

TEACHING ONLINE: THE BRAVE AND ENERGIZING NEW WORLD

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For most of us, using technology, and in particular, the Internet, has become second nature. It is a vital part of our teaching and professional (and probably personal) lives. It is hard to imagine teaching anymore without using some type of technology. Yet, many of us use that technology sporadically and we see it only as something extra. We do not see it as a vital component of the course and the learning. It is the cherry on top of the sundae, not the ice cream. At the same time, it is clear that one of the new trends in education is moving the entire learning environment to the Internet. Yet, many professors are reluctant to move their entire course online. For those of us who began teaching when technology meant an IBM Selectric typewriter and a cumbersome Betamax (video) player, it is hard to imagine moving an entire course totally online. It is difficult to accept that the online classroom can really be as good as the physical classroom.

Yet, I have had precisely that experience. I began teaching a long time ago when we used mimeograph machines and technology was a filmstrip. And while I was excited about much of the new technology that came out during my years of teaching and while I incorporated much of it into my teaching, I remained skeptical about teaching an entire class online. I thought online courses would essentially be correspondence courses taught through the computer rather than through the U.S. mail. Interaction would be minimal and students would read the text and send in papers. The only plus of using the computer would be that assignments would be delivered more promptly. I had a surprise coming.

I started teaching in alternative delivery format as an adjunct for the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), a campus of the University of Maryland System whose mission is to work with adult learners. As such, they offer courses in many alternative formats, including ITV (interactive television, broadcast from a central location to remote students) and telephone. I taught for UMUC for several years in various distance formats, including courses by mail and by telephone. While each of these delivery formats had tradeoffs, they served the UMUC population, which was nontraditional. I had found that these alternative formats were not as satisfactory as face-to-face classes, and while I had some terrific students in those courses, I always felt as though the students were missing a part of the educational experience, especially in the mail and telephone courses that were becoming an increasingly large part of the offerings. Yet, those formats were necessary to serve the UMUC population and I did my best, as did my students.

As time progressed and technology improved, UMUC began to invest heavily in online education. When that happened, the chair of the Psychology Department requested professors to

take the online training and become certified to teach online. I resisted until one summer session about six years ago. UMUC offers traditional classroom courses, but those are always given at night or on weekends in order to serve the students' schedules. In summer school, class meant two nights a week, four hours per night (not including drive time which, in the DC area, can add an hour each way). That time commitment caused me to miss multiple baseball games of the team with whom I do some work. One night, as I sat on the Beltway for an hour following a four-hour class, it occurred to me that if I taught online, I would not miss any games! So, I signed up for the training, still not convinced that online would be as good as face-to-face and sure that it would have the same problems as other alternative delivery formats. Was I wrong! What did I discover?

Moving to the online environment requires a paradigm shift in how we think about education. It requires the acquisition of new beliefs about what teaching is. In doing so, we actually go back to denotative roots of the word "education" – educare – "to lead out." We become facilitators, rather than providers of knowledge, and students shift from passive to active learners. Of course, not all students manage this shift successfully (nor do all instructors who move to the online environment), but it is exciting and gratifying to watch those students who do make the shift as they take charge of their own learning.

Along with rethinking the educational process and what that means for course design, migrating online also means rethinking and restructuring the role of the teacher. Most importantly for me (and probably for most of us) is the change in the dynamic of the course. Traditionally, the teacher is in front of the classroom and controls most, if not all, of how the course flows. This approach is often called the "sage on the stage." As online teachers, we have to be comfortable giving up some of the control. Teaching online requires the instructor to shift that fundamental thinking about the role of teacher and student that most of us grew up thinking. In online courses, the instructor is much less didactic and more facilitating. We become the "guide on the side." Students share much more in the process of learning.

Changing this dynamic is not the path for everyone. Just because a person is a good teacher in the classroom does not mean that person will be a good teacher online. Some great teachers in the classroom fail miserably online and vice versa. The two mediums require two completely different approaches to designing how to reach the course objectives and how to interact with students. Giving up some of that power can be a scary adventure, and it can be hard to convince students that they must share in the process. However, once that shift has been made, even introductory courses can become similar to graduate seminars where everyone is exploring the material and contributing to the learning process. This does not mean that introductory students always have insights similar to graduate students, but the courses flow more like a seminar.

Changing directions like this can be a challenge, but such challenges are often the most fun part of teaching. In fact, as in my case, the move to online can be a truly energizing experience. I have been teaching for a long time, and when I moved to the online environment, I saw it as just another classroom. I found instead an unexpectedly exciting place to teach, which has been revitalizing.

Contrary to intuition, online classes are not alienating, mass-produced products. They are labor intensive, text-based intellectually challenging places that can elicit deeper thinking on the part of the students. They present more equality between instructor and students. The initial anonymity quickly fades and more one-to-one relationships can be created.

The online classroom can have many pleasures. A higher percentage of students, including those that I suspect would be quiet in the face-to-face (f2f) classroom, participate actively. I see more thoughtful answers from students, since they do not have to answer immediately. The postings indicate that they have spent time with the course material and care about learning. A student in my fall 2003 Introduction to Psychology class said, "As a first time online student, I found the online discussions as stimulating and thought provoking as the discussion in the more traditional classroom settings. I felt my fellow students were intelligence, articulate, and very respectful of others' opinions" (Jamie Davis).

Paradoxically, I have better relationships with the students. I get to know more students better. When I go to write recommendations for graduate school, I have much more on which to base my comments since I have seen work habits, diligence, writing skills, and interaction with other students. While I have not seen their faces (and it is always a surprise when I meet them in person because they never look as I imagined), I have a better sense of their abilities than I do with most face-to-face students.

Because UMUC is global, I have more diverse student populations. I have had students from Africa, Europe, and Asia, and their perspectives really contribute a great deal to the discussion. Even at Prince George's Community College, I have had a wide range of students in terms of age, ethnicity, and experience. Perhaps the anonymity of the online classroom encourages such students to enroll who might otherwise feel alienated from the traditional classroom.

The online classroom is a great lab for testing principles of learning—reinforcement, shaping, and schedules. Teaching online allows me to work during my best time, which is early morning. Teaching online allows me to travel to professional conferences (or even vacations) without worrying about something meaningful for students to do. And, I can watch baseball while I am teaching.

Teaching online has drawbacks. Online teaching takes far more time than traditional, face-to-face classes take. The initial offering is incredibly time-intensive, as the instructor must convert the course to the online environment. This involves much more than just cutting and pasting notes. Learning to navigate whatever course management system is used is time-consuming. Students have much easier access to the instructor, and it can be hard to get them to understand that while being just a click away, the instructor is not online and available 24/7. Learning to manage time effectively is a challenge. Online courses require far more reading than traditional classes since all responses are written. While instructors do not have to respond to each posting by a student, they do have to read them. Instructors have to learn to be very clear in directions, and no matter how much I rewrite, some students do not understand (or read the directions). Finally, technology issues occur. Glitches and lost connections are a fact of technological life. Instructors have to be flexible in order to deal with them.

Online education holds many promises. Distance education is seen as an answer to the needs of large segments of the populations. Not everyone can afford or needs a traditional residential college experience. We need to meet students where they are and work with them in ways that takes advantage of their available time and interests. Such alternative formats allow us to extend education to those whose lives will not let them attend traditional class hours. They bring their experience to the class, which enriches everyone. These are often my best students, and I wonder how much more they would shine if they had the chance to attend traditional classes and focus solely on their education. In the online classroom, education becomes a two-way street; the instructor is no longer solely responsible for learning. This dynamic makes learning and teaching exciting.

What would I recommend to someone considering a move to the online environment? Find a colleague who teaches online and shadow the course. Better still; take an online course somewhere. That will give the person some sense of what it is like. Take any training on teaching online. Be honest about time and technology skills. While the potential online instructor does not have to be a computer whiz, that person does need to have computer skills. Get those skills before trying to teach online. Be sure to have good equipment, including a large monitor, and preferably a cable connection. Be prepared to change the view of what it means to be a teacher. Develop patience, as it takes a great deal, especially during the first couple of weeks of class. Be flexible. Technology alone accounts for the need for flexibility. Students learning to navigate the online environment are another. Finally, enjoy the ride. For a person who has an open mind and is willing to struggle, the online classroom can be an exhilarating experience!