

## ***Teaching Online: The Brave and Energizing New World***

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For most of us, using technology—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 without using some type of technology. Yet many of us use technology sporadically and see it only as something "extra." We do not see it as a vital component of the course or of learning. It is the cherry on top of the sundae, not the ice cream. At the same time, it is clear that a new trend in education is moving the entire learning environment to the Internet. However, 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 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 meant using a film strip. Although I was excited about new technology that came out during my years of teaching, much of which I incorporated into my classes, 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. There would be little interaction, and students would simply 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 formats as an adjunct for University of Maryland University College (UMUC), a campus of the University of Maryland system whose mission is to work with adult learners. As such, UMUC offers their 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 using various distance formats, including courses by mail and by telephone. Although there were tradeoffs with each of these delivery formats, they served the nontraditional UMUC population. I found that these alternative formats were not as satisfactory as face-to-face classes, and although I had some terrific students in those courses, I always felt as though they 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, there were requests from the chair of the Psychology department for faculty to take online training and become certified to teach online. I resisted until one summer session about 6 years ago. UMUC offers traditional classroom courses, but they are always offered at night or on weekends in order to serve the students' schedules. During that summer session, classes met two nights a week, 4 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 which I do some work. One night, as I sat on the Beltway for an hour following a 4-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 classes would be as good as face-to-face instruction 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 can actually go back to denotative roots of the word education, “educare,” which means “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 it 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 course dynamic. 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 instructors, we have to be comfortable giving up some control. Teaching online requires instructors to shift their fundamental thinking about the traditional roles of teacher and student. In online courses, the instructor is less didactic and more facilitating. We become the “guide on the side.” Students share much more in the learning process.

Changing this dynamic is not the path for everyone. Just because you are a good teacher in the classroom does not mean you will be a good teacher online. Some teachers who are great in the classroom fail miserably online, and vice versa. The two mediums require completely different approaches to designing how you reach your course objectives and how you 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 in which 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.

The move to online teaching 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. Changing directions like this can be a challenge, but such challenges are often the most fun part of teaching.

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 students and create more equality between instructor and students. The initial anonymity of the “faceless” online classroom quickly fades, and more one-to-one

relationships can be developed than in the traditional classroom, because there is more interaction among all involved.

There are many pleasures in the online classroom. For example, the online classroom is a great lab for testing principles of learning—reinforcement, shaping, and schedules. It is easier in the online classroom than in the traditional classroom to see how these principles actually work. Another pleasure comes from student participation. A higher percentage of students, including those whom I suspect would be quiet in the face-to-face classroom, participate actively. I see more thoughtful answers from students because 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 discussions in more traditional classroom settings. I felt my fellow students were intelligent, articulate, and very respectful of others’ opinions.”

Paradoxically, I have better relationships with the students in my online classes. When I write recommendations for graduate school, I have more information on which to base my comments, because I have seen their work habits, diligence, writing skills, and interaction with other students. Although 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 contribute a great deal to the discussions. 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 enrollment of students who might otherwise feel alienated from the traditional classroom.

Teaching online allows me to work during my best time, which is early morning. I can teach in my pajamas with a coffeepot at my hand. Teaching online allows me to travel to professional conferences (or even take vacations) without worrying about whether there is something meaningful for students to do. And I can even watch baseball while I am “teaching.”

There are drawbacks, however. Online teaching takes far more time than traditional, face-to-face classes. The initial offering is incredibly time-intensive as you must convert your course to the online environment, which involves much more than just cutting and pasting your notes. Learning to navigate the course management system (e.g., WebCT, Blackboard) is also time-consuming. In addition, because students have much easier access to you, it can be hard to get them to understand that, although you are just a click away, you are not online and available “24/7.”

Learning to manage your time effectively is also a challenge. There is far more reading than in traditional classes, because all responses are written. Although you do not have to respond to each student posting, you do have to read them. You have to learn to be very clear with your directions; no matter how much I rewrite, there are students who still do not understand

(or read) the directions. Finally, there are the technology issues. Glitches and lost connections are a fact of technological life. You 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 population. 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 take 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 experiences 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?

- 1) Find a colleague who teaches online and shadow the course. Better still, take an online course somewhere. That will give you some sense of what it is like to be an online student.
- 2) Take any training for teaching online that you can find.
- 3) Be honest about your time and your technology skills. Although you do not have to be a computer whiz, you do need to have computer skills. Get those before you try to teach online.
- 4) Be sure you have good equipment, including a large monitor and a cable connection.
- 5) Be prepared to change your view of what it means to be a teacher.
- 6) Develop patience, as it takes a great deal, especially during the first few weeks of class.
- 7) Be flexible. Technology alone requires flexibility, as do students learning to navigate the online environment.
- 8) Finally, enjoy the ride. If you have an open mind and are willing to struggle, the online classroom can be an exhilarating experience!