

The Media Center : Adventures in Online Teaching and Learning
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by
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“Number please.” I’ve always been interested in distance communications. As a child I was fascinated when my mother chatted on the phone with the lady on the neighboring farm; I wanted to talk, too! Trips to town to place long distance calls with Hazel, our local Ernestine, were a special treat and the switchboard fascinated me. One year for Christmas my grandmother gave me a plastic telephone switchboard. It wasn’t as much fun as the cardboard switchboard I built myself.

Now move ahead a few years: I adapted quickly to e-mail, even before the Internet as we now know it now came along. I have participated in a variety of distance learning activities throughout the years. The leap to online teaching and learning was a natural. This article highlights my personal adventures as an online educator.

My adventure began in a natural way: via e-mail. A message I posted on a listserv caught the attention of a media specialist who is an online instructor; before long I was speaking with the director the online professional development program offered through a Midwestern university. Following a few phone conversations I knew I was ready to dive in.

The program director asked me to take a class before I began designing my own course. I enrolled in an Excel class to become acquainted with the ins-and-outs of online learning. (See “Excel as You’ve Never Seen It,” *Multimedia Schools*, January/February 2002. <http://www.infoday.com/MMSchools/jan02/lehmann.htm>.) As an online student I became acquainted with the consistent organizational structure required for all online courses. I also learned that taking an online course requires organization, careful attention to instruction, and active participation in discussion if you want to get the most out of the course. I felt I was missing something if I didn’t participate in the discussion every day and complete the assignments when they were due. I admired the precise and careful directions written by the instructor and the almost instant feedback to questions and discussion. I loved being able to “attend” class whatever time of day I wanted.

Designing a Course

Course design was both fun and work! Absolutely everything is online. The content of the course was up to me, but I received feedback and assistance from the program director as I put my own course together. I developed a readings list, discussion questions, and student projects. I appreciated the requirement of a consistent format and structure; this left me free to concentrate on content and student learning.

It didn't take long for me to fall into the pattern of breaking the information and assignments down into manageable chunks, writing discussion questions and developing projects, and writing very specific directions. The course I teach requires a fair amount of reading and all required readings are online. Permission is not needed to link to something that is already on the Web, but I did request permission from some authors to post some selected writings that were not available online. Updating the readings list is fun because it helps keep me in touch with professional reading. And, it is a constant task as Web links quickly change and there are new articles to add. The program director put the content online and handles all technical updates, another factor that gives me time to concentrate on content and teaching. Many online programs will require instructors to create their own Web pages or use templates.

Keeping in Touch

Readers familiar with online learning are quite likely visualizing tools such as Blackboard or WebCt. The program I am involved with functions with basic listserv discussion groups; students post some messages to the instructors, others to the listserv. We have the option of utilizing chat, but because my students live in multiple time zones—from Turkey, South Korea, Germany, or Saudi Arabia to Illinois!—it would be difficult to set up chat time that would work. I have participated in group discussions with Blackboard and WebCt through other universities and have found it to be great fun, but also frustrating if participants with less than adequate technology cannot fully participate. Since some of my students have dial-up internet access and “regular email” makes sense for them.

Listsers discussions work well since class sizes are small. My largest class size has been 12; the smallest four, too few for active discussion. I check my e-mail every evening, more often during the weekends and during summer. Students appreciate and generally expect quick feedback about their work or responses to questions. I don't recommend online teaching if you cannot be there for your students almost every day. The biggest complaints I've heard from colleagues who have taken online courses concerns lack of immediate and continual feedback from their instructor. Similarly, I would not recommend taking an online class that requires discussion if you cannot participate often. Participation needs for both the instructor and student would be different in a project-based class.

I maintain paper copy of the course Web pages and make notes on the pages as I think of things to add, delete or improve. It's possible to make updates and improvements quickly. I have a Web mail folder for each unit of the class for storing student submissions. All assignments students submit have specific titles to help me keep everything straight, and I use a spreadsheet to keep track of student work and grades.

A Constructivist Approach

The online class I teach uses constructivist-learning activities such as scenarios, role-playing, what-if simulations, and reflective writing to humanize the online learning experience and incorporate collaboration in meaningful ways. Activities promote student-directed goal setting, personal construction of knowledge, collaboration with peers, development of problem-solving skills, completing products that are relevant to their work setting, and authentic assessment. One project is an e-portfolio, which many participants begin with uncertainty but decide is

worthwhile because the final product represents their growth and accomplishments. Projects are submitted as e-mail attachments or posted on a Web page.

Online Learning Is Global

My students are literally from all over the world. To date they've represented seven states and four continents. The numbers increase if I include the students who were my Excel course classmates and the other professional development professors in my program. Students outside of the U.S. are primarily employees of American International schools or U.S. Department of Defense schools. Two students were people I had met before they took the class. I've even met one class member, a Peruvian who attended a technology conference in Minneapolis. It's great fun to find the students' locations in my ever-present atlas and learn about geography and local traditions. This past week one student has been on temporary duty in Korea; another's school was closed for the Hajj pilgrimage. But, no matter where they are from, all media specialists share similar issues and concerns. Sharing and learning from each other is a highlight of the course.

Working With Adult Learners

Most students who take online professional development courses are there because they want to grow professionally. A few admit to needing that credit or two for a salary lane advancement or for credits to apply towards recertification. They are generally motivated and willing to work. Most students like the readings and being "forced" to catch up on professional reading. Whoever they are and wherever they are, I'm always thrilled to make new online friends and enjoy the camaraderie that quickly develops.

We always learn a lot when we teach, and this is no exception. I've expanded my own technology skills, since I'm using them more than ever. I've learned more about listservs than I knew from just being a participant. I've learned a ton about instructional design and the importance continually updating and improving. Without face-to-face interaction, all information and assignments need to be very precise.

I have increased empathy for teachers who are learning to use new technology since I've had my own moments of techno-panic when I had to learn new e-mail systems and the basics of setting up a listserv. I've also been overwhelmed with the amount of e-mail that appears if I should miss a day of reading student messages, or by all the information on how the "system" works and all the distance learning tools that are available to me. But, thanks to an always "in touch" program director, I've survived and grown. And, of course I've gained professional ideas from students who are my peers.

I love teaching online! Online is not less work, but it is nice to work from home whenever I want and with a cup of coffee and cat by my side. It's also interesting to be part of a growing trend. † Data suggests that online learning is here to stay. Perhaps you have taken an online course or know someone who has. It's the stuff of TV news shows, magazine articles, and a topic of

discussion in post-secondary and K-12 education. Even my “old” high school in a small Minnesota town offers K-12 online courses for anyone in Minnesota who wants to “attend.”

Check online learning out! You are likely to find a course somewhere that meets your professional growth needs.

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Web Links to Visit!

For a comprehensive collection of information about distance education visit the Instructional Technology Council’s Web site
Distance Education Reports and Abstracts
<http://144.162.197.250/reports.htm>

What online learners say:

<http://www.uwstout.edu/soe/profdev/issues/comments.html>

PULLQUOTE TO USE:

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