

Chapter 1

From Reluctant and Reticent to Engaged and Enthusiastic: The Passage to Online Teaching

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I vividly remember the day when my dean first started throwing around the words and the concept of online teaching. She presented the idea as a theoretical construct, but it wasn't long before I knew she wanted to see the objective taken to fruition. As she spoke, my mind vacillated from possibility to resistance. When the conversation concluded, I was solidly in a state of defensive denial! I built up a stockpile of reasons why the course that I most frequently taught, *Democratic Schooling: Issues of Law and Ethics*, was best served in a brick and mortar environment. Students needed to have face-to-face dialogue in order to address the tough issues associated with the ambiguity inherent in the educational arena. They would lose the dynamic interaction and the plurality of thought. It just wouldn't work! Turning to the old adage, I argued that "if it ain't broke, why fix it". My Faculty Course Questionnaires (FCQs) were good and student's regularly noted in their evaluations that they really enjoyed the class.

Transition

I see myself as a "team player." I am a Senior Instructor who wants to be viewed as an individual who supports the School's strategic plan and moves with the flow. I knew that the dean was hoping that I would start teaching online and as a result possibly influence others to do the same. Like many of my non-tenure track peers, I want to be an integral part of the university family. I saw the opportunity to teach online as a dynamic way to demonstrate my commitment. However, I still wasn't convinced I wanted to do this. I started with baby steps. I contacted the individuals at CU Online and asked to have a shell constructed for my course in Blackboard. I then attended one of the many available workshops and gained some basic skills for setting up an online course. At this point, I still had no intention of teaching this course online. But through this process, I learned that I could set up an online course shell as a supplement to my face-to-face class. To my surprise, it worked quite well.

Having a supplemental course shell helped to facilitate the needs of students who prefer to see things in written form. I placed copies of my notes, the syllabus and my lessons on the course site. As I progressed and felt more comfortable, I set up the online supplemental course shell to mirror and augment my face-to-face class. Each week contained supplemental material, which complemented the face-to-face class. As I grew, so did the materials on the site. In addition to the lessons, I posted short assessments, articles, additional reading and forums for threaded discussions. The online course shell seemed to provide endless opportunities (e.g., graphics, audio, and video links) to enhance the courses I teach.

I was happy, my students were happy, and life was good, or, so I thought. About a year later, the School of Education and Human Development decided to stop using Blackboard for supplemental courses and chose instead to use eCollege for both supplemental and fully online courses. This meant that I had to learn a completely new course management system (i.e. eCollege). I fought this change in the beginning but

over time I appreciated it because it served as an impetus to renovate my supplemental course.

A couple of years later, my dean got her wish and I began to teach online. I was provided an opportunity to design and implement a new course for our Masters in Curriculum and Pedagogy Program. The course, titled *Critical Issues in American Education*, was primarily intended for students in the Curriculum and Pedagogy (C&P) masters program. However, we hoped the course would attract students in other programs.

My past experience using supplemental course shells taught me the value of not rushing into and trying to do everything at once. I first designed the course and implemented it as an on campus class for one semester. The second semester I converted it to a hybrid (half on line and half on campus) course and tried it that way for two semesters. Then, finally, in the summer of 2006, I tried it out as a fully online course. It was not an initial success—due largely to the shortened summer timeframe. However, when I taught it a second time the following fall, it was a success. And I was completely hooked.

Engaged

My defensive denial gave way to unfettered anticipation. I started to think about the potential of online learning. The online format enabled the interchange of ideas, information, and learning. Student dialogue was not stunted and the multiplicity of perspectives prevailed. Every student had a voice and no one student monopolized the conversation. Students also benefited from the flexibility inherent in many online courses. There were no parking fees and no traffic. It was asynchronous—but not self-paced—which worked really well for busy adults. In addition, dress code was flexible; I didn't care if students took the class in their pajamas.

Ramifications and Realities and Lessons Learned

I consider myself a realist. I know that online learning does not meet the needs of all learners. However, I have also learned that online courses can be designed to utilize a variety of methodologies to address the needs of the diverse group of learners who sign up for our courses. There are some strengths and weaknesses to teaching and learning online. But then again.... this is true of teaching and learning in face-to-face environments. I will briefly address a few of the lessons I have learned teaching online.

From an instructional standpoint, I have observed a need for redundancy. For instance, I provide information and directions on the syllabus and on the course site. I also restate the directions in announcements, and I send out a weekly email message to all students reiterating my previous instructions. I don't know why this is necessary, but...it is. One technique I have found quite beneficial is the establishment of an FAQ (frequently asked question) section on the course homepage. The list is updated as issues arise.

I have also found that it is important to vary the routine when teaching online. It is easy to get into the trap of, what I call, "reiteration of practice." This is best exemplified when instructors learn or master a new skill (e.g., making PowerPoint presentations, facilitating threaded discussions, or integrating video into a course) and then utilize this new skill "ad nauseam." I have found that it is extremely important to vary your instructional strategies when teaching online—just as you would (or should) in the face-to-face classroom. Although you cannot really rearrange the chairs in an online classroom as you might in a face-to-face classroom, there are many other components that can be manipulated to provide variety (e.g., changing student groups,

procedures, types of assignments, activities, delivery techniques, modes of communication and time frames).

Another lesson I have learned relates to the concept of personality. To some degree, we build rapport with our students based upon personality traits. Personality traits are often more apparent in a face-to-face environment than online. When teaching online, we need to find ways to compensate for this discrepancy. That is, we need to find ways to build rapport and to connect with our students. This is one of the more difficult tasks. I am considering the option of holding the first session of my class in person. I believe that the students and I will both be able to associate the face with a name. In addition, I suspect that meeting everyone face-to-face will help establish the personal/personality component sometimes missing in online courses. Student will get a chance to view me as a “real person” and not just an “online instructor.” While I have not tried this yet, I believe in my head and heart that it will improve the missing personal element.

The final lesson learned is about course evaluations. In my experience, and I believe that most of my peers will concur, course evaluations are statistically lower for courses taught online than those taught face-to-face. Some of this may be due to the lack of personal connection (as mentioned above) or possibly even a mismatch between one’s preferred learning style and the focus of the course.

Enthusiastic

As I have progressed (and regressed at times) through this journey, one thing has remained constant. I am still me. I still maintain the same core ideological components that reflect my values of teaching and learning. Whether I am teaching face-to-face or online, I want my students to be exposed to a variety of ideas, learn from their experience, learn from their peers and instructor, effectively use tools to make informed decisions, and to make socially just decisions. I have come to believe that this can be accomplished in an “online world” and applied to the “real world.”

I have come to believe that teaching and learning online simply broadens the capacity of teaching and learning. Like our students, we too must demonstrate our willingness to be perpetual learners. Online teaching is gaining momentum and we need to be leaders not followers. Quoting a Latin proverb, “By learning you will teach, by teaching you will learn.”

Bio

Dr. Giullian began her extensive career and commitment to the field of Education in a suburban Denver school district. She was a teacher and administrator at both the elementary and secondary levels. She initially joined the UCD team in 1996 after being selected to serve as the “Administrator in Residence” with the School of Education. Dr. Giullian knew that she wanted to create and teach courses that balanced the information found in text and the law (policies, etc), with that learned through actual experience. She expanded her teaching repertoire when she ventured into the sphere of online education and hopes to perpetuate its effective and affective capabilities.