

Reflections on Teaching Online Family Life Education

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ABSTRACT. Delivery of information and advice through the Internet has transformed the ways in which family life educators can teach about the important issues facing families. In this article I reflect on the lessons I have learned as a result of trying to use online delivery systems to conduct family life programs. These reflections highlight the opportunities and challenges faced by family life educators as they attempt to use new delivery systems and educational tools.

In 1994 I had over a decade of experience as a family life educator. Little did I know that my work was about to dramatically change. That year I started a new job as Extension Family Life Specialist at The Ohio State University. When the computer technician installed my new computer he told me that he had included a new program called Mosaic that would allow me to access the World Wide Web. Although I had heard about the WWW, I knew very little about the Web, so over the next few months I began an exploration that continues to this day. I began trying to understand how it worked including reading books and articles about the Web. One particularly influential book was *The Mosaic Handbook* (Dougherty & Koman, 1994) which explained how the Web worked and provided basic instruction about how to create a website. For the next few months I taught myself website development. In those early days there was almost nothing on the Web that was related to children and families. Most of the material was about science and technology because these were the people who knew how to use this technology and had access to it. I thought that the web held much promise for family life education.

Reflection: During my career as a family life educator there have been many changes and many new opportunities. It has been important to continually learn new skills and knowledge so that I can be a more effective family life educator.

Professional Development Using the Internet

My first attempt at using the Internet in my role as a family life educator was to conduct professional development via email and the use of a listserv. I knew that all of the county offices in Ohio had email and that by 1996 this technology was being used to communicate between the campus and county offices. Using email and a listserv seemed like a good way to teach county extension educators about family life.

In 1996 I conducted an e-mail in-service course about issues related to children and divorce. (See Hughes, 1996a). The participants subscribed to an electronic listserv that allowed everyone to jointly discuss information. The course consisted of a series of six e-mail sessions about the effects of divorce on children and program strategies to address those issues. Following each email family life lesson, county educators were sent discussion questions and were encouraged to reply to the listserv with their ideas, questions and reactions to the lesson content. A panel of experts in divorce research and intervention also were enrolled on the listserv to discuss the ideas presented in each session.

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During the first week that I sent the email lesson I spent much of my time on the phone with secretaries from county extension offices who were trying to understand how to use email software, how to subscribe to a listserv and how to deal with other technical problems related to the Internet. This first week I began to realize that most county extension professionals at that time were not reading their own email. Often a secretary managed the email, printed copies for staff and typed replies based on notes from staff. In the follow-up evaluation of the program, only about half of the participants used email themselves. Needless to say this level of Internet access and email usage did not make it easy for participants to actively participate in the discussion on the listserv.

Reflection: Don't assume that just because the technology tools exist and some people are using these tools that your audience is using the tools or using them in the way that you think.

Building Websites for Family Life Professionals and Families Human Development and Family Life Education Center.

In addition to the efforts to conduct professional development programs via email, I was also interested in using the web as a platform for teaching professionals (Human Development and Family Life Education Center, 1996-1999). My colleagues and I had previously developed a print newsletter for professionals working with families. In our first attempts to put the newsletter on the Web, we simply used the same structure and format of the printed publication on the web. In other words, we retained the structure of the printed newsletter when we put it on the web. We also retained the common method of volume and issue numbers used by libraries in cataloguing journals. Over time we realized these “printed materials conventions” were either unnecessary or not helpful on the Web. Eventually we began to break up the newsletter into its parts by putting all the articles about “evaluation” in one section and other types of articles in other coherent sections. We also learned to use the titles of the articles as our links rather than “volume or issue” numbers. This organizational structure seems obvious today, but it took time to design a new structure and navigational methods for the content rather than simply applying the familiar formats of printed materials. Weinberger’s reflections about the Web captures our experience: “the Web is changing our understanding of what puts things together...on the Web...the pieces are so loosely joined that frequently the links don’t work...But that’s okay because the Web gets its value not from the smoothness of the overall operation but from the abundance of small nuggets that point to more small nuggets (Weinberger, 2002; p. ix –x).

Reflection: When learning to use a new educational tool I had to learn how to re-think my instructional design and teaching models rather than simply applying existing strategies.

iConnect.

One of the most experimental web projects I tried on the Web was with Aaron Ebata who developed iConnect (Ebata & Hughes, 1997), a website aimed at adolescents whose parents had been divorced. The primary goal of this website was to get beyond an instructional format that was simply reading text online. We were interested in adding some program elements that allowed participants to be engaged with the information and content of the website. To achieve this goal, iConnect included chat capabilities and a story format similar to a “choose your own adventure” book in which the participants could follow a story line about a child faced with the choices and challenges of his parent’s divorce. As participants they were given choices about

how the story character could react to situations and follow different branches of the story. These program strategies were designed to engage young people in exploring ideas and experiences about divorce rather than just reading expert advice. Unfortunately, in 1997, the basic technology to manage these interactive tools was hard to use and required considerable technical support. In the end the website was too complicated to use it effectively.

Reflection: In trying any new educational tool, some projects will fail. Nevertheless, I tried to learn from each mistake and failure.

MissouriFamilies.

The great strength of the Internet is that educators can reach large and diverse audiences, but this opportunity does not necessarily mean that every program is suitable for every audience. For example, many early family life websites did not adequately distinguish between programs meant for the public and programs intended for professionals (see Tufts University (n.d.) webguide for an example of a repository that puts everything together). In the end this confuses your audience because they can't find the appropriate content.

Reflection: Identify your program niche when developing family life programs.

Upon moving to the University of Missouri--Columbia in 1999, I began to work with faculty to develop a new website that would address a wide range of issues related to families. We called it MissouriFamilies (2001), and one of the keys to developing this website was the decision to focus on family members themselves. By defining MissouriFamilies as an information source for the public, we selected content that was appropriate to families themselves and did not include content that would be useful to professionals who worked with families.

Reflection: Regardless of the educational tools and strategies, knowing your audience remains fundamental to effective family life education.

A major goal of the design for MissouriFamilies was developing a robust structure that was flexible and could easily be expanded. In the course of planning we identified several key elements that allowed for the creation of a flexible structure. One of the first decisions was to organize the information around topical content—relationships, housing, food and fitness, aging, developmental disabilities and so forth. The front page of the website was designed as a table of contents for the website. Likewise, each of these topical pages also served as more refined tables of content that easily provided ways for website visitors to find content of interest.

The content within the website was organized into three formats—short answers to common questions (called “quick answers”), longer articles that provided more information (called “feature articles”) and learning opportunities which were more in-depth learning experiences that included face-to-face programs and online learning classes. A key idea was that the material was organized so that website visitors could easily find an answer to a specific question, but would also be presented with additional information for further learning.

The “quick answer” format was a key instructional design element. This format was a basic building block of the instructional design. We had observed that many software packages had a help section called frequently asked questions (FAQs). There were short answers to common questions. In MissouriFamilies we adopted this approach to constructing the design of the website. Rather than write long traditional newsletters or fact sheets, we developed a series of questions and answers (FAQs). We used these as the basic units of learning and linked them to more in-depth articles so that participants could begin with direct answers to questions and then, if they were interested in learning more, could follow links to additional information. We

created a structure to link small units of information (FAQs) to more in-depth learning opportunities.

Reflection: New educational tools provide new ways for facilitating learning.

Evaluating Online Family Life Education

Regardless of the educational activity it is important to get feedback and understand what is working and what is effective. Using educational technologies presents both opportunities and problems for educators. One of the important but often overlooked opportunities is that web servers record a lot of information about the use of websites. This information, referred to as “web analytics,” provides information about how often a webpage is viewed, the general geographic location of the computer that viewed the webpage, and much more.

Using this information about the Human Development and Family Life website (Hughes, 2001), I began to learn how to use the website analytics to obtain process feedback about the web design that could be used to develop better designs. For MissouriFamilies (2002), we examined the web analytics to monitor usage and understand the effectiveness of the website’s instructional design. For example, when we began to examine the most popular pages on the website we found that an article (Hemmelgarn & Kliethermes, 2001/2009) about the dangers of “Metabolite,” a common nutritional supplement that was being sold as a weight loss aid, had the most page views of any page in our website. This led to the discovery that when you conducted a search for “Metabolite” this article was on the first page of the search results. All the other pages identified by the search were sites that sold the product. This finding provided us with insights into monitoring keywords that were being used by participants to find the website through search engines. The FAQ format was a particularly good method to facilitate finding our webpages via search engines because many people used questions and keywords as a search strategy. We also added information on each webpage that provided participants’ with the ability to easily find additional, relevant content even if they originally landed on a specific webpage deep in the website.

Reflection: Build in ways to get feedback and evaluation information to improve online family life education.

Teaching Online Family Life Education to Students

In 2008, I had the opportunity to teach the graduate course about family life program development at the University of Illinois. Although online family life education had been included in this course, I decided that developing the skills and expertise to conduct online family life programs would be central to the course. Thus, rather than encourage students to write printed material or develop workshops, students would be expected to design (if not actually develop) online programs. One of my assumptions for this course was that since students would be familiar with many of the technology tools they would easily be able to create educational materials online. I quickly learned that although students were familiar with the technology, they generally had only used it for communication and entertainment. They had much to learn about how to develop strategies for using technology for instruction.

The course that evolved combines an analysis of online family life programs with the instructional design skills that are essential to online programming (see Hughes, 2010). For example, I have adapted a review form reviewing online programs (Hughes, 2008) that I originally developed to analyze face-to-face programs (Hughes, 1994). There are three major objectives of this course:

1. Develop skills for translating research about human development and family life into program content.
2. Understand the program development process, from identifying an educational need to program design and ultimately program evaluation (based on Hughes, 1994).
3. Develop educational technology skills and strategies to effectively develop online family life education.

The content of this course is now on its 3rd revision and much closer to the right focus. The early versions of the course were too focused on the educational technology skills and failed to deal with the fundamental skills of translating research into practice and program development. The emphasis on the technology reflected what I needed to learn the most about, not what the students needed. This is another reminder that effective teaching always starts with knowing your audience, even in the case of teaching students or professionals.

This course has resulted in important new contributions by students who have become engaged in studying online programs and designing new programs. Three students, Jill Bowers, Elissa Mitchell, and Sarah Curtiss have made significant contributions to online family life program development. Bowers and Mitchell conducted a review of online divorce education programs and have made important recommendations that can lead to better programs for these families (see Bowers, Mitchell, Hardesty & Hughes, 2011). Additionally, this group of students developed a guide for designing online family life programs that integrates knowledge and skills from research on human-computer interaction, user interface design, educational technology, web design, and multimedia learning. One of the first products of this group is an overview of best practices in designing online family life education (Hughes, Bowers, Mitchell, Curtiss, & Ebata, in press).

Reflection: Be prepared to revise your work again and again in order to make family life education better.

New Opportunities

In 2009 I began monitoring the online discussion about the potential role of childhood vaccines in causing autism. I used this discussion with students to illustrate how the Internet could distribute dubious scientific information and that scientists who studied this issue were rarely engaged in the online discussion. Likewise, although there were reports online from the Food and Drug Administration about this issue, even their spokespersons and educators did not participate in much of the online discussion. This situation was very troublesome to me and I used this as a lesson to suggest that effective family life education would need to actively participate in online discussions/blogs if we hoped to be a relevant source of information. This set the stage for my next opportunity.

Reflection: It is important for family scientists and family life educators to use new educational technology tools to engage the public.

Huffington Post-- Science in the tabloids.

In 2010, I received an email from the editors at the Huffington Post indicating that they were starting a new section of their online publication in the area of “divorce” and inviting me to be one of their bloggers. After some consideration I agreed to participate. My approach to this assignment has been to write a brief article that captures the findings from recently published research (See blog entries at Hughes, 2011). I choose topics that can be applied to the challenges faced by divorcing families or that might inform public policy and programming issues. The

editors write the headlines for the blog posts that appear on the front page of the section which often means that my work appears with hyperbolic headlines, and it is always embedded in a page of articles that chronicle the latest celebrity divorce. I am not the only professional trying to foster a thoughtful discussion; there are other professionals such as attorneys, mediators, and counselors who contribute articles as well.

The most interesting part of this work is the comments that are posted from readers in reaction to my blog posts. Some of the comments are inane, but many are funny and heartrending as well. The most important part of this work is learning from the readers. Through the comments I understand how I have failed to communicate a particular idea. I learn what readers are thinking about on various issues and topics. These comments improve the work, help me to select topics that may be interesting and informative and give me a chance to extend the conversation about these issues.

Reflection: It is important to take some professional risks. You will probably learn something.

Divorcescience.org- Practicing public science.

My latest work is an attempt to expand both science and the translation of science about divorce in a public online setting. I have just begun a new website, divorcescience.org (2011) that is designed to provide information that is appropriate for various audiences, yet conduct the work in ways that encourages crossover learning experiences. The audiences for the website include divorcing parents, professionals who work with divorcing families (attorneys, mediators, family life educators, counselors, etc.), students and researchers. The idea is that by constructing an integrated platform for each audience around the scientific study and application of divorce science, there will be opportunities for each specific audience to crossover to explore different views on the same topics and explore different perspectives on the same issue. For example, a parent seeking an answer about the effects of divorce on children has an easy way to see a technical summary of the divorce research on this topic if he or she is interested in finding out more information. Likewise, students and researchers will have a chance to see what parents are asking about divorce and see how their research can be translated into advice and information for the public and to be easily engaged in the educational aspects of this work.

With this work I am also trying to engage students in the development of this website. This is an opportunity for them to learn the research and to apply the research to real issues. Too often in our educational experiences we do not capitalize on students interests in “helping people” which is often one of the primary reasons they have chosen to major in Human Development and Family Studies.

Reflection: The Internet allows family life educators to develop new ways of integrating research, teaching and outreach.

Reflections about the Past and Future

In 1996 I summarized my experience with the email in-service program about divorce as follows,

Just as the participants often underestimated the time demands of this type of teaching, so did I. In the future I will schedule at least one-half day per week to support this type of in-service. This teaching demanded more (maybe twice as much) preparation as similar teaching face-to-face because everything had to be written. However, I now have a completed course that could be taught again to other groups... There are clearly some

limits on this type of teaching; this will not work for skills or for more complicated material. However, electronic communications should be one of many delivery formats that we use (Hughes, 1996b).

Today I feel much the same. Online family life education requires a lot of effort and not all family life education should be online. The online platforms and tools for teaching will continue to become more powerful and we will continually learn how to use these tools more effectively. I find myself optimistic about the future of online family life education.

This has also not been a solitary journey, as I have learned from gifted programmers and web designers. I have exchanged ideas with clever family life educators and innovative program developers. There have been numerous students who have contributed ideas and taught me about how to use the Web more effectively. I often find myself reflecting on David Weinberger's (2002) quote, "We are the true 'small pieces' of the Web, and we are loosely joining ourselves in ways that we're still inventing" (p. x).

Reflection: I still have much to learn and there will be more opportunities to create new family life education programs.

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