

Teaching Online

Growth in Online Education

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For the past 8 years, I have been involved in online education; first as a student, then as a part-time teacher, and now as an online educator as my primary career. For those unaccustomed to online learning, it involves delivering most or all of the course content asynchronously via a computer. Learning management systems, such as eCollege, Moodle, and Blackboard, provide the course platform that contains content and assessments. The frequent elements of an online class experience include lectures (documents, slide presentations, video, podcasts, etc.), asynchronous threaded discussions, and assignments. Some schools

also incorporate concurrent activities using chat and Web conferencing tools (e.g., Wimba, WebEx, Adobe Connect).

To explore online teaching further and what is involved in moving to online education, this article addresses the following questions: (1) what do online educators say about their experiences, (2) is online education a fad, (3) how does online teaching differ from onground teaching, (4) what are schools looking for, (5) how does one become an online educator, and (6) what is the future of online education.

I asked a few colleagues to share their experiences with online education: Dani Babb (PhD, educator, author, consultant, entrepreneur); Sheri Beasley (PhD, online educator, human resource management specialist); Matt Boyne (MS, commercial pilot, online educator); Angela Ellis (MBA, CPA, core faculty at Colorado State University Global Campus); and John Latham (PhD, educator, consultant, performance excellence expert, author). They provided valuable insights in response to my questions, which are summarized below.

How did you get started as an online educator?

- After being involved with a prerelease test of Blackboard, I began the transition from onground to online teaching. I was excited to reach a new population of learners.
- A former professor put me in touch with a recruiter who later contacted me.
- I was contacted by a former professor who was interested in a paper I wrote.



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- I was previously teaching onground and saw students improve when I blended online components using Blackboard. I later switched exclusively to online teaching.
- A colleague who was already teaching online asked if I would be interested in doing the same. I also teach onground now.

What credentials did you have and were they important for how you started teaching online?

- I started teaching with a bachelor's degree and specialized knowledge that was in demand, found more opportunities after earning a master's, and even more with a PhD
- I started with a master's degree and later earned a PhD to open more doors.
- I started with master's degrees and specialized knowledge and am currently pursuing a PhD.
- I was a licensed CPA with a master's degree when I started onground and added online education after 7 years of teaching experience.
- I started online teaching helping dissertation students, so having a PhD was required.

What impact has your professional experience made on your teaching opportunities?

- Many times the learners have incredible life experience. If I cannot weave my own experiences in, they don't see the applicability of the material. I could not be successful without my professional experience.
- My professional background has led to many courses I enjoy. My management and leadership background also resulted in teaching management, business, and leadership classes.
- Because of my background in professional training, I have been interviewed

many times for teaching and learning courses.

- I believe my professional experiences lend credibility to my teaching. Adult students engage more effectively when I use real-life examples to illustrate points.
- My professional experience has been critical to my teaching success. The combination of my academic education and strong professional experience has been the key to all my opportunities. Either by itself would not be sufficient.

What do you like about being an online teacher?

- Reaching people that are too busy to physically attend school but dedicated to lifelong learning. Working with people so talented and learning from them too is fantastic.
- The flexibility of setting my schedule and working from home or while traveling.
- I love all of it!
- My favorite aspect of teaching online is the flexibility of being able to teach from anywhere at any time.
- I like the flexibility of the asynchronous delivery method and the portability of the classroom. I also can travel and teach from anywhere with a high speed connection.

What do you dislike about being an online teacher?

- Some schools are unrealistic about expectations, with some expecting daily participation in the virtual classroom. Sometimes life can feel a bit unstable and long-term contracts are rare.
- Although not unique to online teaching, students who do not read feedback and make needed improvements.
- Needing to purchase a new laptop soon—that is my own out-of-pocket expense.

- The accelerated turnaround times. For example, I respond to e-mails within no more than 12 hours. I respond to discussion board postings within no more than 24 hours and I return assignments graded within 48 hours.
- The lack of personal interaction and synchronous exchange of ideas.

What advice do you offer future online educators?

- Decide what the right fit is for you—working for several schools as an adjunct or for one school fulltime. If teaching is not your passion, choose another profession. Teaching online is not easy money and you shouldn't choose it for the paycheck.
- Be persistent—online teaching opportunities can take many months to develop.
- Know your professional material as well as educational theory.
- If you have previous onground teaching experience, know that there is an element of releasing control when moving to the virtual classroom. The result of teaching an online class with the same approach as teaching onground can feel like utter chaos. Patience and persistence is required.
- Online programs vary in structure and degree of freedom allowed. Find a university that fits your personality, teaching philosophy, and style.

As the economy is slowing, what change do you expect to see in the profession of online education?

- Schools are trying to “find a niche” to keep and retain students. They are recruiting only the best teachers and not settling for mediocrity. I think we will see more people going to school online and that this field will have growing demands. Job loss, as bad as it is, often results in more people turning to education.

- More people will seek a degree to increase their employability in the future.
- Online education is growing as the economy slows.
- If financial aid is available, online enrollments will increase. As more digital natives become adult learners, we will find an increase in the number of people that have an affinity to online learning.
- I expect the competition for faculty jobs to increase. This means that both professional and academic experience will become more important. Individuals with executive experience, doctoral degrees, and publications will have an edge.

Online education is not a fad. Enrollments in online higher education have seen an average annual increase from 2002 to 2007 of 20% while the total higher education student population has grown at an average of 1.5% annually during the same period (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Further, based on the research of Allen and Seaman, over four million students are taking online classes this year. Many educators support online courses and see them as critical to the future of learning. Also growing is the number of traditional onground institutions offering online programs.

Online enrollment growth has largely been spurred by increased time constraints on adult learners who are balancing career, family, and the need to further their education in an ever-changing workforce. Online educational programs provide flexibility for these adults whose schedules and responsibilities prevent them from attending a traditional program with fixed class dates or who do not wish to commute to a physical school. Additionally, many learners find their online classes to be of more value than their previous onground experiences because of the increased collaboration with peers and teachers.

A frequent question is what impact the worsening economic conditions will have on historically increasing online education enrollments. Traditionally, poor economic times have seen an increase in the number of people seeking education. Recently, some state schools have had to slash budgets and decrease enrollments because of funding problems associated with state budget crises (Pugh, 2008). At the same time, students are choosing to attend lower-cost schools, with enrollments at many community colleges on the increase (Porter, 2008). Cost-effective online programs will continue to see rising enrollments as long as financial aid remains available. If aid tightens, we will likely see enrollments reduce.

When asking educators who have experience both onground and online, they often express that the two are completely different worlds. Moreover, onground teaching is not adequate preparation for online teaching. Of course an obvious distinction between the two is the use of the Internet and computer technologies to completely conduct an online class virtually (Ko & Rossen, 2004). However, much more important is the distinction in learning theory. A clear paradigm change has occurred in the quality online programs, shifting from teacher-focused to learner-focused education. Although this shift is taking place in some onground classrooms,

as attested to by the valuable research of Bain (2004), it is the expected approach in online education (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). A few key distinctions between the old paradigm and the new paradigm are presented in Table 1 (adapted from Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 5).

In summary, this shift can be explained by the often-quoted role of the online teacher as “guide on the side” rather than “the sage on the stage.”

Teaching online is difficult to break into because online programs frequently require prior online teaching experience. Quality programs are looking for proven teachers who understand the online environment and why, out of necessity, it differs from onground structures (for an account of one professor’s experience moving from onground to online, see <http://insidehighered.com/views/2008/11/06/overman>). Existing teachers who want to explore online teaching and also gain experience can add online elements to their onground classes and create a hybrid experience. For example, free tools such as Google Groups can be used to create a private online discussion area for students to asynchronously collaborate. Many teachers have successfully converted onground courses to online courses; one example is Hensley’s case study that includes suggestions for converting courses (Hensley, 2005).

Table 1. Different Teaching Paradigms

Old Paradigm (Teacher-Centered)	New Paradigm (Learner-Centered)
Teacher transfers knowledge to students	Knowledge is collaboratively constructed by students and teacher
Students are passive recipients of information	Students are active participants in the learning process
Knowledge transfer occurs separate from the context in which it will be used	Students provide real-life contexts for knowledge discovery and construction
Teacher is primarily a provider of information and an evaluator	Teacher is a coach and facilitator
Assessment is often indirect by using objectively scored tests	Learning is assessed through discussions, papers, projects, and the like

Online educational programs are fundamentally looking for learner-centered teachers. If a school considers someone for an online teaching position, it is likely that they will first be required to complete a faculty development program conducted by the school. Although each school does this a little differently, often prospective teachers can expect to review learner-centered teaching theory, school policies and expectations, and the specifics of conducting a class in the school's learning management system. This faculty development experience is also a prolonged interview that contains activities to gauge your capacity to be learner-centered. For example, it is common to have exercises that require participation in discussions and providing feedback to fictitious students' assignments.

Teaching online also requires the proper mix of academic credentials and professional experience. Master's degrees are generally the minimum required and some job postings will specify that a terminal degree is needed. Also important is the professional experience a teacher can bring to the classroom. Since the teacher is acting as a coach and facilitator while learners are discovering knowledge, professional experience is required to put the information in real-life contexts and to help students do this for themselves. It is also observed that more schools are seeking to compete at a higher level and asking or requiring faculty to participate in their professional community by conducting research and publishing contributions—not unlike tenure track requirements for traditional schools, but without the tenure track benefits. Both accreditation requirements and competitive pressures are driving this trend.

Online educators need academic credentials, applicable professional experience, and a learner-centered philosophy. Of course, different programs have their own emphasis. For example, a college extension system offering classes in pho-

tography, retail management, or hospitality management is more likely to emphasize professional experience over academic credentials. They also provide someone a good opportunity for gaining experience as an online teacher by leveraging prior professional experience, even if the person has not taught before.

To help someone prepare to teach online, a number of teaching certification programs are available. Each has its own focus and participants need to consider their plans and needs before selecting a program. For example, if the desire is to be an instructional designer, then choosing a certification program that focuses on instructional design is important. If the focus is teaching, then a program such as the University of California, Irvine Extension's "The Business of Teaching Online" (UC Irvine Extension, 2009) is an excellent choice. UC Irvine's program prepares onground teachers as well as those without prior teaching experience to be learner-centered online teachers, to know what to expect in the virtual classroom, and to excel in the profession.

Online schools find their teachers in a similar manner as other professional careers by using job postings and networking. Popular job posting sources include those used by all professions (www.monster.com, www.careerbuilder.com, etc.) and those specific to education (www.higheredjobs.com, www.chronicle.com/jobs, www.facultyfinder.com, etc.). Networking can be pursued by taking an online teaching certification program, participating in online teaching conferences, joining professional discussion groups, and visiting blogs. Some preferred resources include: Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (www.merlot.org), OnlineTeachingJobs Yahoo Group (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/OnlineTeachingJobs/?v=1&t=search&ch=web&pub=groups&sec=group&slk=2>), Teach Online (www.teachonline2008.blogspot.com), Online Adjunct Jobs ([Volume 6, Issue 2](http://www.onlineadjunct-</p>
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jobs.blogspot.com), and Make Money Teaching Online (<http://www.teachonline-book.com/index.html>). However, these are only a small sample of the many high-quality journals and Web sources available to current and would-be online teachers, including the *Distance Learning*. A few quick Web searches will uncover a dizzying number of resources.

A number of factors suggest that online education will only continue to grow. Although the history of online education has blemishes, with some schools closing from financial pressure, diploma mills dragging down the reputation of quality online programs, and employers at times questioning the value of online programs, the enrollment growth is hard to ignore. The online higher education market is on the order of \$10 billion (extrapolated from Shapiro, 2007). Many traditional onground schools have created online offerings, with more expected to enter. Quality state schools, such as the University of California, Boston University, and Colorado State University, to mention only three, have created online offerings, providing credibility to the online learning model and evidence of the growing demand.

A generational convergence is underway that will only add fuel to the online learning fire and spur it to even faster growth. Gen Y is technologically sophisticated, natural at multitasking, adept at virtual communications, experienced at collaborating, and accustomed to working with their peers to accomplish tasks. This is an ideal profile for online learners. As Millennials consider options for furthering their education, they will be the ones pushing the future of the virtual classroom.

In conclusion, online teaching is not for the weak hearted. It is demanding and at times tiresome work. However, the schedule and location flexibility is hard to beat. Most importantly, it provides an opportunity to positively influence people that we

would otherwise never be able to meet. Personally, the most rewarding aspect of teaching online is having a positive and meaningful impact on people wishing to improve themselves.

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