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A Technophobe's Guide to Managing Online Courses

By Rob Jenkins

True confession: I've never been a big fan of online courses. My favorite thing about teaching has always been the direct interaction with students and the energy that it generates—what some might call the "performance aspect" of teaching. I'm not sure how that translates over the Internet.

And no, before you ask, I've never taught online. I've never gone bungee jumping, either, but I'm pretty sure I wouldn't like it.

Moreover, professionally speaking, I've always been a little skeptical of Web-based classes. It's difficult for me to comprehend how so many vital aspects of teaching and learning—lectures, class discussions, hands-on demonstrations, synergy among students—can be fully recreated in a virtual environment. After all, doesn't "virtual" mean "not quite"?

On the other hand, when I was a department head, no one above me on the organizational chart ever asked me what I thought about online courses. I was just told to put them on the schedule.

I became a chair in the mid 1990s, at the onset of what we might call the online revolution. Back then I argued not against distance learning—that would have been career suicide—but at least for a more measured approach, as my campus (like every other) raced to offer more and more online courses, mostly for financial, not pedagogical, reasons.

My arguments were brushed aside like those of a talk-show guest in a policy debate. Within a few years I found myself operating professionally in a brave new world, one in which the number of online courses offered by faculty members in my department alone seemed to double each year. It was a world not of my own making, but one in which I was expected not only to function but lead.

Since then I've learned a great deal, not the least of which is that I might have been wrong about online courses. Oh, I still have no

interest in teaching them myself, and I still believe some administrators see distance learning as a cash cow without much regard for quality. But as some of the people I respect most in the profession have embraced online teaching, I've had to reconsider my preconceived notions. Maybe, as my colleagues tell me, you really can recreate the most important aspects of the classroom experience in a virtual environment. Perhaps, as they insist, that environment even has certain advantages over face-to-face interaction.

Regardless, online classes are clearly here to stay, at least until they're replaced by ... what? Holograms? Vulcan mind melding? Who knows.

That's one of the hard truths I've had to accept as an academic administrator who is, in some respects, a bit of a neo-Luddite. Another is that, whatever I might think of online courses, they are loved by lots of students. And even some who might not love such courses end up taking them anyway for personal reasons, such as the fact that those students are in Afghanistan. That is especially true at community colleges, where our students must juggle course work with jobs and families. For many, online classes are a godsend.

Faced with those realities, and notwithstanding my mild technophobia, I struggled to become a good and conscientious department chair for my faculty members who taught online. For any administrators who find themselves in a similar position—and I suspect there are many—I offer the following suggestions.

Suspend your skepticism. Maybe you're like me: You can't see yourself ever even taking an online course, much less teaching one. Maybe you're secretly (or not so secretly) dubious as to whether those courses are as good as the face-to-face versions. As an administrator, you have two choices. You can either resign in protest or resolve to make sure your department offers the best online courses possible.

If you choose the latter, you have an obligation to treat those courses (and the faculty members who teach them) just like any others, and not like stepchildren. Along the way you may well discover, as I did, that many of your assumptions are incorrect and your suspicions largely unfounded.

For example, a common assumption among administrators is that teaching online somehow requires less effort than teaching face-to-

face, and that faculty members who teach "at a distance" are just trying to get out of work. They just want to lounge around the house in their pajamas while the rest of us go to the office.

My experience working directly with online-faculty members suggests that teaching a course on the Web actually requires more time and effort than teaching it in a traditional classroom. And yes, some of those professors may very well be working in their PJ's—at 2 a.m., when administrators are fast asleep.

Support your professors. You might not know much about teaching online or care much for the idea, but you have people in your department who do. No doubt some of them are among your best faculty members. Trust their judgment. Defer to them in matters that involve distance learning. Go to bat for them with the administration when they want to offer new online courses or have ideas about better ways to do things—just as you would go to bat for any faculty member pursuing a worthwhile endeavor.

A few years ago, a colleague who had been one of the pioneers of online delivery at our college—and who was universally recognized as being very good at it—decided she wanted to teach her entire load online. At the time, that was against college policy. (Although I never could find that policy in writing. Odd.) As her chair, however, I saw no reason she shouldn't do it and every reason she should—student demand was certainly there—so I approved her request.

The next day the dean showed up in my office, demanding to know why I had allowed that faculty member to flout (unwritten) policy. I told him we had five online sections—already full of students—that needed to be taught, and that we could either allow her to teach all five, thereby making her happy and providing students with an excellent instructor, or we could demand (per "policy") that she teach two of her classes face-to-face and then twist somebody else's arm to cover the remaining online sections, thus creating unhappiness all around—especially, perhaps, among students.

The dean harrumphed (yes, he literally harrumphed), and said, "Well, it's your department," and strode out the door. Not only has that colleague been teaching her entire course load online ever since, but the college now has a large cadre of faculty members who do the same.

Learn all you can. The fact that you're not an expert about online pedagogy, or that you don't have any personal interest in the

subject, doesn't mean you can't at least learn the basics of how courses are taught online. I'm sure your college, like mine, offers numerous training seminars for those who want to teach online. You might not have time to attend all of those sessions—nor do you need to—but you can probably fit in at least a few.

You also have a great resource in your online instructors. Most of them will be happy to give you access to their courses and perhaps even walk you through them. The IT experts on your campus can also help out and answer your questions. So don't be afraid to ask.

You can even learn from students. They'll be happy to tell you who are the best (and worst) online instructors. Of course, you can't always take what they say at face value, because much of it will be sour grapes and petty complaints along the lines of, "He makes us read too much" or "I don't think she likes men." But over time, if you listen to students, you can certainly detect patterns and trends that may inform some of your managerial decisions.

Just relax. No one expects you to know everything about every aspect of your department, especially if you lead one of those multidisciplinary mega-departments so common on community-college campuses. As a chair, I supervised faculty members in drama, speech, reading, and art—none of which is directly related to my field, English. My good friend the physicist chaired a department full of biologists, chemists, and environmental scientists. And so it goes.

Once you learn to look at online teaching as a type of specialization, you can place it in its proper perspective. Your primary role as an academic leader is to maintain the quality of your department's course offerings, online or otherwise. You don't have to know all the ins and outs of the technology, and you don't need to have taught online yourself, to judge whether or not an online course is fulfilling its purpose, following the course outline, and meeting students' needs. Any reasonably competent administrator—even a technophobe or a neo-Luddite—should be able to make those determinations.

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