

Ensuring Quality Online Instruction: Investing in the Future

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I became an online teacher and an e-learning advocate shortly after use of e-learning became widespread among colleges and universities in this country, almost 15 years ago. In the early days, the research and institutional conversations centered around two questions: whether online education could produce learning outcomes equivalent to the physical classroom, and whether our own institutions should “jump on this technology bandwagon.” As these debates played themselves out in the literature and on campuses public and private, large and small, a funny thing happened. Our students chose for us. Quietly and in numbers that continue to swell past our predictions, students have embraced online delivery of education. The schools that anticipated this and positioned themselves in the market, including the for-profits, saw gigantic growth in enrollments and revenue. But the rewards of early adoption have been reaped.

Today, the majority of US educational institutions offer some form of online education. Research over the past decade has demonstrated that online students are not only equal-

ing but also often outperforming their traditional classroom counterparts (Hansen, 2008; Osborne, Kriese, Tobey, & Johnson, 2009; Baglione & Nastanski, 2007), making it more appealing for institutions—from community colleges to Ivy League universities—to throw their hats into the ring. We're no longer discussing whether or not we should invest in online learning; research and market demands have rendered that point moot. Today, the conversations leaders in academia are having are about how to attract and retain students in this new and competitive educational marketplace, and those institutions that are not invested in this conversation may end up paying the price.

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The obvious answer for leaders is that in order to attract and retain online students, we will need to create and facilitate dynamic, collaborative, meaningful online learning environments and experiences. But therein lies the rub. We've had a tough time accomplishing that consistently. While the potential for online learning to produce these kinds of learning experiences is clear, our first generation of e-learning has largely failed to live up to that promise. We know it and our students know it. Turns out, everybody knows it.

The Pew Research Center recently issued a report that compares the results of two studies. One survey asked the public and one asked over 1,000 college and university presidents to weigh in on the value of online education. It should come as no surprise that 75 percent of the presidents indicated their institutions now offer online courses. What might be slightly eyebrow raising is that the presidents who felt that online courses provided the same value as their classroom-based alternatives outnumbered members of the public who felt the same, 51 percent versus 29 percent (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011, p. 2). However, do the math and you discover the truly alarming realization that there are a number of college presidents, roughly 24 percent, whose institutions are offering courses which they consider substandard. Leaders concerned about the quality of their online offerings should take a careful look at what their online consumers are saying about the courses they're taking.

Studies reveal troubling gaps between student expectations and the online instruction they are receiving (Diaz, Swan, Ice, & Kupczynski, 2010; Jaskyte, Taylor, & Smariga, 2009; Ke, 2010; Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008). In their study of master's-level social work courses, Frey, Faul, and Yankelov (2003) found that the online instructional strategies most often employed by fac-

ulty were not those preferred by most students and that many student-preferred strategies were seldom utilized (p. 452). Another recent study surveyed undergraduate students and faculty about how they valued and perceived various aspects of the instructional strategies in their online courses. Items included such statements as, "My instructor provided feedback which helped me to learn" and "The instructor clearly communicated important due dates/time frames for learning activities." For all 13 survey items, students said they valued the strategies at significantly higher rates than they perceived the strategies to have been manifest in the course (Curdie, 2011).

Interestingly, faculty in that same study rated their own values and perceptions the same way, indicating they valued each of the instructional items highly but rated their own ability to achieve them at a lower rate (Curdie, 2011). Faculty navigating within this new environment have often found themselves struggling to adapt, overwhelmed by the technological choices available and uncertain about what works best in the online classroom. In one recent qualitative study, instructors had difficulty articulating their design concepts, confessed they did not know enough about the technologies used and were unaware of their educational value, and admitted they did not read all student discussion threads because of time constraints (Ke, 2010). Clearly, online teaching is different from traditional classroom instruction and requires a set of skills new and unfamiliar to many instructors.

Emerging educational technologies offer new possibilities about not only when and where learning takes place, but how as well. That is, the virtual classroom provides new methods for interaction and content delivery that challenge traditional assumptions about teaching and learning. Lectures delivered behind a dais are being replaced with video lectures that incorporate images and interactive multimedia. Rather than relying on printed textbooks, students can make use of resources mined from the most recent information available on the Internet on any topic they choose. Verbal classroom discussion is now being transformed into asynchronous, written dialogue that can be referred back to as often as a student desires. Studies overwhelmingly agree that online teaching is different from traditional classroom teaching (Bangert, 2006; Ke & Hoadley, 2009; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2007) and requires different, more student-centered pedagogical approaches. As Garrison and Akyol (2009) point out, "Traditions such as the passive lecture are viewed critically because instructional technology has provided new possibilities

where educators can create and sustain collaborative learning communities not constrained by time or space” (p. 20).

Faculty, however, are not always comfortable with these new roles and often struggle in creating opportunities for interaction and fostering community. They express concern and doubt about their own ability to create and manage interactivity, often shying away from it or overlooking the concept of community altogether (Totaro, Tanner, Noser, Fitzgerald, & Birch, 2005; Hutchins, 2003; Su, Bonk, Magjuka, Liu, & Lee, 2005). Conrad (2004) interviewed five faculty before and after their first semester teaching online and found the instructors focused on issues of content, evidenced little awareness regarding collaborative learning or the importance of community, and relied heavily on the traditional approaches they were familiar with.

No doubt, many factors contribute to the challenges faculty face when shifting to online instruction. One cause is clear. The business drive to capitalize on the demand for online courses has prompted institutions to move forward quickly. Too often in our rush to meet the swelling demands of our online audience, we’ve done so in the absence of sufficient training, resources, and support. University leaders who can say that their online courses offer the same value as traditional classroom instruction are the leaders who have invested accordingly in their faculty development and technical infrastructure. Institutions where academic leaders have capitalized by increasing their online offerings but have hesitated to commit adequate resources to the effort should beware of their practice getting ahead of their pedagogy.

Academic leaders are perennially concerned with the satisfaction and achievement of their traditional, campus students. In reviewing the success of traditional programs, leaders consider multiple factors and dedicate resources to areas such as professional development, assessment, hiring practices, etc. Now those leaders must ensure that appropriate resources and attention are directed at the same goals in their online courses. So the question becomes, what leads to student satisfaction and achievement in

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the online class? Of course, the answer is neither simple nor singular. Course development and evaluation focused on student satisfaction and achievement, faculty training and evaluation, and support and development of instructional design staff are some of the components of a quality online program. What follows here is an overview of some of the research centered on the issue of faculty presence.

The Faculty Effect

Just as they do in the traditional setting, faculty play a key role in the success and reception of the online classroom. Recent research reaffirms the central role the online instructor must assume.

Rovai (2002) investigated what makes students drop out of online courses at greater rates than traditional classes. Early studies revealed that higher than average online attrition rates were connected, at least in part, to feelings of isolation among virtual learners (Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Vesely, Bloom, & Sherlock, 2007). Rovai used Tinto’s 1993 work (as cited in Rovai, 2002, p. 2) on the importance of community to traditional college students to make the case for its application in online courses. In their study of 117 online graduate learners, Rovai and Wighting (2005) found an inverse relationship between isolation and sense of community, leading them to suggest that if learners are able to develop a sense of belonging, it is possible to reduce feelings of isolation in online courses. Naylor and Wilson (2009) found that overall satisfaction with both professors and classmates was correlated with the amount of contact students had with each group. Swan and Shih (2005) found such a high correlation between the perceived presence of the instructor and students’ rating of instructor satisfaction that they suggest the two might be a single construct for some students.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) offer the concept of *teaching presence* in their now widely cited Community of Inquiry (COI) framework. They call teaching presence the “binding element” in the creation of successful online learning communities (p. 98) and define their three-factor structure for teaching presence as (1) design and organization, (2) facilitating discourse, and (3) direct instruction. Instructional design and organization involves the planning and execution of course management, including such responsibilities as setting the curriculum, designing methods and assessments, establishing deadlines, using technology effectively, and establishing online communication protocols. Facilitating discourse involves the instructor’s effective management of the interactions of the learning community in order to sustain engaged participation in focused and meaningful discourse. Indicators used to identify such facilitation include

evidence of instructor interventions that seek to identify areas of agreement and disagreement; reach consensus and understanding; encourage, acknowledge, and reinforce student contributions; and draw in participants. Finally, direct instruction relates to content provision and “intellectual and scholarly leadership” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 8). This is the factor most closely related to the traditional role of teaching. In fulfilling this role, the instructor is responsible for presenting information, focusing discourse, scaffolding learning, summarizing discussion contributions, and diagnosing misperceptions.

Studies of the COI framework have yielded significant results in terms of teaching presence. For instance, Baker (2010) found teaching presence to be significantly correlated to affective learning, cognition, and motivation. In a study by Bangert (2008), students were randomly assigned to one of three groups: (1) the social presence group, in which students engaged in community building activities and the instructor refrained from facilitating discussion and direct instruction; (2) the teaching presence and social presence group, which participated in the same activities but in which the instructor also provided direct instruction and leadership in discourse facilitation; or (3) the control group, which worked on their own. Transcript analysis showed the group with both social and teaching presence posted more messages in the integration category and significantly more in the highest level of cognitive presence, resolution. Qualitative results in a study by Ke (2010) showed that “[i]n spite of a common understanding that online gears towards a more independent and self-regulated learning, adult students have identified instructors who demonstrated high presence online as the key to learning satisfaction” (p. 818). The author goes further to suggest that in such environments, the instructor should act as “the catalyst that initiates the community development process” (p. 818).

Moving toward increased teaching presence in online courses requires strategies that come out of a student-centered, constructivist perspective, are informed by the Community of Inquiry, and are supported by current research. Professional development focused on such goals might encourage faculty to adopt practices such as the following:

Design and organization. In designing and organizing the online course, consistency should be at the top of the list of design goals. I use weekly modules that contain all of the readings, assignments, and other materials students will need to complete that week’s work. Due dates are consistent—usually Wednesdays and Saturdays for discussion posts and Fridays for all other assignments. Students express appreciation for this stable structure as it allows them to create a routine that keeps them

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in touch with the class and avoids the “I forgot about the class because it’s online” problem.

Consider making the class visually consistent as well. In my courses, I try to use icons in the weekly overview to indicate the nature of the week’s work (a pile of books for research, a pen for drafting, etc.). I also use font and color to distinguish lectures (all in a purple border and gray background, for instance) from assignments (red borders with a yellow background, for example). Again, it takes only two or three weeks before students, consciously or not, know what to expect and how to operate confidently.

In other words, one of the goals of the design and organization process should be to eliminate navigational confusion for students who are likely already feeling a little unsure about how to function in an online classroom. The goal is to fulfill students’ safety and comfort needs so they can focus on attending to the cognitive demands of the class. Providing clear navigational and participation information up front clears the way for students to engage with course concepts.

Facilitating discourse. Once the course has begun, the design phase should be behind the instructor who must now turn his/her attention toward facilitation. Many professors bristle at the idea of frontloading their entire course, yet it’s imperative. Moving from the design to the facilitation phase of a course, the need for consistency shifts to a demand for responsiveness. Being responsive online means replying promptly to student queries, but it means much more than that as well.

Responsiveness is demonstrated, for instance, by taking an active role in the management of discussions. Some faculty, clinging to the popular refrain of moving from being “a sage on the stage to a guide on the side” step back from participating in discussions, believing their intervention will stifle participation. Nonsense. No one would give a classroom full of students an article to read and then leave the room while they discussed it amongst themselves.

In online courses, instructors are bestowed with the valuable gift of being able to see what each and every participant thinks and understands about the topic being discussed. Wouldn't classroom instructors love to have such rich performance information on their students? It is imperative that online faculty leverage that ability and provide students with timely, meaningful feedback on their thinking and progress. Online instructors model critical thinking and synthesis by identifying areas of agreement or disagreement within the group/class and then encourage students to do the same; publicly praise quality posts so that they too may serve as examples of the work expected; and contact nonparticipating students privately to encourage participation and offer assistance. They provide context-specific follow-up questions that encourage students to continually elevate the discourse and general class feedback to give everyone a sense of where the group stands.

Striving for high levels of responsiveness contributes to the other critical aspect of facilitation: building community. This is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of online instruction for faculty to become comfortable with. Not raised in the digital age, many current faculty are unaccustomed to communicating in this new medium. The losses of body language, speech, and real-time conversations are dramatic for faculty used to working with a physical audience. Learning how to use technology effectively to elicit the kinds of communal classroom behaviors and attitudes students and faculty are used to exhibiting takes deliberate planning and consistent action to foster connections and collaboration. A good way to begin is to start off the semester with a low-stakes week focused on getting acquainted with the digital environment and with each other. I ask students to include their favorite band, book, and quote in their introductions. While these items are not relevant per se to our course topic, they never fail to provide moments of connection for students in which they realize they share something in common with the people they are going to be working with for the next 16 weeks. Include assignments/discussion that require collaboration, and be explicit about the goals of that collaboration. It doesn't take long for students to see the virtue in being exposed to how a variety of other people think about a topic. Comments from my students have included, "I had not thought about [that] in that way but now that you point it out, I think you're right," "I've been thinking about what you wrote," and "After I read what you wrote, I went back and reread that

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passage ... and I saw what you were talking about which I missed the first time."

Direct instruction. Direct instruction refers to what is commonly thought of as the nuts and bolts of teaching; it's the scholarly leadership of the course. Content provision is one of its emphases. One of the great virtues of online learn-

ing is its ability to leverage the power of the Internet to provide the most up-to-date content to students in real time. In one class, I've replaced the textbook because the OWL at Purdue provides excellent online resources that meet all of my pedagogical needs. If that's too drastic, instructors might consider setting a Google alert to be notified when new items are posted on the Internet in their discipline or set up an RSS feed for their favorite blogs. They also should share items they feel are significant with their class as they gather them. In doing so, they demonstrate enthusiasm for and interest in their discipline, model information literacy strategies and scholarly habits, and expose students to the most current information in their field.

These sample practices emphasize the critical role faculty must play in orchestrating meaningful and productive online learning environments. Faculty who have begun to make these difficult transitions in their online classes are meeting with success. Those who have not are not only compromising the success of their students, but also putting their institutions at risk by offering courses that will struggle to compete in the rapidly evolving educational marketplace.

Conclusion

Institutional leaders must support professional development efforts aimed at providing online faculty with the support and resources to learn about, implement, and continually evaluate new pedagogical approaches. This article has examined increasing teaching presence, yet professional development of this sort is but one area on which leaders might focus their efforts to ensure quality online instruction. Course development and evaluation focused on student satisfaction and achievement, faculty training and evaluation, and support and development of instructional design staff are among the others to be examined. It's time institutions invested in their online learning programs as aggressively as they seek to profit from them. Only then, will *all* college and university presidents be able to confidently claim equality between their online and traditional course offerings.

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