

Introduction to Online Teaching and Learning



Online learning is the newest and most popular form of distance education today. Within the past decade it has had a major impact on postsecondary education and the trend is only increasing.

In this workshop we will explore what the experience of online learning is like for students and how it has changed the role of the instructor.

What is Online Learning?

Online learning is education that takes place over the Internet. It is often referred to as “e-learning” among other terms. However, online learning is just one type of “distance learning” - the umbrella term for any learning that takes place across distance and not in a traditional classroom. Distance learning has a long history and there are several types available today, including:

- *Correspondence Courses*: conducted through regular mail with little interaction.
- *Telecourses*: where content is delivered via radio or television broadcast.
- *CD-ROM Courses*: where the student interacts with static computer content.
- *Online Learning*: Internet-based courses offered synchronously and/or asynchronously.
- *Mobile Learning*: by means of devices such as cellular phones, PDAs and digital audio players (iPods, MP3 players).

By far the most popular approach today is online learning. According to the Sloan Consortium, online enrollments continue to grow at rates faster than for the broader student population and institutes of higher education expect the rate of growth to continue increasing. Some of the key findings:

- Over 1.9 million students were studying online in the fall of 2003.
- Schools expect the number of online students to grow to over 2.6 million by the fall of 2004.
- Schools expect online enrollment growth to accelerate — the expected average growth rate for online students for 2004 is 24.8%, up from 19.8% in 2003.
- The majority of all schools (53.6%) agree that online education is critical to their long-term strategy.
- A majority of academic leaders believe that online learning quality is already equal to or superior to face-to-face instruction. (The “no significant difference” phenomenon.)

(From: <http://www.sloan-c.org/resources/index.asp>)

How It Works

In years past, instructors had to create their “virtual classrooms” from scratch which was difficult and often led to poor results. Today, an entire industry has emerged to do this for us. Course Management System (CMS) software is utilized by just about all colleges today. CMS allow instructors to design and deliver their courses within a flexible framework that includes a number of different tools to enable learning and communication to occur.

Popular for-profit CMS include:

- Blackboard (www.blackboard.com)
- WebCT (www.webct.com)
- eCollege (www.ecollege.com)

Low cost alternative and open source CMS include:

- ETUDES-NG (<http://etudesproject.org>)
- Moodle (<http://moodle.org>)
- Angel (<http://angellearning.com>)

Any of these CMS offer functionality which allows instructors to deliver *course content*, enable *communications*, and conduct *evaluations*. The most common tools offered by CMS include:

Schedule	For posting and viewing deadlines, events, etc.
Announcements	For posting current information to all students.
Syllabus	For creating and posting the course syllabus.
Modules	For publishing and viewing course content in sections.
Assignments	For posting, submitting, and grading student work.
Discussion Board	For asynchronous discussions, group work, and collaboration.
Private Messages	For private communication between students and/or the instructor.
Chat	For real-time, synchronous conversation in written form.
Tests & Quizzes	For authoring and administering exams, quizzes, surveys, etc.
Gradebook	For posting and managing student grades.

A New Paradigm for Teaching and Learning

Online learning is catalyzing a pedagogical shift in how we teach and learn. There is a shift away from top-down lecturing and passive students to a more interactive, collaborative approach in which students and instructor co-create the learning process. The Instructor’s role is changing from the “*sage on the stage*” to “*the guide on the side*.”

Constructivism

This point of view maintains that people actively *construct* new knowledge as they interact with their environment. This is a student-centered approach in which students “co-create” their

learning experience. This approach empowers students as active learners instead of just passive recipients absorbing information and reproducing it for standardized tests.

Derived from the work of Swiss philosopher, Jean Piaget, constructivism emphasizes:

- The learner as a unique individual.
- The relevance of the learner's background and culture.
- Increased responsibility for learning belongs to the student.
- Motivation for learning comes from successful completion of challenging tasks.
- Instructors as facilitators helping learners develop their own understanding of content.
- Learning is an active, social process.
- The dynamic interaction between task, instructor and learner. Synergy!

Constructionism

Constructionism asserts that learning is particularly effective when constructing something for others to experience. This can be anything from a spoken sentence or an internet posting, to more complex things like a painting or a presentation. For example, you might read this page several times and still forget it by tomorrow - but if you were asked to explain these ideas to someone else in your own words, or produce a slideshow that explained these concepts, you would gain a deeper understanding that is more integrated into your own ideas.

Collaboration

As an instructor, you focus on the experiences that would best generate learning from the learner's point of view, rather than just publishing and assessing the information you think they need to know. Each participant in a course can and should be a teacher as well as a learner. Your job changes from being the sole source of knowledge, to being a guide and role model. You connect with students in ways that address their own learning needs by moderating discussions and activities in a way that collectively leads students towards the larger learning goals of the class.

(Modified from: <http://docs.moodle.org/en/Philosophy> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism_%28learning_theory%29)

Benefits of Online Teaching and Learning

Why online distance learning and why now? Online distance learning meets the needs of an ever-growing population of students who cannot or prefer not to participate in traditional classroom settings. These learners include those unable to attend traditional classes, who cannot find a particular class at their chosen institution, who live in remote locations, who work full-time and can only study at or after work, and those who simply prefer to learn independently.

The minimum requirement for students to participate in an online course is access to a computer, the Internet, and the motivation to succeed in a non-traditional classroom. Online courses provide an excellent method of course delivery unbound by time or location allowing for accessibility to instruction at anytime from anywhere. Learners find the online environment a convenient way to fit education into their busy lives. The ability to access a course from any computer with Internet access, 24 hours a day, seven days a week is a tremendous incentive for many of today's students.

Some of the main advantages of online learning include:

- **Convenience:** 24/7 access from any online computer; accommodates busy schedules; no commuting, no searching for parking.
- **Enhanced Learning:** Research shows increased depth of understanding and retention of course content; more meaningful discussions; emphasis on writing skills, technology skills, and life skills like time management, independence, and self-discipline.
- **Leveling of the Playing Field:** Students can take more time to think and reflect before communicating; shy students tend to thrive online; anonymity of the online environment.
- **Interaction:** Increased student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction and discussion; a more student-centered learning environment; less passive listening and more active learning; a greater sense of connectedness, synergy.
- **Innovative Teaching:** Student-centered approaches; increased variety and creativity of learning activities; address different learning styles; changes and improvements can translate to on-ground courses as well
- **Improved Administration:** Time to examine student work more thoroughly; ability to document and record online interactions; ability to manage grading online.
- **Savings:** Accommodate more students; increased student satisfaction = higher retention and fewer repeats.
- **Maximize Physical Resources:** Lessen demand on limited campus infrastructure; decrease congestion on campus and parking lots.
- **Outreach:** Give students options; reach new student markets; appeal to current students thus increasing enrollments.

Online Learning FAQ

Those new to online learning are often unclear about what to expect. Below are some answers to frequently asked questions about online classes.

Is an online class the same as a self-paced class?

Answer: No. While some online classes are similar to independent study, most online classes are not self-paced classes. The due dates for documents and class participation reflect those of a "regular" campus class. Homework, other activities, and online class participation must be completed by preset dates and times.

How much time do I have to spend online?

Answer: You should plan to spend at least the same amount of time you would spend on a face-to-face class. And probably more, at least at first, as you get oriented to the online CMS.

Do I have to log on to class at a particular time?

Answer: No. You will have deadlines by which to post your work, but when you complete that

work is up to you. You should try to do your work on a daily basis so as to avoid being overburdened at the end of each unit.

Is taking a class online easier than a "regular" class?

Answer: No. The course content in an online class is usually identical to that of a face-to-face class on the same topic. Some people think the workload is even more demanding than a regular face-to-face class in that you have to be a self-directed learner, stay motivated, and stay on top of your workload independently. It has been shown that the most successful online students/teachers tend to share the following characteristics:

- Self-motivation/self-starter
- Good organization and time-management skills
- Familiar with computers and the Internet
- Resourceful and actively seek answers and solutions to questions and problems

What Internet skills would be helpful in an online class?

Answer: The most successful students have the following Internet skills:

- Familiarity with Web browsers and an email program.
- Some familiarity with Web-based interactions such as email, discussion boards, listservs, and chat rooms.
- Proficiency with typing and word processing.
- Experience in successful Internet searches using a variety of search engines.

How is online teaching different from traditional classroom teaching?

Answer: The online model emphasizes an interactive learning environment, designed to stimulate dialogue between instructor and students and among students themselves. The online process requires both instructor and students to take active roles. The instructor will often act as a facilitator, organizing activities that engage students directly rather than relying too heavily on lectures and memorization.

When and where do classes take place?

Answer: We don't really "meet" in a real-time or physical face-to-face sense. Instead, we interact regularly through the CMS and via email. Courses take place wherever your computer is: at home, at work, on the road - anywhere you can connect to the Internet. Courses are typically organized by week with specific due dates. The model is primarily asynchronous, which means that within each week you and your students may log in whenever it is most convenient. Generally, logging in four to five times per week is necessary to give timely feedback and interact sufficiently with students. Although communication is primarily asynchronous, real-time chat is also available.

How will I be able to communicate with my students?

Answer: A lot of instructors mistakenly assume that they'll feel isolated from their online students. To their surprise, most instructors find that online courses actually provide a high degree of personal contact, and many say that they get to know their online students much better than their students in on-ground courses. This is because asynchronous, online courses offer many more opportunities for reflection, in-depth discussion, and interaction than traditional courses that meet only once or twice a week. Not only will you and your students communicate

directly, everyone in the class can be involved in group- and class-level discussions contributing as much and as often as they want. Far from being an impediment to communication, the online format facilitates and enhances communication and interaction in ways that would be impossible in other situations.

(Adapted from: FAQ created by Dr. Marsha Conley, American River College and <http://www.onlinelearning.net>)

Important Questions for New Online Instructors to Consider

- How can you accommodate different learning styles online?
- How might you convert the learning activities you use in the traditional classroom to the online environment? Is it possible to use your materials “as is” or will you need to rethink how your material is presented?
- Lecturing is the most common method of presenting content in college classrooms. Why is lecturing a less productive method of teaching in the online environment?
- In the virtual classroom, lectures are short and few. With this being the case, where are the students going to get the information they need to obtain the learning objectives?
- Are video, audio, and real-time activities a benefit in a text-based asynchronous online course? Why or why not?
- How will you inform your students of online expectations and realities and help ensure their success?
- What problems can you anticipate that students might have when beginning your course? How might you smooth the way for your students?

Quiz: Is Online Teaching Right for Me?

The online instructor plays a vital role in developing and maintaining an effective online learning environment and must possess a unique set of tools to perform successfully. Some instructors from the traditional classroom environment will easily adapt to the online model, while others may find the transition challenging. Reflect on your teaching style, circumstances and technical skills to see if teaching online is right for you.

Questions:

Computer skills

- Do you have (or are you willing to obtain) access to a computer and Internet connection at home and/or at work?
- Are you willing to upgrade your computer equipment or purchase new software if needed?
- Do you know how to use email and access the Web using a browser?
- Can you download files from the Web and save them to your own computer?
- Can you attach a document to an email message?

- Can you cut/copy and paste from one program into another?

Experience in the online learning environment and qualifications

- Have you ever taken an online course as a student (i.e. the ETUDES-NG training course)?
- Have you used Webpages to supplement your on-the ground course or seminar?
- Have you used online quizzes, a discussion board or chat room as part of your teaching?

Attitudes towards teaching and learning in the online environment

- Do you believe that high-quality learning can take place without interacting with your students face-to-face?
- Do you believe lecturing is the best, or only, method for delivering education in your field?
- Do you feel that discussion is an effective teaching strategy for your subject matter?
- Do you believe it is important to structure activities so that students can learn from each other via interactivity and collaborative learning?
- Do you believe increased learning can occur when work/life/knowledge experiences are shared among peers?
- Do you think creating a sense of community amongst learners is a priority in your teaching?

Teaching style and habits needed to teach online

- Can you dedicate a significant number of hours per week (any time during the day or night) to participate in the online teaching process?
- Are you willing to log on and contribute to your online classroom discussions and interact with students online at least 4 times a week, and ideally more?
- Are you able to create schedules for yourself and stick to them? In other words, are you a self-disciplined, independent worker?
- Are you flexible in dealing with students' needs (due dates, absences, make-up exams)?
- Are you comfortable in communicating almost entirely through writing (since online courses are text-only environments)?

Training and commitment

- Are you willing to invest a significant amount of time and energy in preparation for teaching your course online?
- Are you willing to spend time rethinking and redesigning your teaching materials to fit the needs of the online environment?
- Are you willing to invest time in professional development to continue learning new online teaching and/or technical skills in the future?

Feedback:

Experience in the online learning environment and qualifications

If you have had first-hand experience as an online student, you will likely have greater insight into your own online students' needs and a better understanding of the unique requirements of the online environment. Experience using the Internet and the Web to enhance your teaching in the traditional classroom can be a good first step to teaching entirely online.

Attitudes towards teaching and learning in the online environment

An online instructor should be able to accept the value of facilitated learning as equal to the traditional model. If a teacher feels the only way that true learning can take place is through the traditional means of educating in a classroom, the person is generally not a good fit for the online paradigm. This is OK, but we must be honest with ourselves. Both an accelerated learning model and the online process depend on facilitative techniques for their success. The online classroom requires new teaching strategies and instructional techniques; *you should not try to recreate the on-ground classroom in the online paradigm*. The person leading a successful online class must be a proponent of facilitative learning, and have confidence in the system in order to make it work.

Teaching style and habits needed to teach online

The online facilitator should be open, concerned, flexible, and sincere. An online instructor must be able to compensate for the lack of physical presence in the virtual classroom by creating a supportive environment where all students feel comfortable participating and especially where students know that their instructor is accessible. Failure to do this can alienate the class both from each other and from the instructor and would make for a very weak learning environment. Online students are as busy, or busier, than anyone else in today's hurried world. An online instructor should be willing to give individual attention to students who may need extra help. Being sensitive, open and flexible is mandatory for success in the online realm.

Seven Principles of Good Teaching

Based on considerable educational research, Chickering and Gamson (1987) outlined Seven Standards of Good Practice for Undergraduate Education, principles that have been widely accepted as measures for judging the effectiveness of classroom teaching. ETUDES-NG incorporates elements in each of the seven areas, as demonstrated below:

Principle 1: Encourage student-faculty contact

Through Private Messages students and faculty can communicate. Among other things, this allows instructors to be proactive by following up on students who are not participating in chats, discussions, etc. Students and faculty can also communicate through the discussion forums.

Principle 2: Encourage student cooperation

The same areas of ETUDES-NG that allow for student-faculty contact can also be used for student-to-student contact. Assignments can be created to take advantage of this. Furthermore, the discussion forums can help foster group work and collaboration among students. Consider incorporating peer reviews, project sharing, and thread-leaders to moderate discussions. Student collaboration leads to a sense of community and higher learning outcomes.

Principle 3: Encourage active learning

Instructors can take advantage of the rich interactivity on the Web by designing assignments around appropriate Websites. When students come to these sites, they make choices, and they learn from their choices. Active learning also takes place when students work cooperatively. Give students more control, leadership roles, and options in what assignments to complete. Leave the center stage and transform yourself into a guide on the side.

Principle 4: Give prompt feedback

In ETUDES-NG, students can see results of their tests and view solutions to graded assignments immediately after submission. Instructors can and should promptly respond to student questions. ETUDES-NG allows you to provide both acknowledgement and information feedback.

Principle 5: Emphasize time on task

For example, give students something specific to respond to in each module via the discussions. Build in a reward system of points for each post and reply to the discussion forums. In other words, make posting and responding mandatory. Create a structure that can be followed, broken down week by week or unit by unit, allowing for acceleration of pace.

Principle 6: Communicate high expectations

In your syllabus you should include course goals and performance objectives. You might include model assignment submissions that can serve as examples for students to follow. The bottom line is that you must be explicit and clear in communicating your expectations to students.

Principle 7: Respect diverse talents and ways of learning

Create assignments that offer students options. Giving students choices in their learning experience increases satisfaction and retention. Consider giving students options as to what format to submit assignments or projects. For example, they might design a Webpage, write an essay, or develop a PowerPoint presentation. There is no reason why all students should submit the exact same homework or participate in one discussion topic. Variety is the spice of life and your online class; teach to the various learning styles of your students.

Supplemental Resources

Confessions of an E-Dropout

(<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/arossett/viewpoint.htm>)

What went wrong? As the instructor, what could you have done to change the situation?

Strategies for Learning at a Distance

(<http://www.uidaho.edu/eo/dist8.html>)

What Makes a Successful Online Student?

(<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/tutorials/pedagogy/StudentProfile.asp>)

Tips for Online Success

(<http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/resources/tutorials/pedagogy/tips.asp>)

The Core Rules of Netiquette

(<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html>)

Distance Learning History

(<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/Spring01/deClair/history.html>)

Growth in Distance Education Programs and Implications for Federal Education Policy

(<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d021125t.pdf>)

The Future of Online Learning

(<http://www.downes.ca/future>)

Read Steven Downes' predictions and see if they are true today.

Thirty-Two Trends Affecting Distance Learning

(<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/fall63/howell63.html>)

Online Pedagogy Links

(<http://www.teaching.ua.edu/courses/onlinepedagogy.html>)

Online/On-ground: What's the Same?

(<http://www.edtech.neu.edu/workshops/materials/course/materials/pedagogy/>)

(My) Three Principles of effective Online Pedagogy

(http://www.sloan-c.org/publications/JALN/v8n3/v8n3_pelz.asp)

Online Pedagogy and Best Practices

(http://teachvu.vu.msu.edu/public/pedagoqy/online_ped_best_pract/)

Tips and Tricks for Teaching Online: How to Teach Like a Pro!

(http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Oct_04/article04.htm)

The Role of the Online Instructor/Facilitator

(http://www.emoderators.com/moderators/teach_online.html)