A Look at Dordt's Summer Online Courses

Kate Henreckson
Dordt College

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A LOOK AT DORDT’S SUMMER ONLINE COURSES

Dordt College began offering online summer courses in 2014.

The college noticed that, whether due to a family or medical situation or a switch in major, some students needed more flexibility than semester courses offered. Often they were looking elsewhere to meet their requirements.

“We wanted them to take these courses from Dordt College,” says Associate Provost Leah Zuidema. “So, we looked at which classes would be most helpful for Dordt’s students.”

As a result, Dordt has added a number of online courses, including Core 160—“Introduction to the Arts.” Other classes added over the last few years have been “English Composition,” “Sociology & Social Justice,” and “Principles of Marketing.”

Taking a summer course is not easy. Courses generally last six weeks and require about 20 hours of work per week: the equivalent of a part-time job. But for some students, it is also a way to free up their schedule during the school year to take extra electives, be involved in more co-curricular activities, or even study abroad.

“The physical college will never go away, but students need flexibility. In the end, it comes down to serving our students well,” says Zuidema.

To prepare Dordt faculty for online teaching, Education Professor Dr. David Mulder (’98) teaches BOLT 101: “Blended and Online Learning and Teaching.” In each of the six weekly workshops, Mulder uses a different pedagogical technique. For example, one week he plays the “absent professor”—giving no comments or feedback. Another week he is the “overly-involved professor”—commenting on everything.

“We want online courses to be high quality experiences, both for the instructor and the student,” Mulder says. One way he encourages that is by focusing on “social presence”—making sure that students (and professors) convey a sense of who they are, even in an online environment.

“I want faculty to see that they can use online tools to build relationships and make real connections with others.” Mulder says. “In the end it’s about responsible teaching—responding to the needs of your students, the demands of the content, and the traditions of your discipline.”

Teresa Ter Haar, professor of theatre arts at Dordt, enjoyed the BOLT 101 experience.

“BOLT 101 captured my imagination for the way an online class could create relationships with students,” says Ter Haar. “I was skeptical at first about that piece. But David got us excited about how tech could foster those relationships.”

Ter Haar co-teaches an arts appreciation course online. The requirements for the course include performance attendance, readings, writings, and a video storytelling project.

Ter Haar did find the lack of body language in online teaching challenging, particularly in teaching theater. But there were also definite benefits.

“Sometimes in face-to-face classes, students are reluctant to speak out,” says Ter Haar. “But because this is all in writing, my students actually got a sense of their classmates and their own abilities to be insightful. Communicating online is intuitive for them, so they open up in a way they sometimes don’t face-to-face.”

Ter Haar plans to take some of the lessons she learned in online teaching and bring them to her traditional classes—particularly using written online peer responses.

“Teaching online was really fun—I loved it!” she says. “I had a great experience in my class this summer, and BOLT 101 set me up well to do that.”