiroz, José Luis Girarte, Elena Castillo de Loera, Jorge Trisca, and Tomás Cauch

of institutional Internet resources in the school's academic endeavors.

The University Internet Team

The university president encouraged MU's deans and departmental chairpersons to set goals to implement these unconventional delivery methods and aided in the creation of the University Internet Team. Nine professionals from Information Systems, the electronic labs of various schools, the School of Engineering and Technology, and the Graduate School of Education worked together from October to December 2000 to:

1. Develop a plan to increase faculty use of the Internet.
2. Design a proposal to present to the Professional Development Institute that would declare this project an essential part of faculty training.
3. Initiate online courses with the help of interested faculty members in order to increase the project's acceptance.
4. Offer advice for developing distance and online education.
5. Choose software for this project.

On October 22, 2000, the Internet team voted the following purpose statement in keeping with the vision of the university: "The University of Montemorelos offers the benefits of Seventh-day Adventist educational programs using the Internet in traditional classrooms and in the virtual community to reach young people and professional Spanish-speaking audiences worldwide who are unable to physically attend the University."

By December 2000, the teachers who had created the pilot courses were willing to produce more online classes. In January 2001, the religion professors accepted an invitation to place their Bible courses on WebCT, and received training the following month. Some professors who initially embraced the project later abandoned it because of the lack of support and time constraints.

Creation of the Office for E-learning Design

In response to this first experience, the university administration decided to create an office that would, among other things, design and place courses online. Initially, the Web team consisted of a director (an assistant to the president for university project development) and seven faculty members (five in charge of instructional design and two in charge of graphic Web page design). While working on the first online courses, the Web team developed the theoretical framework, standards, and procedures for its internal functions, as well as design standards and criteria for teachers of online classes (see sidebars). At the same time, the team worked on a proposal for a Distance Learning Office that would report to the university's academic vice president.

From its inception, this office worked to support distance learning by endorsing the idea of professors initially being content developers and eventually becoming tutors/teachers of the same courses. Three university schools took advantage of this support: education, business, and music. At the moment, 13 courses have been placed online, and 23 are in the process of development.

e42 Platform

A development team created the e42 Platform course management system for the university's online education. (The "e" stands for "electronic" and "42" for the founding year of Montemorelos University.) The e42 platform provides the software for teachers to develop course content and organize online classes. Like WebCT and Blackboard, e42 enables teachers to do a number of tasks related to online teaching: course creation, student registration, personal Web-page de-

velopment, file management, scheduling, forum development, internal mail, and other tasks. e42's variety of pedagogical functions and flexibility allow the instructor to easily accomplish the processes of teaching and learning online. Students have ready access to course material and numerous opportunities to interact with classmates and fulfill course requirements.

Training Teachers to Design and Tutor Online Courses

The university's Institute for Professional Development (IDP) regularly provides teacher in-service training. The IDP decided to give every faculty member a brief introduction to online education. The purpose of this workshop, conducted in



Montemorelos University professors attend a training session on the design and teaching of online courses, taught by the authors of this article, who are members of the Department of Development of Distance Learning.

2002 by Dr. Jim Jeffery from Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, was to awaken teachers to the many possibilities of online teaching. For three days, four hours a day, teachers received hands-on training in how to take the first steps toward Web-enhancing their courses.¹

Online Course Training

The IDP asked the Office for E-learning Design to prepare and implement a module by June 2002 that would introduce teachers to designing and teaching online courses. Preparation for this course began in February 2002. Necessary computer skills were identified, and all teachers who lacked the required skills received assistance in a course titled "Designing and Tutoring Online Courses." The eight units designed by team members included the following: designing online courses, teaching/tutoring online courses, strategies for interaction in online teaching, instructional strategies and techniques, Web resources, copyright laws, assessing student performance, and integrating faith and learning in online courses.

The content of each unit was presented in a different format and included such activities as forum, chats, voice conference, lectures, and case-study analysis. Two final assessment

instruments were used to measure teachers' mastery of content and perceptions about the course. The 112 faculty members who registered for the course were divided into eight groups. As teacher/tutors, the members of the design team each provided feedback and encouragement to the teachers in one of the groups. The training was delivered online during a one-week period. About half of the 112 teachers satisfactorily finished the course. Participants' reactions at the end of the course included the following: "The content of the modules presented was very interesting, useful, and valuable,"



Montemorelos University teachers practice their technical skills in preparation for creating online courses.

"Faith integration in online education is possible," "Tutoring is very important for the success of the course," "The e42 platform was reasonably simple and functional," "The time assigned for the course was not sufficient for some people," and "Following instructions plays a very important role in teaching online."



A Montemorelos University student completes assignments for an online course.

New Challenges for the Near Future

The administration of Montemorelos University has formulated the following goals:

1. Create new online courses so that every senior undergraduate student will complete at least one online course in his or her discipline.
2. Select and develop 30 new online courses, starting in the summer of 2003 (using results from a feasibility study in the Spanish-speaking world).
3. Negotiate with three Spanish-language universities from South America to evaluate the content and instructional

Sidebar No.1

Quality Design Standards for Online Courses

Each course should fulfill the following criteria:

- Be Bible-based;
- Reflect the Adventist philosophy of education;
- Contribute to the formation of Christian character and a spirit of service; and
- Intentionally incorporate Christian beliefs and values.

Each course should promote learning for the development of personal and professional skills.

- Promote skills and academic development;
- Support productivity; and
- Motivate quality performance.

Each course should promote the highest levels of thought and communication.

- Be clear, truthful, precise, pertinent, and logical;
- Develop communication skills and teamwork;
- Develop problem-solving skills; and
- Conform to current copyright laws.

Each course must have clear and motivating objectives.

- Content and activities reflect the course objectives;
- Be up to date;
- Accommodate different learning styles; and
- Be clearly outlined.

Each course will be pedagogically sound, according to the nature of the course.

- Include activities that involve reasoning, comprehension, application, synthesis, evaluation, and critical thinking;
- Be scheduled, with beginning and ending dates;
- Have clear due dates for projects and assignments;
- Provide access to library resources;
- Include appropriate course evaluations;
- Include various ways to verify the required skills; and
- Include a process for evaluating format and quality.

design of the courses.

4. Create an Online Education Department. (This became a reality in January 2003, and the Office for E-learning Design was reorganized as the Department for Development of Distance Education, under the academic vice president.)

In summary, the Montemorelos story says something about the culture of an institution that is successfully implementing online education. It's important that leadership have a vision for online learning, that ongoing teacher training be a part of the culture, that people work together across organizational boundaries, and that no experience be viewed as a failure! Montemorelos University is moving forward with God's blessing—remaining true to its mission, utilizing a team

Sidebar No. 2

Online Tutoring Standards

Recognizing the importance of the teacher, the following guidelines were established:

In the spiritual role, the teacher/tutor will:

- Integrate faith through communication between student and teacher;
- Model moral and Christian values;
- Encourage spiritual growth;
- Promote discussions where great questions are explored; and
- Encourage cooperation, not competition.

In the intellectual role, the teacher/tutor will:

- Provide incentives for the student to achieve the course outcomes;
- Guide discussions to crucial issues;
- Ask questions to encourage critical thinking;
- Encourage students to extend knowledge and make contributions;
- Foster intellectual commitment by keeping classes challenging;
- Encourage students to be intellectually curious and active, rather than passive;
- Help students develop self-regulated learning skills and perseverance; and
- Facilitate resources to help develop discussion issues.

In the social role, the teacher/tutor will:

- Establish a framework of quality and warm service;
- Offer immediate feedback;
- Care for students' needs and help them as required;
- Provide a friendly environment;
- Give accurate and friendly answers;
- Interact constantly with students;
- Follow up on all activities;
- Allow freedom of speech, ideas, and opinions; and
- Show a sense of humor, helping others to avoid annoyances caused by technology.



The primary author of this article, Victor Korniejczuk, tutors students in an online course.

approach to innovation, and using as many “best practices” as possible² to better serve the church and its students. ✍



Authors of this article, left to right: **Victor Korniejczuk** is a Professor in the School of Education at Montemorelos University (MU) in Montemorelos, Mexico. He is also Assistant to the President for Projects of Innovation and Institutional Development. Since January 2003, he has directed the university's Department of Development of Distance Education (DDDE). **Patricia Monárrez** is a Teacher in the School of Education at MU and Coordinator in the area of implementation in the DDDE. **José Luis Girarte** is Head of the computer laboratory in the School of Health Sciences at MU. **Ana Lucrecia Salazar** is a Professor in the School of Education at MU and Coordinator of the area of design and production in the DDDE. **Jorge Trisca** is a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at MU and Instructional Designer for the DDDE. **Tomás Cauch** is a Teacher in the Department of Education at MU, Head of the computer laboratory for the Education Department at the university, and a graphics and Web page designer for the DDDE. **Elena Castillo de Loera** is a Teacher in the Department of Education at MU and an Instructional Designer in the DDDE. (Not pictured) **Tatiana Quiroz** is an Instructional Designer in the DDDE.

NOTES

1. The workshop notes are available at <http://www.andrews.edu/~jimjeff/AVLL/index.htm>.

2. See Best Practices for electronically offered degree and certificate programs—especially the sections on Institutional Commitment and Faculty Support: http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/resources/electronic_degrees.