

Considerations for Online Learning

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Considerações para Aprendizado na Rede

In the history of education, online learning is a very new phenomenon but it is growing at an exponential rate and has become a significant means of education in North America and elsewhere. In this paper, I would like to share some of what I have learned from working in an online teaching and learning environment. Just over a dozen years ago, my university moved into online learning at a time when tools and resources were in the early stages of development and more importantly best practices around this mode of education were largely unknown. Since then, we have learned and unlearned many things. By sharing our experiences through our collective deliberation, we might find answers, possibilities, and strategies for online learning in our respective programs. To this end, I have organized this paper around some of the most frequently asked questions on this topic. Some of the questions are interrelated, but it may be worthwhile to address them separately. The focus here is on online learning where a whole course or series of courses is conducted in the internet environment, rather than on internet enrichments that might be included in any traditional classroom, although there are some significant commonalities in both settings.

1. What are the benefits of online learning?

The students at my university cite *flexibility* as the most positive benefit of the online program. Online learning is usually asynchronous; that is, students and instructors do not have to be present in the classroom at the same times, except if “live chats” are scheduled. So attending to their class can happen at any time in the week and in any place where the student has access to a computer. So students can be enrolled from anywhere in the world without the problem of having to deal with different time zones. Many of our students are what we would call “adult learners” – they often have family and work obligations and cannot take time off to attend a face-to-face course that has specific meeting times. Students can work in their schools, businesses, clinics, and offices during the work day, spend time with their children, and study in the evening. They can take more courses during vacation time and fewer courses when their job or family demands are the highest. They can work at home, on the train, or during breaks at work. Since everybody’s life seems more complicated these days, this kind of flexibility is really appealing.

Another major benefit of online programs is *accessibility*. The busy parent who cannot leave the family to study at a university can study online at home. A student who lives in an isolated area but has access to the internet can study perfectly well at a distance. A person with a disability who would have difficulty maneuvering around a campus, can

work from home and with new technologies, and visually – and hearing-impaired students can access all the course work on their personal computer with the new tools that have been developed for them. In one case, one of our graduates was hospitalized during most of her time in the program, yet was still able to complete her study program successfully.

In the online classroom, there is greater *equality* of opportunity. Research on classroom interactions reveals that all students are not treated equally in a classroom unless the instructor is particularly careful. Male students are more frequently called on than female students to supply answers to questions, and extraverted or demanding students are more likely than shy or introverted students to participate in classroom discussions and receive the attention of the teacher. And we know that engagement with the ideas and participation in the learning process is one of the keys to successful learning. The online classroom is largely blind to race, socio-economic status, gender, age, disability, and personality when compared with the face-to-face classroom. In the relative anonymity of their own homes, students who have tended to be overlooked in their classrooms have a barrier removed to full participation. In fact, introverted students may perform better in the online environment because it allows them the time they need to participate – they can think about their answers before rushing in with responses, they can pause to craft a carefully thought through answer, and they can take their time in expressing their ideas out of the public eye and in the privacy of their own computer space. So the online classroom is more open to students who might feel marginalized in regular face-to-face classrooms.

Online learning opens the possibility of *richer resources*. So much of the information in the world today is found in digital form on the Web – all available from the student's own personal computer. Besides that, however, networking with other learners and experts around the world becomes a real possibility. You can invite your students to attend a webinar as part of your course with a thought-leader from a distant place who would otherwise be unavailable to you. With little planning and effort on the part of the teacher, students can engage in conversation with performers, conductors, and composers anywhere in the world. Music-making can happen with other musicians nationally and internationally, and master classes can be held with professionals from other locations. Conversations with other music educators or music students can be built in very easily – either within your class or beyond. Many online programs fill the gaps in the teaching staff with part-time instructors and these instructors can be located anywhere in the world. Team teaching approaches with colleagues in other institutions becomes a real possibility too.

From the viewpoint of the school, online programs offer *efficiencies* in operations. A school that conducts all its programs online has little need for classrooms, heating and cooling systems, parking garages, lunch rooms, sports facilities, teachers' offices, and other kinds of infrastructure that consume a lot of the budget. The school's footprint is considerably smaller, and costs are down. It does require, however, an instructional technology department and support team. And if the online program is only a small fraction of the total offerings at an institution, any possible savings in this area are not so apparent.

One efficiency that is part of most online learning platforms has to do with *tracking* – of both faculty member performance and student progress. A teacher's instructional style, attendance to the tasks of teaching, and assessment strategies can be reviewed by those who have access to the classroom so the teacher's work can be monitored and help given where needed. This may mean a loss of privacy that teachers in classrooms have been accustomed to, but it may also mean that teacher presence in the classroom and performance can be supported. And student's growth and development in knowledge and skills can be followed and facilitated since the record of progress is permanently available online.

2. What are the disadvantages of online programs?

There is a *resistance* to online learning from traditional programs that needs to be addressed. Some programs have been developed that have been poor quality – these are sometimes used as representative of all online programs as an argument against them. There is a reticence to embrace new technologies in institutions that are very conservative – and educational institutions can be among the most conservative of institutions.

Some students too may be resistant. Their learning style suggests that face-to-face learning suits them better. Some are afraid of technology, although younger students are usually less afraid than their teachers. They may also find that purchasing a computer is too costly. However, in today's world it is increasingly difficult to function professionally without a computer.

Some argue that the online environment is *depersonalized*. In place of a live teacher, one has digitized words and images. Students may feel isolated without regular contact with their teacher and fellow students. It is very important for instructors in online programs to ensure that personalization is not lost – and there are effective ways to do that. If the online teacher communicates regularly and responsively, students can receive the personal attention they need as well as, if not better, than they would in a traditional classroom where every interaction is public and the demands of the whole class can make it difficult to spend time with one who may need the instructor's immediate and focused attention.

3. What does online learning look like?

There are some basic features in an online course, whether it is built on a commercial e-learning platform such as eCollege or Blackboard, or one that is home-grown. It should give the name of the course and the instructor. It will need links to places where you can easily email the class, receive their assignments and return their graded work, and record their grades. It should also link to the various supports for the course: the syllabus with an outline of objectives, topics, resources, and assessment plan; the library, writing center, help desk, and any other student services; and a class café or a place for more casual contact among students. Then each component of the course, either topics or weeks, provides all the content and directions for the course. The discussion board is the place where most of your teaching will be done. Here students will address your discussion questions and respond to each other, raise questions of their own, and basically learn from and with each other. The instructor responds to the students' answers by asking probing questions that encourage them to think more deeply. It is possible to record lectures or presentations which students can access through the online classroom and audio or streaming video can be added that demonstrates a music technique or shares a music work for discussion or review. Since most computers now have a built-in microphone and video camera, it is becoming increasingly feasible to have students upload recordings of their own performance for teacher review and feedback. Some efforts have even been mounted where members of a band, chorus, or orchestra have performed their parts independently and the parts have then combined into a single musical event, although such an approach may be fraught with technological and musical challenges. As a culminating event in a classroom, this might be something worth undertaking.

One of the potentialities of online learning is that it supports a student-centered approach. Students are not captured in a bricks-and-mortar classroom, studio, or rehearsal

space where the furniture is arranged for them to sit in rows and listen to the teacher. The learning materials are right in the hands of the students. The teacher does not have center stage but the learning activities do. The teacher is put in the role of facilitator – we provide materials, ask questions, prompt thinking, mentor learners, stimulate discussions, and review student work – but the responsibility for actually learning much more obviously rests on the students for they must take those learning opportunities and do something with them. The online course design makes it much more difficult for a student to sit passively through a whole course.

4. How can online learning be used in my program?

Some schools, especially universities but also high schools more and more frequently, offer their entire program online. These schools are usually very large institutions, and growing larger, drawing students from across the country and around the world. Other schools have set up an online learning division as a parallel program to the traditional curriculum. Students enroll either in the regular program or the online division, or they can take a mix of traditional and online studies. In a similar configuration, some programs offer some courses online and others in traditional classroom, making the choice dependent on the needs of the particular course or the student at the time. Still other experiments are being conducted in which a part of a regular class is conducted online; for example, team work on a project, background or remedial work needed to be successful in the course, or a discussion forum.

It seems that the most successful approach to online learning has a blend of one kind or another of face-to-face work and online learning. In the program I am most familiar with, all the academic work is conducted online but even then, we find it necessary in many cases to add residencies of a week or two for face-to-face work. The residencies can reassure students that they are on the right track, help them make adjustments to their preconceptions, provide them with the skills they need to be successful, and so on. Some students simply need the face-to-face contact to feel comfortable, no matter how minimal that contact is.

5. What are best practices for online teaching?

Here are some suggestions of ways to conduct successful online teaching:

1. Prepare both students and teachers for the online environment: they need to be familiar and comfortable with the media, how to use all the tools and links in the course, and where to go for help (student services, teacher, registrar, IT help desk, bursar, library). Some online programs require a practice-based orientation for teachers and students before course work begins.

2. Ensure that teachers and students are aware of expectations about their respective roles and responsibilities in the course – when assignments and graded work is due, how often they should be in the classroom, and when one-on-one communication can be used and how. Because the online environment is new and different, many of the old habits about turning up and how one behaves when present do not necessarily apply. And because the teacher is not physically present, students need to know the protocols and expectations for themselves and their instructors beforehand so they do not feel isolated and unguided.

3. Establish expectations around online etiquette – how to address each other; how “shouting” is represented by capitalizing one’s words and why it is important to use civil language; when and where it is appropriate to use emoticons (the typed symbols to express emotions such as smiley faces); why it is important to think about what you write before you put unretrievable words out there for all to read; what emphasis will be placed on correct spelling and grammar, and so on.

4. Expect teachers to be present. It is tempting to become an observer and let the online course take the role of the instructor, but students need the guidance of the instructor and the assurance that the teacher is actually there. Putting up welcome messages, participating in the discussion forum, sending reminders, giving previews and post-views of topics, making announcements, and communicating with students one-on-one are ways to alert students to your presence. These kinds of simple moves can help improve retention, quality of work, and student satisfaction.

5. Expect teachers to be timely. Without access to visual clues, students who raise questions or submit work for review, or offer suggestions need immediate feedback from the instructor to be assured that they are moving in the right direction or need to change course to meet the learning outcomes. An email message or equivalent should be answered within 24 hours or less – because the answer may be needed to complete an assignment on time or to offer a solution to a pressing problem.

6. Expect teachers to be responsive. It is usually not sufficient to make global statements like, “You have all done a good job with this assignment.” There is no personal assurance in such a statement and no indication about what any individual did well or could improve. While the students have no visual clues from the teacher’s body language, so too the teachers have no visual clues from the students. To be responsive, instructors need to read student posts perceptively, ask tactfully for more information if necessary, and address carefully student requests. Even though you and your students may be separated by distance, you can still be a personal presence as their mentor, instructor, and guide.

7. Conduct ongoing teacher development around key skills, such as facilitating online discussions; mentoring in the online environment; providing feedback on student work; personalizing the classroom; using technical tools; course development; engaging students in their learning; handling difficult students in the online classroom. These are specific topics about which online teachers have the most frequent questions, and for which many of the teaching skills developed in the regular classroom are not an exact fit in the online classroom.

6 What media are recommended?

Frequently, start-up programs use open-source software (teaching platforms such as Moodle, email programs such as Yahoo or Hotmail, discussion forums such as Wikis, and portfolio systems such as Mahara) because they are easily accessible and free. However, these kinds of software are usually abandoned early because software support services are not always available, communicating with growing numbers of students and teachers becomes increasingly cumbersome, and tracking student learning and resources can be problematic. At that stage in an institution’s development, software systems that can be customized and supported by the vendor are usually purchased. Eventually, these software systems become unique to an institution, and increasingly flexible to allow social media interfaces, sophisticated and differentiated communication systems, and in-

clude learning management systems that allow tracking of faculty performance as well as individual student progress.

Conclusion

Online teaching is a challenging but potentially effective way teaching and learning will be conducted increasingly in the twenty-first century. Many of the benefits of face-to-face learning can be replicated and even expanded in this learning environment as long as instructors and students understand how the online classroom is similar but different from the traditional classroom. With a few simple moves, the online instructor can provide learners with powerful educational opportunities that free them from some of the restraints of time and place that have put boundaries around learning.

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