Fostering Non-Traditional Student Success in an Online Music Appreciation Course

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Abstract : E-learning has earned an essential place in academia because it promotes learner autonomy, student engagement, and technological aptitude, and allows for flexible learning. However, despite advantages, educators have been slower to embrace e-learning for ESL and other non-traditional students for fear that such students will not succeed without the direct faculty contact and academic support of face-to-face classrooms. This study aims to determine if a non-traditional student-friendly online course can produce student retention and performance rates that compare favorably with those of students in standard online sections of the same course aimed at traditional college-level students. One Music faculty member is currently collaborating with an English instructor to redesign an online college-level Music Appreciation course for non-traditional college students. At Community College of Philadelphia, Introduction to Music Appreciation was recently designated as one of the few college-level courses that advanced ESL, and developmental English students can take while completing their language studies. Beginning in Fall 2017, the course will be critical for international students who must maintain full-time student status under visa requirements. In its current online format, however, Music Appreciation is designed for traditional college students, and faculty who teach these sections have been reluctant to revise the course to address the needs of non-traditional students. Interestingly, presenters maintain that the online platform is the ideal place to develop language and college readiness skills in at-risk students while maintaining the course's curricular integrity. The two faculty presenters describe how curriculum rather than technology drives the redesign of the digitized music course, and self-study materials, guided assignments, and periodic assessments promote independent learning and comprehension of material. The 'scaffolded' modules allow ESL and developmental English students to build on prior knowledge, preview key vocabulary, discuss content, and complete graded tasks that demonstrate comprehension. Activities and assignments, in turn, enhance college success by allowing students to practice academic reading strategies, writing, speaking, and student-faculty and peer-peer communication and collaboration. The course components facilitate a comparison of student performance and retention in sections of the redesigned and existing online sections of Music Appreciation as well as in previous sections with at-risk students. Indirect, qualitative measures include student attitudinal surveys and evaluations. Direct, quantitative measures include withdrawal rates, tests of disciplinary knowledge, and final grades. The study will compare the outcomes of three cohorts in the two versions of the online course: ESL students, at-risk developmental students, and college-level students. These data will also be compared with retention and student outcomes data of the three cohorts in f2f Music Appreciation, which permitted non-traditional student enrollment from 1998-2005. During this eight-year period, the presenter addressed the problems of at-risk students by adding language and college success support, which resulted in strong retention and outcomes. The presenters contend that the redesigned course will produce favorable outcomes among all three cohorts because it contains components which proved successful with at-risk learners in f2f sections of the course. Results of their study will be published in 2019 after the redesigned online course has met for two semesters.

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