

Why Faculty Resist

Stephen C. Ehrmann

Have you ever heard the phrase “resistance to technology” used to imply that some faculty are irrational dinosaurs? I have, and I don’t like it. In my experience, most such resistance is quite reasonable. The following story about online discussion in real time suggests what worries these instructors.

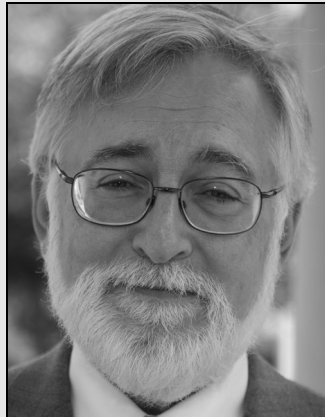
Visualize a scene from the late 1980s. In these days, there are no online chat rooms yet, no texting yet, and very little e-mail is yet written by college students. “Writing” is something that most students do in

order to get grades. They face a big leap from casual, personal, oral conversation to formal academic writing, and many trip on that hurdle.

In a handful of classrooms across the country, however, students and their instructors sit behind the big monitors of computers connected through local area networks. No one speaks. The only sound is the clicking of keyboards. Students and their composition instructors are typing into what will someday be called a chat room.

In these computer labs, academic writing in real time is being used as an intermediate step to help students make the jump from casual oral speech to formal essays. Instructors hope that, when students “talk” about academic topics by writing to each other, they will learn to express their academic ideas in text to a real audience. Students can then use the transcript of the conversation as they write formal essays. This grant-funded project is called “English—Natural Form Instruction” and will later be renamed “Electronic Networking for Interaction” (ENFI).

Let’s move forward in time a month or two to a meeting of the faculty involved in this experiment. It’s midway through the first semester of this experiment. Today, the director of the ENFI project, Professor Trent Batson of Gallaudet University, has gathered about 15 faculty members from seven participating colleges and universi-



Stephen C. Ehrmann,
Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning and
Associate Professor of Educational Technology
Leadership, Graduate School of Education
and Human Development, George Washing-
ton University. Telephone: (202) 994-2651.
E-mail: sehrmann@gwu.edu

ties. As the program officer monitoring this grant, I am sitting in the circle of chairs and listening.

The discussion has been going on for an hour or so. An English faculty member at the New York Institute of Technology has just turned to her colleague Marshall Kremers and said quietly, "Marshall, you should tell your story." He responds equally quietly that he doesn't want to. She insists, so he reluctantly begins to explain what happened in his classroom.

Marshall explains that, on the second or third day of class, some of his students veered off topic, writing profanity and obscenity instead. His objections were simply lines of text that were quickly shoved up and off the screen by the flood of student expletives. He didn't feel comfortable getting up and speaking: this was an educational experiment where talking was barred. So, when his objections didn't stem the tide, Marshall walked out of his classroom. He returned later but this cycle of student profanity and faculty retreat were repeated a couple more times before the rebellion ended, Marshall now reports to us. He concludes in a puzzled, rueful way, "I don't know what I did wrong."

There is a long silence.

Then one of the other faculty in the circle says quietly, "Well, something a bit like that happened to me." One or two other faculty agree that what Marshall described resembled things that had happened in their classrooms, too.

Diane Thompson, a codirector of the project from Northern Virginia Community College, joins in. "I've seen this phenomenon also. Marshall, this is the first time you've taught this way, but it's my third time, and I've had time to think about it. We say these new technologies are 'empowering,' and we assume empowerment is great. But think what happens when powerless people get power. Think about the French Revolution. People break windows!"

"But that's not altogether bad. After all, the most important ingredient in a successful composition course is energy flowing into the process of writing. That's what you had, Marshall. The challenge here is not how to crush a rebellion. It's how to channel the energy!"

Suddenly the discussion ignites as faculty exchange ideas about how to "channel the energy." I sit silently, enjoying the conversation, but also with a sense of *déjà vu*: where have I heard this kind of exchange before?

Then I remember. A decade earlier, in the 1970s, I had been at The Evergreen State College, a nontraditional institution with full-time interdisciplinary programs instead of courses. Instead of each faculty member teaching two courses a quarter, teams of faculty teach only one interdisciplinary program at a time, often lasting a full academic year. Similarly, students each take only one such program at a time. Instead of grades, Evergreen faculty write about what students have learned; in these full-time programs, faculty know their students quite well. Seminars are far more common than lectures, even in science. In full-time programs such as these, it's easier for faculty to be spontaneous and reorganize what they're doing, because they and their student are completely dedicated to this one program. In these and other ways, Evergreen was (and is) unlike anything that its new faculty members had ever seen.

And at Evergreen I'd seen many faculty blushing as Marshall Kremers had blushed: ambushed by unexpected problems with their students, faculty new to Evergreen would feel ashamed. At Evergreen, as with ENFI, experienced colleagues would quickly reply, "Don't be so hard on yourself. That's just the kind of thing that happens in a place like this. Here's why it can happen. Here's what you might have done to trigger it. And here are some thoughts about what you might do to respond."

Why did such discussions about teaching problems happen so often at Evergreen?

First, such problems hit novice faculty frequently because Evergreen was so different from any place they'd taught before: unfamiliar settings and actions produce unfamiliar problems. The second reason for the frequent sharing of such bad experiences was novices had a safe setting in which to confess: Evergreen teammates have to depend on one another, and meet frequently to talk about what's going on in their programs. Third, when the novice exposes a possible personal failing, teammates are likely to have seen the problem before or heard about it from previous teammates: Evergreen teaching issues don't vary much from year to year. Because teaching teams were remixed quite frequently, insights about how to respond spread with amazing speed across the college.

So now in 1987, as I listen to the ENFI faculty talk excitedly about "how to channel the energy," I realize this conversation is like, and unlike, those at Evergreen. In both settings, new situations lead to new problems for novice faculty. In both places, the ambushed faculty are a bit ashamed to talk about the problem.

But there are differences between the two situations, too.

First, Evergreen itself doesn't change much from year to year. But technology does change and, more importantly, what faculty and students do (with the aid of technology) changes. So, for technology users, unfamiliar problems can emerge frequently.

Second, at most institutions faculty don't normally work in teams. There are far fewer opportunities to have conversations in which faculty feel comfortable revealing their teaching difficulties.

Finally, technology training (note the title) is usually led by young technology experts, not experienced faculty. The instructors are unlikely to be aware of such

teaching problems. And, whether workshops are led by staff or faculty, the leaders are usually enthusiasts who want to paint online learning in the most positive possible light.

No wonder many faculty resist teaching online, or do so in a way that's very safe, and that closely resembles how they teach in classrooms! It really is risky to change what you're doing in a course. What's worse: *everyone around them is pretending that faculty are not in any danger*. No one is preparing faculty to cope.

It's 2012. We understand the challenges. So how should we prepare faculty to respond to the inevitable pedagogical problems they'll face when they take advantage of online technology to reshape their courses?

First, just as we did in 1987, experienced and novice faculty ought to talk about what can go wrong. And participants need to feel safe enough to confess what might just be stupid mistakes. You can't tell until you share, as Marshall Kremers discovered.

Second, notice that the ENFI discussion produced more than just concrete responses for the classroom (e.g., different ways to "channel the energy"); it also produced deep conceptual insights into the underlying causes (e.g., "Think about what 'empowerment' really means, Marshall."). In fact, when I've told the story of Marshall Kremers in the decades since, listeners sometimes come up with new analyses of the underlying issues, each of which suggest different ways to respond.

Kremers' students may have erupted because, in real time writing, the novice's timing is usually off; by the time a comment is prepared, the conversation has moved on and the painfully written comment is ignored. Irritation builds until some students explode. Response: try discussing the problem with students and asking them how to deal with the irritation.

Martha Kanter, under secretary of education, recently likened the ENFI students' empowerment to "experiments" performed by students of B.F. Skinner. When their professor moved to the left of the lectern, students secretly agreed to look interested and ask questions. When their professor stood to the right of the lectern, they would instead sit silently and feign boredom. By the end of the term, the story goes, their professor was habitually standing in the left corner. After telling this story, Kanter suggested that the ENFI students' profanity was a deliberate attempt to manipulate the professor. Suggested faculty response: recognize the joke, laugh, and ask students to describe examples where writing has subtly influenced people.

So there are at least three possible causes of the ENFI disruption: empowerment leading to anarchy; irritability caused by the mechanics real-time discussion; and empowerment leading to student attempts to manipulate the professor. Each analysis suggests fresh options for transforming a threat into a learning opportunity.

The 1987 discoveries occurred almost by accident. Today, to help faculty teach online, we can arrange such discoveries intentionally, while reassuring faculty that we have their backs.

First, collect some stories of pedagogical problems that can arise when courses are taught online (e.g., Ehrmann, 2009). Each story should describe what happens up until the problem, and then stop. (The Kremers story would end with Kremers lamenting, "I don't know what I did wrong.")

Second, invite a group of faculty, both novice and expert, into a seminar to discuss a few such stories. Ask participants whether they have had similar experiences. Ask how they explain the causes of the problem, and how they would respond to convert the problem into an opportunity.

Once the seminar has discussed two to three cases, invite participants to volunteer their own most challenging moments in teaching online, or their concerns about what might happen in the future. Analyze those new cases in the same way: what might cause such a problem? How might you respond?

My second suggestion stems from an aspect of the real time writing that I haven't emphasized yet: many of these ENFI faculty had previously met. They already had a track record of talking about teaching together. Similarly at Evergreen novices had already had many conversations with teammates about teaching before they had to confess a failure. And during such earlier conversations, faculty have learned whom to respect about this particular teaching issue: other faculty listened attentively to what Diane Thompson had to say about empowerment because they already knew Diane was a seasoned authority on ENFI.

Unfortunately at many institutions, many faculty haven't had a history of talking about teaching problems with colleagues. So they may not feel safe admitting problems to colleagues, or know whose advice to respect.

So let's look for ways to foster routine discussions about online teaching and its problems. That's not easy. Many faculty have little time or patience for such discussions. Unless the conversation produces a quick payoff, many faculty will simply exit and not return.

I see at least two good options for organizing compelling, useful conversations about teaching and its dilemmas.

One strategy is to create faculty learning communities that each explore a different issue of teaching online (e.g., how to foster and maintain deep discussions among online students). Miami University has been a leader in organizing such FLCs. (Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and University Assessment, 2012)

The second option is to encourage structured, brief conversations among faculty who teach pretty much the same course online to similar students. In that setting, participants will share terminology and assumptions: they can launch immediately into substance and immediately understand responses because they all speak the same language and face quite similar problems. Such a conversation could cover many useful tips and painful problems in a relatively short time.

In extremely large courses, these conversations could be among section leaders. More often, it makes sense to organize online conversations among faculty who teach the same course but at different institutions (e.g., via Skype or Blackboard Collaborate). If participants already know each other from professional meetings and/or because the institutions are near to one another, so much the better.

When such a discussion begins, a leader would ask who would like to introduce something interesting or distressing that has happened in the course in the last week or two. After a brief (3 minute?) description, the moderator would invite discussion of similar experiences, relevant resources, and possible next steps (up to 7 minutes?) making sure no one takes too much of the time. When the assigned time (30 minutes?) is over, the session adjourns until next time (next week?). "Leave them wanting more" is a good mantra for organizing sessions like this.

Your institution's online learning program can help by scheduling sessions at times that work for the greatest number of faculty and, if attendance begins to lag, checking to see if setting a new time would help. No stipend ought to be necessary

(and few of us could afford to pay one) but hosting occasional parties for participants would be a good idea.

Such online conversations across institutional lines can produce a very beneficial side effect: once faculty develop a history of talking about teaching, teaching improvements, insights, and resources are likely to be shared across institutional lines. (Ehrmann, Gilbert, & McMartin, 2006). Institutional leaders in online learning are likely to be those institutions that import good ideas faster than anyone else.

The landscape of online learning is changing qualitatively, as Patty Dinneen and I described in "Beyond 'Comparability,'" published recently in this space (Ehrmann & Dinneen, 2012). To spread such striking new approaches to the organization of teaching and learning, however, we first need to prepare faculty to face the dark side of innovation.

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