

Identifying and Addressing Teaching Challenges in K-12 Online Environments

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INTRODUCTION

Often, educators report that they were born to teach, and from a very early age, it is clear that they are destined to have a classroom of their own. However, this dream typically did not include teaching via the use of a web-based environment. An increasing number of elementary and secondary teachers are finding themselves encountering this relatively new form of instruction. However, this type of teaching presents a unique set of challenges. According to a recent survey

of almost 600 K-12 online teachers throughout the United States, major areas of concern include the amount of time devoted to teaching online, control over the content, and issues related to students (Archambault & Crippen, 2009).

TIME

While virtual teachers enjoy the flexibility of teaching online, the amount of time spent teaching online surpasses that of a traditional, face-to-face environment. When asked about the challenges related to time, online teachers agree that although it is beneficial in many ways, including getting to know their students better, the time investment was a major factor in their workload. As one online teacher commented, "I feel that it is a wonderful opportunity for my students, but it takes much more of my time than it did when I was in the classroom." Another echoed the same theme: "Teaching online I feel is much harder than any other type of teaching position I have had in the past. It takes a lot of preparation, and decision making,"

The notion of time and energy spent is one that is particularly underestimated by those outside the field, and often comes as a surprise to those who are new to online teaching. Because many teachers in this area are continually improving their practice with new content, new technologies, and new ways of engaging students, it can



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be particularly time-consuming, as another online teacher noted: "I work harder now than ever before. No two years are ever the same." This finding is consistent with previous studies that suggest that through the process of teaching online, instructors at the K-12 level continually made changes to improve their courses, especially the courses that they had previously taught face-to-face (Lowes, 2005).

The amount of time needed to teach in an online environment is an important consideration for those considering entering the profession. Although schedule flexibility and the ability to teach "anytime, anywhere" is a understandable draw to prospective teachers, online teachers need professional development from the onset that emphasizes the demands for time and addresses time management strategies specific to online teaching. These could include setting clear expectations with students, such as policies regarding response time to e-mail, feedback on assignments, and procedures for having questions answered, and the role of the teacher as facilitator. These elements are related to classroom management for the online environment. Because teachers coming from traditional settings have experienced preparation related to establishing rules, routines, and procedures for face-to-face teaching, the translation of elements for an online setting is sorely needed.

COURSE CONTENT

Another challenge facing online teachers is how content for their courses is developed. From examining various models, there appears to be a wide range of models for how online content is created. Some virtual schools allow their teachers to create their own content and others use materials developed by a content provider, colleague, or curriculum specialist. The experience on the part of the teacher with respect to how much control they had to change their course(s) seemed to be an

issue. When teachers do not have control over the content, this can become a source of frustration, as one expressed: "I have little control on curriculum and course management. [Notice of] errors within the course need to be submitted through a third party. I would prefer to make corrections myself to eliminate the delay." Several other teachers experienced a similar feeling:

I am not the creator of the lesson plans or course design, and have no authority to change or create anything for my students.

I find the curriculum at this online school is very poor. I spend much of my time rewriting it while I teach. Also, in social studies it is hard to impossible cover the content (or state standards) in anything less than a very superficial way.

The school I work for has a great environment and very supportive staff/faculty, but there is little freedom in the actual instruction of the courses.

Content development is a unique issue related to K-12 online education, and an area for future research, including who provides content, how it is created, and how content is evaluated for possible use and adoption. Content providers may want to consider allowing greater access for teachers to incorporate their own lesson ideas, as well as the ability to make corrections or revisions to curriculum directly. Since educators in online environments should be certified in the content area in which they are teaching, their input in how the courses should be organized, activities that should be implemented, and the ability to make modifications, needs to be heavily weighed. Through the process of teaching online, educators learn what works and what does not. According to another study, online teachers continually made changes to improve their courses, especially the courses that they had previ-

ously taught face-to-face. As one online teacher commented, "By developing my course, I have had the opportunity to introspectively analyze what I am teaching, why I teach the way I do, and how I can change and improve my communication with students" (Lowes, 2005, p. 7). This experience is an important consideration when deciding on the extent to which teachers are allowed to modify, revise, and/or create content for the classes they teach.

STUDENT ISSUES

Online teachers also express frustration in dealing with various student-related issues, including students who may not be well suited for an online learning environment and the disparity between students who succeed and those who fail. This theme is echoed by the following online teacher sentiments:

I am surprised by the amount of students that fail, but I have seen improvement over the last year and a half. It seems that students either do really well or just don't do anything at all.

Many of my students are making great progress toward understanding mathematical concepts. However, others choose not to participate and consequently they fail. Online works well for some motivated students.

Pretty much the same as face to face students. Some students self motivated to get work in, some you have to track and remind, and some give up even when they obviously can do the work.

Other teachers express frustration at times in getting to know their students:

Sometimes it is frustrating not knowing what is going on with the student's personal lives.... This limits your understanding of their needs. Other than that I enjoy doing it.

The methods for teaching online, or online pedagogy, include the differences in teaching strategies that are implemented when adapting curriculum to an online environment, such as student interaction, evolving teacher roles, student access, and evaluations of student outcomes. Online educators also need to be aware of the importance of encouraging and teaching specific self-regulated behaviors to their students to ensure every possible chance for success, such as the use of cognitive strategies such as modeling, analogies, and metaphors to aid in understanding the content-related material. This involves the teacher's ability to translate and contextualize information to improve students' understanding and motivation for learning. In order to be able to create such materials and implement these types of strategies, online teachers need to have not only an excellent grasp of their given content area but also an appreciation of how technology and the online environment affect the content and the pedagogy of what they are attempting to teach. Because of this, professional development is needed in order to assist teachers with the unique challenges of developing their skills related to meeting the needs of students, especially those with disabilities students who might be at-risk for failing, and with differentiating instruction (Rice & Dawley, 2007).

There is wide array of obstacles that dedicated teachers have had to overcome in order to better educate students and improve learning. Online teaching presents a unique set of challenges, including the amount of time needed, the development and implementation of course materials, and the ability to meet the needs of a diverse group of students. This requires highly motivated, committed individuals who are able to translate, adapt, and develop their teaching skills to the online environment and who are willing to learn to continue to improve their practice. As one online teacher described:

My experience with online teaching can be described as a learning experience! I have learned so much about computers/software/trouble-shooting. I would have never thought I could do so much on a computer. If you had asked me 8 years ago to even try to complete some of the work I now do I would have been flabbergasted! So, I learn and the students learn, and we try to keep it educational, but still fun. This is a great teaching environment for teachers who are self-motivated, willing to learn, and who are good with doing a lot of work independently.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

From the major challenges communicated by online teachers, additional preparation, professional development, and support is needed. Online teachers would benefit from educational opportunities that focus on the time demands and management strategies for teaching in an online environment. Concentration areas in online classroom management might examine ways that online teachers could more effectively use limited time through establishing clear expectations with students, procedures for streamlining responses and feedback to students, management of student interaction, and the evolving role of the online teacher. Although experienced teachers are adept at managing a face-to-face classroom, there is a clear need for assistance with developing this skill set in the online environment to ensure that teachers are able to effectively use their time to maximize student learning and engagement.

Another focus area for development of online teachers is how pedagogy is transformed as a result of being in an online setting. Methods for engaging students, encouraging interaction, assisting students to be more self-regulated, and helping them to stay on track are all part of the "art" of online teaching that can be sometimes difficult to cultivate. Teachers also need to understand the unique challenges

online students face, especially those from at-risk backgrounds so that they can employ instructional strategies to support learning to ensure student success in the online classroom. In addition, online pedagogy uses the affordances of technology to provide the best possible modeling, analogies, and strategies to craft instruction and help students understand the content. The ability to differentiate instruction is one of the key advantages of the online classroom, but without sufficient preparation and the capacity to create, revise, and guide the curriculum, this opportunity is potentially lost.

In addition to online classroom management and pedagogy, the notion of who creates content and who has access to make changes, modifications, and revisions seems to be an area of concern for online teachers. Because teachers who could not make changes in the curriculum expressed frustration, virtual schools using content providers may want to develop a clear, quick, and easy process for teachers to be able to make revisions in lessons, especially if there are errors or inconsistencies in the content. It may also be beneficial to allow teachers to supplement the created content with their own lessons, ideas, web-based resources, and approaches to teaching a specific unit. Just as in the face-to-face classroom, where teachers have access to materials, but have the ability to make modifications based on their expertise, this flexibility is also needed in the online environment, allowing for the medium to capitalize on teachers' knowledge and experience to improve instruction.

To face the challenges of online teaching, additional professional development and preparation is needed, not only on the part of virtual schools dealing with the specifics of their programs, but also on the part of teacher education programs as a growing number of educators enter the field. By hearing directly from online teachers themselves, specific issues related

to online pedagogy, content, and technology can be addressed so that these individuals are better prepared to enter the virtual classrooms that are an increasing and important part of our educational landscape.

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