Online Teaching: State of the Art

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As instructor-led online classes become increasingly prevalent at colleges, universities and school systems around the world, the issue of online teaching quality is becoming a major topic. There are a lot of sides to this issue including: (1) impact on student achievement; (2) faculty satisfaction; (3) assessing online teaching effectiveness; and (4) how to improve online teaching. Let me say a few words about each of these in turn.

Although I haven't seen any studies that directly correlate instructor actions with student outcomes, I have reviewed hundreds of course evaluations of online courses over the years and one of the most frequent complaints from students is lack of instructor feedback or involvement in the class. Students expect to get timely and substantive feedback from their instructors on their assignments and they also expect instructors to participate actively in discussion forums, chat sessions or whatever form of interaction exists in the class. While the consequences of a "hands-off" instructor may not affect learning directly, it certainly influences student motivation to do well in an online class and affects their overall performance and attitudes. This is particularly true for students who need extra help with the subject matter or keeping up in an online class.

The question is why don't some instructors participate fully in their online classes? The answer as far as I can tell is the workload involved. Reading and responding to the discussion postings or assignments generated by a class of 20 or more students requires a considerable amount of time and many faculty see it as an unreasonable workload. In some cases, there may be an issue of not understanding how to respond to students using the particular technology involved, but I think this is unlikely with today's easy to use learning tools. A more plausible explanation is that they do not find the kind of limited interaction possible with online learning systems to permit the kind of response they'd like to make to students. At any rate, some instructors asked to teach online classes do not find it satisfying.

On the other hand, many instructors like online classes. Most find the opportunity to interact extensively and intensively with students to be very rewarding. To some extent their enjoyment of online classes may derive from use of technology, although this not a prime motivating factor for all faculty. Certainly the convenience factor of being able to teach wherever they like (and whenever in the case of asynchronous systems) is a big attraction. For some faculty, the ability to reach out to students anywhere in the world, and to draw on the global database of resources is exciting. So, online teaching can be very satisfying to a subset of faculty, who are not deterred by the workload issue.

These two opposite reactions to online teaching bring up the issue of evaluating online teaching effectiveness (Roberts, 2006; Williams, Hricko & Howell, 2006). Because faculty range considerably in their skills and motivation to teach online, the results can be quite variable. Administrators of online programs need to monitor the progress of classes to ensure that faculty are participating fully and being responsive to students. (Ironically, this kind of oversight almost never happens in traditional classes.) However, the dilemma is what to measure? The number of responses to students or the amount of time faculty spend online are data easily available from Learning Management Systems and provide a general measure of course involvement. End of course evaluations can measure student satisfaction and self-ratings of learning accomplishment. But these measurements don't indicate how well an instructor can get students to interact with each other and engage in the content of the course. It is possible to do this by going through discussion postings and examining feedback messages, but this is very laborious and considered intrusive by faculty. Therefore, the measurement of online instructor effectiveness is problematic.

Which brings us to perhaps the most important issue associated with online teaching: how to improve it (Gudea, 2008; Ko, 2010; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). This question assumes that we understand the nature of online teaching well enough to provide unequivocal guidance, which is not the case. However, we do know some things: Hands-on practice with the learning system/tools being used is critical; instructors are unlikely to teach well unless they are quite comfortable with the technology involved. Peer support and interaction is important (i.e., faculty like to learn from each other). Learning how to facilitate student interaction is usually the most difficult skill for faculty to learn since it's not an element of traditional classroom instruction. So faculty need to practice moderating discussion groups or web conference sessions in which they play a coaching role ("guide on the side versus sage on the stage"). What works best is to have faculty participate in a short online course; understanding what it's like to be an online learner provides the basis for effective online teaching.

Teaching online is still a new activity for most teachers, although thousands have mastered the art in the past decade or two and it has been extended into many new areas (e.g., Downing & Holtz, 2008; Edmundson, 2007; Rees et al., 2008). As online learning becomes commonplace, the issues discussed in this overview will receive a lot more attention. Eventually, online teaching skills are likely to become the norm; but for now, they require extra attention in terms of training, support and assessment.

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