By Judy Piercey   Jun 11, 2015

Beyond MOOCs: Campus Launches Online Learning Office Headed by Jeff Elman

As director of Online and Technology Enhanced Education, Elman will provide oversight of UC San Diego's online education activities and serve as the institutional liaison with technology platform partners

Enhancing education through technology is a passion of Jeff Elman's. "My first job after college was as a high school teacher in an area of Boston where few kids went to college," said the UC San Diego professor of cognitive science and former dean of the Division of Social Sciences. "My love for teaching and learning has continued ever since. But over the years, I've become increasingly aware that there's often a mismatch between what we know from the science of learning and the way we actually teach. Online platforms and the use of technology are not silver bullets—after all, they can be misused—but they do open up exciting new educational possibilities."

Jeff Elman

Elman now has an opportunity to explore new ways of technology-based teaching and learning on behalf of the campus as the inaugural director of the Office of Online and Technology Enhanced Education. Part of the Teaching and Learning Commons, the newly launched initiative is closely aligned with the Commons' goals of supporting both instructors and students.

"With the campus' focus on improving the educational experience for our students, increasing interest in online and hybrid education, and the availability of state funding to encourage the use of technology in leveraging and expanding access to our university, it is essential that we have faculty leadership to drive planning and policy development and practices related to these efforts on behalf of UC San Diego," said Executive Vice Chancellor Suresh Subramani. "I'm pleased that Jeff Elman will be leading our use of technology in the education delivery process."

Office of Online and Technology Enhanced Education

Elman's responsibilities cover three distinct functions. First, he will provide general oversight of UC San Diego's online activities, including organizing and providing training activities to get faculty involved in both hybrid courses, which combine online instruction and in-class discussion, and massive open online courses, or MOOCs. He will serve as the point of contact for instructors who have questions about copyright issues; organize relevant campus resources to facilitate the faculty's efforts in this area; and represent the campus in forums that explore online learning and the exchange of information and best practices related to those activities.

Second, Elman will serve as the official institutional coordinator, platform administrator and partner liaison, with responsibility for establishing and managing relationships with online technology platform providers; giving guidance to interested faculty who want to use the platforms; providing oversight for disposition of revenues generated by the courses; and assisting faculty to ensure that their intellectual property rights are safeguarded.

Finally, Elman will work with faculty and with The Commons' new Center for Engaged Teaching to develop innovative pedagogical methods that use online technology, and for exploring new niches and needs that can be served by this technology. Elman said that "my goal is that UC San Diego should play a leadership role in developing new technologies for enhancing education. Online methods will be one of several approaches to this end."

"We have several faculty members whose experience with online courses goes back many years, predating the current MOOC platforms," he noted. "Extension has used online learning for years, and online technology has been incorporated into many of our professional school programs. But we are now as a campus taking a much more proactive and organized approach."

Elman explained that although the campus will offer some online courses for credit, faculty currently seem primarily interested in two uses of online technology. One is to develop non-credit certificate courses. These courses are now very popular in online education. Several universities have developed sequences of specializations (four to nine courses) for which participants get a certificate. These sequences are intensive, high quality and can be of great benefit to enhancing students' professional development. UC San Diego is currently contemplating four or five such specializations.

Second, many faculty are excited about the use of online approaches to help prepare students who are transitioning to UC San Diego from high school or community college. "We have a real interest in ensuring that our incoming students have all the tools and preparation they need to succeed here. Online courses can help achieve this," Elman explained. "Our goal is to identify how we can create a rich online environment that will allow students to transfer smoothly and successfully. Providing customized access and using important new technologies such as adaptive learning technologies will be key features."

However, Elman emphasized that we are still at an early stage in exploring how online technology may be integrated into teaching and learning. "There will doubtless be new models that will emerge in coming years," he said.

Online technology opens up the possibility for students practicing skills and getting instant feedback, and having personalized learning experiences that are dynamically changed as students learn. Elman believes this kind of adaptive learning, tailored to the needs of the specific students, is almost impossible to do in a large classroom environment. To make it happen "we are looking to the future and one of our goals is to find partners who will be open to innovations that we think are important," he said.

UC San Diego Partners with New Online Platform

A new online platform option for UC San Diego faculty is edX, the leading nonprofit, open source online learning destination that offers online courses to students around the world. Founded by MIT and Harvard in 2012, edX has a three-pronged mission centered on increasing access to education, improving the quality of education on campuses and online, and researching ways to advance teaching and learning.

"EdX is a great partner," Elman said. "They are very much interested in working with us to develop and innovate the platform."

Under the name of "UC San DiegoX," the campus will host its first free, non-credited course beginning Aug. 17. "Computer Graphics CSE167x" will be taught by Ravi Ramamoorthi, a professor in the Department of Computer

Ravi Ramamoorthi

Science at the Jacobs School of Engineering. The six-week course will cover the foundation of computer graphics. Students will be able to make images of 3D scenes in both real-time, and with offline raytracing. A former faculty member at UC Berkeley, Ramamoorthi was an early adopter of the edX platform.

What does the future hold for online education? "The campus has just spent several years developing a new strategic plan for the future," Elman said. "I was privileged to participate, when I was dean of Social Sciences, in much of the discussion about what our vision and mission should be. One of the central values that emerged over the course of this discussion was that we are student-centered. Teaching students and training future leaders is one of the key elements in our mission as a public university. There are lots of pieces that are needed for this, and we already have many in place. My vision is that online and technology enhanced education will be one of the many tools we use to give our students the best education in the world."

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