

Moving from Face-to-Face to Online Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching can be challenging but is also rewarding. It is challenging to create a sense of social presence so that the online student feels a part of the learning community. It is difficult to assess the level of student learning and to regularly communicate with them without being face-to-face. Online students may require constant feedback and clarifications on difficult concepts which can be very time consuming for the faculty. The paper will discuss creative instructional strategies that will help faculty overcome some of the challenges and make their transition from face-to-face to online teaching an easier process. Advantages and rewards of online teaching are also discussed.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Compare and contrast instructor-student interaction in face-to-face courses vs. online courses.
2. Discuss the importance of social presence in online education.
3. List some strategies that will motivate an online learner to actively participate in an online course.
4. Discuss the “non-stop” nature of online teaching and learning.
5. List two advantages of online teaching.

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INTRODUCTION

Classroom lectures, paper exams and face-to-face communication are used to accomplish the cognitive objectives in most CLS programs across the country. However, in recent years, CLS education has reached beyond the classroom setting to a wider student audience that is not able to attend the on-campus classroom. Online education connects instructors and students with resources, virtual communication and remote activities using a course management system as the primary means of instruction. Transitioning from on-campus to online teaching brings about some challenges and surprises. This article will focus on the ways in which faculty must adjust their teaching in order to effectively facilitate learning online.

Creating an environment of *social presence* is essential for the success of online education. Garrison et al. defined social presence as the ability of participants within the online learning community to project their personal characteristics into the community and present themselves as real people.¹ The connection and feeling of being part of a learning community is somewhat lacking in online education and it is not unusual for an online student to feel isolated. Creating a sense of social presence creates a level of comfort and enhances interactions between students and the instructor, which makes the learning environment fulfilling for online learners and instructors.^{2,3} As Mykota and Duncan pointed out, the primary function of social presence is cognitive learning. When students perceive their experience as enjoyable, satisfying, and personally and professionally fulfilling, they tend to interact more, which results in enhanced learning. When the online environment is lacking social presence, the participants see it as impersonal and, in turn, the amount of information that is shared with others decreases.⁴ Gunawardena and Zittle examined the effectiveness of social presence in online education and reported that a direct relationship exists between social presence and

student satisfaction. They found that students with high perception of social presence had higher perceptions of learning and were 60% more satisfied with their instructor compared to students that had low perception of social presence.⁵ This was also confirmed by a comparative analysis of student motivation involving 12 e-learning university courses performed by Rovai (2007). The results of this study provide evidence that social presence is a major contributor to the satisfaction and motivation of online learners. This can be accomplished early in the course by the instructor sharing background information, professional experiences, personal and professional interests and challenges.⁶ An introductory exercise where the students and instructor share their backgrounds can be all it takes. Alternatively, instructors can divide the students into groups and let them share contact information to create a buddy system. Relationships established at the beginning of the course create social presence and provide a support system. Thus, the understanding of the social presence theory and development of an environment conducive to sharing early in the online education process contributes to the overall success of the online educational experience.

Whether face-to-face or online, acquisition of knowledge and obtaining a higher order of critical thinking are goals of higher education. In the face-to-face setting, this is evident through classroom discussions, laboratory exercises, and oral and written examinations. Instructors have regular contact with students and are able to assess their prior learning and their level of cognitive knowledge in every class. They rely on a number of unobtrusive visual cues from their students to enhance their delivery. A quick glance, for example, reveals who is attentively taking notes, pondering a difficult concept, or preparing to make a comment. The student who is frustrated, confused, tired, or bored is equally evident. The attentive instructor consciously and subconsciously receives and analyzes these visual cues and adjusts the course delivery to meet needs of the class during a particular lesson.

Challenges of Online Teaching

When teaching online, faculty has few, if any, visual cues. Those cues that do exist are filtered through technological devices such as video monitors. It is

difficult to carry on a stimulating teacher-class discussion when spontaneity is altered by technical requirements and distance. The teacher might never really know, for example, if students are asleep, talking among themselves, or even in the room. If the course is purely online, the lectures may be recorded in any of several formats and may or may not be viewed by students. Furthermore, the level and depth of prior learning and critical thinking skills of learners in the online setting is not always displayed to the instructor. Under those circumstances, a pre-assessment is necessary to assess the knowledge and skills that an online student possesses prior to the beginning of the course. Moreover, online students need a structured system of acquiring cognitive knowledge to produce positive learning outcomes. The instructor should provide a logical flow of lessons as well as activities that assess and reinforce student learning on a regular basis so that adjustments to instruction can be made in a timely manner.⁷ Although face-to-face interaction is limited in this setting, discussion boards, blogs and/or chat rooms can be used for communication with the instructor and with other students. Most students will take responsibility for their learning and actively participate in discussion board type activities, particularly if it is a graded event. However, there are always some that will not participate no matter what the consequences.

Compared to the traditional face-to-face courses, online courses require more development and design time and the delivery is more labor intensive. Visser's (2000) study compared his own experience as an instructor of a new online course with prior experience teaching a regular classroom course. His results indicated that the time and labor-intensive work that is required in online course development and delivery are greater than that of regular classroom teaching.⁸ The instructor must start preparing for an online course long before the course starts. This requires hours in front of a computer screen typing every instruction that could be verbally communicated in a face-to-face setting with minimal effort.⁹ This is because every aspect of the course must be carefully organized with explicit and detailed instructions. There is little room for making changes while the course is in progress because instructors do not have regular meetings with students to clarify

instructions. The same is true for providing feedback. All communication with online learners must occur in writing, via email or formal announcements on an online content management system such as Blackboard. As a result, there is some lag time before the online learner receives and reads the message. Often the learners work on their course content at night or on weekends, and need answers to their questions during that time. This means the instructor must be available to them after normal office hours. This “non-stop” nature of online learning along with the need to provide constant feedback and clarification may give a sense of omnipresence to the faculty.¹⁰ Constant messages from learners can be time-consuming and labor intensive to review and respond to. In addition to corresponding with online learners, grading of exams and papers and other responsibilities, such as other courses, are enough to overwhelm an instructor. Although quick response and feedback are the nature of the online environment, an instructor can use simple strategies, such as including the probable response time in the syllabus, to inform learners about expected response time. Lewis and Abdul-Hamid suggested that common problems, questions and their responses can be collected over time and feedback comments can be copied and pasted for a quicker response.¹¹ Alternatively, a frequently asked questions’ section can be posted on the content management website where necessary. Finally, the organization of the course is extremely important and using clear instructions will help to avoid the need for additional clarifications.

Advantages of Online Teaching

Some of the frequently mentioned advantages of online teaching are that it is convenient, efficient, challenging and can be fun and rewarding. Such courses also provide the opportunity to work with new and emerging cutting edge technologies.¹² Online instructors can teach from anywhere in the world as long as they have an internet connection. There is no class time missed due to illness, educational conferences, public holidays or even natural disasters. In addition to convenience, the online environment also offers excitement as well as new challenges for both learners and the instructor. The instructor can create interactive learning tools for teaching challenging concepts, which is more interesting and exciting for the learner than

using still pictures or verbiage in a face-to-face lecture. However, every online instructor must face the challenge of mastering the course management system and keep up with emerging technologies. If the university or CLS department provides technical support and training, the process becomes less frustrating and more enjoyable. Finally, online learning produces a deeper level of thinking and understanding of course materials vs. face to face learning due to the written nature of all communications. An online and phone interview of 21 university faculty conducted by *thejournal.com* provided some subjective data regarding online learning. More than half of the interviewees felt that learning in online environment is more profound as the discussions seem both broader and deeper. They also felt that, in such an environment, the quality of student contributions are more refined as they have time to mull concepts over as they write prior to posting. The fact that students must take the time to write their thoughts down, and the realization that those thoughts have the potential of being permanently exposed to others via discussion board or the like, brings about a deeper level of discourse.¹³ Moreover, the quality of discussion can be tied to the course participation grade which again motivates students to put greater thought into what they write. Another study conducted by Asynchronous Learning Network interviewed 20 university faculties that taught both face-to-face and online, representing various departments in their schools. This was a semi structured interview where faculty answered 14 questions which were then coded and the most frequently coded passages were determined. The faculty in this study frequently spoke of being more reflective or careful in crafting their own responses in an online discussion and also mentioned the higher quality of questions and comments from online learners.¹² Both studies show that discussions and learning can be superior in an online environment compared to face-to-face environment. Both of the above mentioned studies are qualitative and do not provide quantitative data which is certainly needed to explore this further. Overall, online teaching has its advantages and can be a fulfilling and satisfying experience for an instructor.

Most online instructors will agree that teaching online is no less rewarding than teaching face-to-face. A study

conducted in 2006 showed that faculty experiences with online teaching were gratifying, stimulating and rewarding.¹⁴ In a classroom setting, the instructor might feel good about an 'aha' moment when the students display understanding of difficult concepts. The experience is quite similar when an online student posts something thought-provoking on discussion board. Moreover, if learners have related work experience such as in a CLT to CLS program, the course facilitator or instructor learns from them as well. These learners may have access to case studies and the latest testing methodologies that can be shared with everyone involved in the course. Overall, the experience of a course instructor can be rewarding in traditional, virtual, or blended environments.

As classroom venues transition from traditional to virtual, the role of an instructor changes. The instructor must recognize the nature of online learning and adjust their instruction to create a learner-centered environment. Creating a climate of social presence, paying close attention to course design, thoughtful use of creative instructional strategies, and encouraging knowledge sharing will assist instructors in managing the demands of web-based instruction effectively.

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