



UT TeleCampus

Annual Report 2006

...extending the reach of
The University of Texas System
through the application of high-quality,
student-centered Internet delivery via
degree programs, academic courses,
training, professional development,
and college preparation.

UT Arlington
UT Austin
UT Brownsville
UT Dallas
UT El Paso
UT Pan American
UT Permian Basin
UT San Antonio
UT Tyler
UT Southwestern
Medical Center at Dallas
UT Medical Branch
at Galveston
UT Health Science
Center at Houston
UT Health Science
Center at San Antonio
UT M.D. Anderson
Cancer Center
UT Health Center at Tyler





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Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Rebekah Nix

Dr. Rebekah Nix is a Senior Lecturer for the Teacher Development Center at The University of Texas at Dallas. In addition to her work with the new Master of Arts in Teaching Science Education (MAT-SE) online program offered via UTTC, Nix works on multiple grant-funded programs at UTD for science educators. She is also a Fellow at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia.

UTTC: You've been on both sides of the online classroom - as a student and a teacher. Has this experience given you a different perspective as a professor teaching online?

NIX: My experience with online education has been great so far - personally and professionally. Coming out of high-tech start-ups gave me a unique advantage I think. After commuting across town in rush-hour traffic to earn my Master's degree at the University of Texas at Dallas, I continued my doctoral studies on the other side of the globe at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia - without leaving home! I'm absolutely amazed at how close my international classmates and I remain today. The level of interaction in my online courses was tremendously stimulating. The quality of the coursework was more than satisfying. Now, in my courses, because most of the tedious work of teaching (setting up grade books, creating content, etc.) has been done, I can keep myself engaged as a true professional by enhancing my courses with new tools and resources that efficiently complement the basic objectives. I am able to foster that individualized attention and focused interaction that made my personal experience so effective. The great thing is that everything just keeps getting better - for me and my students!

How are you using the tools available online in your work with the Master of Arts in Teaching Science Education online program?

The number and variety of tools and resources available to distance educators continues to advance. That keeps it interesting for faculty, students, and staff! For example, we've thought through literally hundreds of design options for the science courses alone. Science is so much more than being able to follow directions - it's a way of thinking. Teaching online has shifted the focus from rote memorization of facts and figures to meaningful learning and ways to apply that foundational knowledge. That's how I learned from my life experience, but not how I was taught in the traditional classroom! Because we know that our online students have access to a computer and the Internet to connect to our classes, we're requiring that they purchase state-of-the-art scientific probeware, which they can get for less than the standard expensive textbooks. We've incorporated self-contained, platform-independent electronic workbooks that guide them through inquiry-based experiments. Their individual results provide a springboard for collaborative group work and higher-level analysis through comparison. In this case, geographically-separate trials enhance their learning. That's actually how it happens more often than not in the real-world of scientific research, so their experience is more authentic and certainly memorable!

I understand you're working with UTTC's digital library services to incorporate information literacy in your courses as a way to

measure program goals against course design. How's that working?

We may have discovered a way to evaluate the new program in terms of whether or not it will be producing the model graduate. We're piloting a series of instruments (derived from pertinent standards or key competencies) that are intended to assess the target literacy level. This is measured in terms of individual student efficacy, attitude, and ability, along with their perceptions of the degree of constructivist pedagogy promoted in the learning environment of each course. It will be interesting to see how these scales correlate to quantitative achievement data; and are supported by qualitative performance data derived from the course products and electronic archives. It takes time to develop these attributes fully. We hope that this longitudinal program evaluation will enable us to ensure that the courses are meeting the needs of MAT-SE candidates.

What's the benefit to you of teaching online?

The most enjoyable 'fringe benefit' of moving my courses online is that I've made so many new acquaintances at UTD and UTTC. I'm now part of an accomplished network of student-centered faculty and staff who are passionate about their work and willing to work together. The collaboration initiated among the science education research faculty, UTD reference and distance education librarians, and the UTTC digital librarian is probably my favorite. Unlike many other campuses, we do not have a large distance learning center. But it's so exciting to know that I can actually name 24 people at the UT TeleCampus who are actively supporting me and my students. That's encouraging and inspiring.

What learning outcomes do you need your students to take from this and how will you measure them?

I have a set of rubrics that I use to score projects. The points map to specific requirements and general aspects that are defined within the course. Each lesson has a short quiz to check for knowledge and understanding of the topic. Those are automatically scored and immediate feedback is provided to the student. Weekly assignments guide their project development and enable me to return individualized comments along the way. Reluctantly, I hold my comments in the various discussion threads until the class has thoroughly explored the ideals I designed (overtly and covertly) into the activities and surrounding content. I subscribe to the constructivist theory. This model provides a sufficient scaffold to guide their discovery and a practical framework for me to monitor their progress.

As a teacher educator, my students are often my peers and will become my colleagues. In everything I do, it's important to me that we both internalize something that makes a difference. That is different for each individual and dependent on where they are at that particular point in time. We'll meet the listed course objectives and measure achievement on concrete scales, but it's the essence of the experience that I hope will transfer into their practice. ■