Observations of a Reluctant Online Instructor: Transitioning from the Classroom to the Computer

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In the early summer of 2009 I had no idea that I was about to become an online professor. I was a tenured faculty member at Lambuth University, a small liberal arts college. I loved the liberal arts atmosphere, the pristine campus, and the intimate class sizes. But, Lambuth had been struggling financially for many years, and the accumulated financial problems were mounting. Faculty had been asked several times to delay paychecks, and there was talk of the school closing its doors. My wife and I were both faculty members there, comprising the entire psychology department. Given the financial state of the school, and the fact that all of our family’s financial eggs were delicately resting in one shaky basket, when a friend from the University of Tennessee at Martin called about a job opportunity, I was willing to listen. Knowing only that the opportunity at UTM involved a position in their counseling masters program, I was surprised to learn that this program was entirely online. The program had adopted the online format in 2007. I was being asked to come to UTM for a year, with the chance to be hired tenure-track after that year.

The practical decision was an easy one. I needed stable work (Lambuth closed in 2010). But once I had joined the program I was forced to seriously evaluate my thoughts about online education in general, and the online education of counseling students specifically. This article outlines some of my initial thoughts, the changes in thinking that I have had since I began online teaching, as well as a description of my process of learning how to teach online.

MAKING THE MENTAL LEAP

An important question had to be answered immediately: How can I teach counseling courses online? I had to make a connection between a discipline that values interpersonal relationships, and a technology that seemed to inherently make these connections more difficult.

The questions from friends and co-workers were predictable and persistent, “You’re teaching counseling, online? How do you do that?” The contempt in their voices was not hidden. I felt some shame as they slowly shook their heads, squinting at me in amazement. Not yet sure of the answers myself, I would look down, mumble something about webcams and hope that would satisfy them. For the more sympathetic friends and colleagues, this sufficed. They had no desire to kick a man when he was down. For the more self-possessed, this was an opportunity for them to unleash a reasoned harangue against technology in our society and the existence of online education, while sprinkling in a few shots at the rigor of counseling education in general. At that point I had little strength to put up much of a fight, mainly because I could understand their concern and their implicit question: “Is this a legitimate degree??” I had the same questions and concerns. Coming from a teaching background rooted in discourse and interaction with students, I was struggling to understand how technology could provide the same educational experience. To me, education is about relationships, not just the transmission of information. Online education appeared, from the outside, to be nothing more than input and output, treating students as they, themselves, were computers. As the instructor I would provide the “input” through course materials, while they constructed the “output” in the form of assignments completed. I needed to know that I would be doing valuable work. I needed to know that I would be providing effective training. I needed to know that I would be fulfilled by this work. While I needed to make this move, was it a long-term commitment, or just a stop-gap?
ENGAGING THE TECHNOLOGY

I was hired about a month and a half before the Fall semester was to begin. In this time I had to learn how to use Blackboard as a delivery platform, become familiar with the courses I would be teaching, and completely develop a new course. I needed to work, and learn, quickly.

While UTM has an excellent Information Technology Center (ITC) that provides support for faculty teaching online, I was entering the picture so late in the school calendar that I had missed the workshops and tutorials on Blackboard. I knew that ITC would be willing to answer any questions that I might have, and that they would be available via phone or appointment. I didn’t live in the same town as the university, so using the phone was much more expedient for me. ITC became an invaluable safety net, but not my primary method for learning about online teaching.

The best teacher for me was Blackboard itself. By looking at the courses that I would be teaching, I could learn how Blackboard allowed me to organize information, how to enter that information, and how to change that information. Since I would be developing a new course on my own, these previously developed courses became my blueprint. As I navigated through these courses, I began to get a feel for how a student might first explore a Blackboard course. Fortunately for me, the courses that I would be teaching had been taught by different instructors, so I had examples of several different styles. And, Blackboard seemed to be fairly intuitive, which helped me learn how to construct Assignments, Tests, and Discussion Board threads.

It took me the full month to develop that first course, and I was surprised how time-consuming some tasks were. It became clear that any one aspect of my course was going to take multiple steps to complete.

RETHINK HOW YOU TEACH

There is no standard method for teaching an online course. There are, in fact, many options to choose from, and as technology advances, many more developing each year. For me, developing my first course within a limited timeframe, exotic techniques were not an option. I needed to stick with the basics for now and look to add more sophisticated and creative options in subsequent semesters.

Organization of the course was paramount. I had to be sure that what I presented to the students was clear, consistent, and fair. Thorough explanations for each assignment, including any rubrics when grading, were important. But also the use of logical places in which to put these explanations and descriptions was equally important. Students needed to know where to find information, so the manner in which I organized my courses helped them to know exactly what was expected of them.

I also had to make decisions about how to present information to the students. Videos, Powerpoints, and Word documents were all good choices. But for my discipline, it was clear that I would also need a synchronous webcam activity for some of my courses.

INTERACTION WITH STUDENTS

One of the aspects of teaching I enjoyed the most was interacting with students in the classroom. I preferred a very interactive teaching style that relied on class discussion, small group work, and activities. To get the benefit of this teaching approach online, I had to change my perception of interaction and make use of the available technological resources in Blackboard.

One change in thinking that I have made involves the belief that I was somehow less connected to my online students than I was to my other students. Upon reflection, I realized that there were many students who physically attended my courses with whom I had little interaction. It is possible for a student to sit quietly in the back of a classroom, participate minimally, and slip out the back door. Some students never say a word in class. While I spent a great deal of time speaking with students in my office, not every student in every course dropped by. What I found with my online courses was that there is no place to hide for students. Everyone must participate in the Discussion Boards, you must interact with me and the other students. There is no back door in an online course. You must drop by my virtual office and interact. This was an unexpected advantage.

Another change in thinking involved the use of technology to interact with students. Personally, I came to prefer e-mail over talking on the phone or in person with students. Email affords some time to collect my thoughts, gather information, and have a record of my response. It seemed to me to be an efficient and effective way to communicate with students. Also, I was in control of the time spent in this interaction. I could put some e-mails off and spend more time with others. Given the amount of time I was spending in that first year grading, I needed any time-saving measure I could get.

To make my courses more personal, I included a short bio and a picture of myself. I wanted my students to know that I was a real person living a real life and they could contact me if they had any concerns. In my introductions to my courses I tried to incorporate a little humor (but not much) to give them a peek at my personality. These were simple ways to increase the connection with my students.

HOW MUCH WORK IS ENOUGH?

An interesting, and important issue to be resolved was to determine how much work to expect from students. In my
face-to-face courses I could judge this by factoring in the amount of activity I wanted from each student during our class meetings. Lecture, class discussion, and activities were normal aspects of this, each requiring different levels of student activity. As a constructivist, I am a believer in active learning and highly value dialogue with and between students. As I constructed my face-to-face courses, it was a given that class participation would be an important expectation for my students.

Now, as an online instructor I had to re-evaluate the amount and types of assignments I required of my students. How many hours each week should a student work in a graduate level online course? How much time should it take a student to complete each assignment that I required? Could I cover the same amount of content in an online course as in a face-to-face course? I had absolutely no idea how to answer these questions other than to look at the courses already developed that I would be teaching and use them as a template for the course I was developing.

An important consideration for me in answering these questions was that I would now be working with graduate students and not undergraduate students. I was expecting more effort and dedication from my graduate students. All of them were entering this program because they believed in this career choice. They had made a financial and time commitment to become a professional counselor. Each course would prepare them to become better professionals, so it was reasonable to assume that they would absorb the material more quickly, reflect in some depth about the topics, and try to produce quality work.

My resolution was to look at the material I needed to cover, consider the length of the semester, and divide the content equally across the time we had. I found that I could cover more content in an online format for two reasons. First, these were graduate students, and they could function more independently than undergraduates. They were entering the program with some fundamental knowledge of educational and psychological concepts that undergrads don’t typically possess. Many of them had worked in the counseling field and were coming to our program to get the degree they needed in order to progress in their profession. Second, if I needed to assign more reading in addition to the text, or add activities or projects, I felt comfortable that they could handle this. I chose practical readings and assignments so that they were using or reflecting on the concepts rather than just memorizing them.

I found that I was initially more cautious about the workload and was able to adjust to their abilities as I gained more experience teaching online. My students were not only covering a lot of content and working hard, they were producing very good work. I was very pleased with the level of understanding, comprehension, and reflection that they consistently produced. The online format was helpful in giving them the opportunity to interact with each other, the content, and with me. Through this interaction, students were showing their potential to become effective counselors by thinking critically about concepts and issues.

**EVALUATION: GET PERSONAL**

Another way to interact with students was through the feedback I provided on their assignments. Personalized, consistent feedback is best for the students. They need to know you value their work. My belief was that if students spent time and effort crafting their responses to my assignments, I should spend time and effort to thoughtfully evaluate those assignments. Discussion Board grading can be incredibly time consuming if you have a very large class. I believed that I should respond to every single post on the Discussion Board. Later I learned that many professors read and graded all of the posts and then created their own thread giving their overall impression of the students’ posts and a response to the Discussion Board prompt. I can understand that approach. Often student responses are very similar to each other, and it can become a challenge to devise ways to construct an original comment for each. But, I found it difficult to read these posts and not respond.

I also tried to grade assignments as quickly after the due date as possible. Students need and appreciate prompt feedback. Often they need this feedback in order to complete the next assignment. But I also knew that I could not allow work to pile up, or I would never be able to catch up. I had to grade quickly in order to avoid being hopelessly behind. I had to provide substantive feedback in order to help students learn.

It was natural to make some comparisons between the quality of work of my online students with the students I taught at Lambuth. My undergrads were generally very good students. One of Lambuth’s missteps near the end was to try to increase enrollment by giving out a large number of scholarships. We attracted some excellent students, but as enrollment went up, revenue decreased, since almost 75% of students were on scholarship. Our major had the reputation of being difficult, so we tended to attract better students (or maybe we just scared off some weaker students). My online students were coming from a different circumstance in that they were taking a definite step toward their chosen profession, rather than exploring a topic that might become a profession. This change in perspective impacted their level of commitment to their studies. They tended to be older, responsible for funding their education, and attempting to balance full-time work, a family life, and their graduate studies. With all of these considerations, I found that, in general, the level of writing skills and critical thinking skills were comparable between the undergrads and graduate students. I had some outstanding students at each level, and some average students at each level. I was genuinely surprised when I had a graduate student who struggled to write effectively, and this was not common.
TEACHING A COURSE DEVELOPED BY SOMEONE ELSE

Regardless of whether you are teaching online or face-to-face, it is difficult to teach a course that someone else has developed. Every instructor has his or her own way of organizing information and making sense of his or her course. Putting someone else’s plan into action is like wearing someone else’s glasses. You can do it, but if their prescription isn’t close to yours it might be painful and awkward. This was true for me as I learned my new online courses. Problems were more likely to occur with the courses that I did not develop. Since I had not put these together, and had a limited amount of time to familiarize myself with them before the semester began, it was easy to overlook certain details. Each instructor has his or her own unique way of organizing information. At UTM, we use Blackboard as our delivery platform. Within Blackboard, an instructor has the ability to create many layers of content, from modules to folders to individual files. These can all be moved around and organized as the instructor sees fit. The result is that a section on, say, “Assignments” can be constructed that would contain all information about the required assignments in the course. Some people provide information for each assignment, for example, in only this one place. That was my preference and seemed logical. Others, however, would put the same information in multiple places. You would find descriptions of the assignments in this folder, but then again in a folder on the individual chapters or sections of the text. I ran into problems with this when information, due dates, for example, that I had changed in one place, was not changed in the other. This led to confusion for the students, and more work for me. If the mistake impacted the students I would accommodate them and fix the problem. This issue is unique to online teaching in the sense that the instructor must have a good working knowledge of the delivery platform, like Blackboard, in order to understand how courses are constructed and how to make changes. I had to learn how to track down all of the different places where information could be found on these courses and consolidate them to better fit my means of organization. Doing this gave me a better understanding of how a student might navigate a course. From that I could decide how best to organize my own courses. Students are impacted by these considerations. A disorganized course is confusing to the student and requires time and effort from them that could be used learning content and completing assignments. This is important for my online students who tend to have families and full-time jobs. The easier you can make the navigation of your course, the better the experience for the student. I have had many students tell me that they prefer the way I organize my courses and find it much easier to understand my expectations and requirements.

An issue that I did not expect to care about also arose: the look of the course. By that I mean the colors, fonts, highlighting and format of the course. It surprised me how powerful these factors were in my experience of a course. For example, one instructor who had developed one of my courses used many bright colors, both in the choice of background themes and in the color of text written on her Blackboard course. Sections of her introduction to the course, for example might be in bold, red letters, others in yellow. I found it difficult to focus when reading these passages, my attention being pulled in many different directions. So now style had to become an important consideration for me as I developed my own course, and adapted the courses that I inherited. For that first semester I didn’t change much, mainly because I didn’t have the time. The second semester, though, afforded me the chance to stamp each course with my own style and tone.

INSTRUCTOR’S TIME

When I first began to describe my new job to my friends still teaching traditional courses, they seemed to have a similar reaction. I could tell by the questions they asked me that it sounded to them as though online teaching was less demanding: “You teach from home?!!?” “Only three courses?!!” “You never have to lecture?” The implication was that somehow the computer was doing all of the work for me, and I was living out everyone’s dream of being paid to do nothing. I had to admit, it did sound idyllic in many ways. Since my classroom was my laptop, I could become a mobile teacher. If I wanted to jet off to the beach on the spur of the moment all I needed to keep working was my laptop and an internet connection. Theoretically I could do this job anywhere at anytime.

I learned, however, that all of the time normally spent engaging students in the classroom or in my office, was now spent grading assignments. Each day, every day I would check my email, answer email, grade, grade, answer email, grade, grade, send email, grade, and grade, and then check my email one last time before bed. I was not, in other words, lounging on the beach every day. I was, however, honing my ability to grade a large number of assignments in a relatively short amount of time. Because I had so many assignments in several courses due in such rapid succession, I had to work diligently to keep from being overwhelmed. What I didn’t know until later is that I gained a reputation for having one of the quickest turn-around times among faculty teaching online. I was just trying to survive.

My first year of online teaching was busy for another reason: I was teaching new courses. I had taught psychology at Lambuth and was now teaching counseling courses. While there is some overlap between these two disciplines, the courses that I was asked to teach in that first semester were concentrated and focused on a narrower topic. Reading new textbooks, finding additional outside resources to add to the Blackboard site, and keeping up with changes in
these new areas was important. This added hours to the time already spent grading and answering emails.

Later, when I spoke with my friends who now had experience teaching online or hybrid courses of their own, I noticed a change in attitude. No longer were they thinking that I was living an idyllic existence. A common response now was, “Online teaching is just a slick way to get us to work more without paying us more.” I immediately recognized what they were saying. An online course is theoretically never out of session during a semester. It is always there, always open, always silently operating whether you are logged in or not. For an instructor, the work is always there too: there is always something that can be graded, responded to, or created. If you are compulsive about checking email, there is always another incoming message that requires a response. The absence of a definite beginning and ending of the work day serves to expand both. The line between work time and off time dissolves.

TECHNOLOGY WILL LET YOU DOWN

I learned rather quickly that the term “live by the sword, die by the sword” was appropriate to online teaching. Whenever you are relying heavily on technology to deliver your coursework, you need to be prepared for that technology to fail. Things happen. Servers go down, software fails, power outages occur, and internet connections get interrupted. In other words, problems are going to occur.

Many, many times I received frantic emails describing some electronic calamity. I tried to be very supportive and flexible with these issues. I was going through them myself, so I knew how frustrating this could be for the students. If the issue seemed legitimate, I offered a solution and gave the student a chance to fix the problem. I felt a little more comfortable doing this since I had only graduate students, typically an obsessive/compulsive group looking to do things by the book. More often than not I gave the student the benefit of the doubt.

NOT ALL STUDENTS ARE TECH SAVVY

It is unwise to assume that a student who has sought out, applied to, and entered an online degree program has any knowledge whatsoever of how to use their computer and the internet. I found this out quickly as I had a student in one of my first courses who was nearing the end of her degree program. Despite the fact that she had taken several semesters worth of online courses, by the time she took mine, all knowledge of computers seemed to have evaporated from her mind into a fine mist. I remember distinctly having a problem with her ability to properly name and submit her papers. She could not understand how to title a Word document file. I gave explicit directions of what to name the assignment, but she could not understand how to carry them out. This was more of an irritation for me than a real problem. She was doing the work, so the content of her assignments was fine. But as the assignments mounted and she continued to ignore the directions despite my feedback, I was getting irritated. Why would she not simply name her files correctly?? I would email her. She would reply with long, winding, at times incoherent emails professing that she had no idea what I meant by a “file” or “document,” and despite consulting several computer experts could not possibly comply with my unreasonable requests. Sigh. She never did get this right and I raised the white flag, accepting the fact that somehow she had managed to complete an online degree program without ever understanding what a computer file was.

Other issues were much less dramatic than this, but were important to address. The majority of the students in our program are adults with work histories and families to care for. While some are relatively young, most are not. Learning to navigate Blackboard can take some time, and not everyone gets the hang of the steps required to submit an assignment or take a test. To accommodate these students, I learned to include information about Blackboard and online learning in general. This included how to contact the UTM HelpDesk and ITC. For technical questions these were much better resources than I could ever be. The unique aspect of my situation was that all of our students had made a conscious decision to enter an online program, they were not placed in an online course because it was the only open section of a required course. So each student had made this decision for their own reasons, whether it was convenience, cost, or preference for online courses. So these students were prepared somewhat for technology issues, because they had made this choice.

FIND WAYS TO STAY CONNECTED

Online teaching can be a lonely, isolating endeavor. Many long hours are spent alone in front of your computer. For me this isolation was compounded by the fact that I lived an hour from campus, and only one of the three faculty members in our program was based on campus. The university provided an office for me, and a colleague, at a local community college in the town where I lived, but there was really no incentive to use it. I was required to attend monthly faculty meetings but had no other obligations on the main campus. This may sound like an ideal situation, especially to faculty members burdened by many non-instructional obligations. But many of the advantages of being surrounded by colleagues are lost. Working in the same building allows for informal discussions about your discipline and program, sparking ideas for research and teaching. And it’s important to feel a personal connection to other faculty. As a new faculty member this absence was
felt even more strongly as I left a school at which I knew almost all of my colleagues, to a school where I knew almost none of my colleagues.

While research supports the idea that online faculty members should address this issue, real life sometimes intervenes to make this difficult. I really struggled with this aspect of teaching online. When I accepted the position, my wife and I were also homeschooling our son. Each morning my wife would go off to work and I would be home with our son, balancing his work with mine. I had the freedom to complete my work any time of day, but I also had to put the mental, physical and emotional time into working with my son. While commuting to UTM could connect me to colleagues within the college, I would lose valuable work time. Also, since my program was housed in the college of education, I wouldn’t be interacting with people in my area. The need to stay at home was stronger, so I stayed home.

I find it interesting that Apple and Google spent millions of dollars to construct their campuses for their employees, specifically designing these facilities to encourage informal interaction. The thought is that many innovative ideas occur by bumping into people from different departments. Collaboration is the intent. But how interesting that they recognize that this needs to occur through physical contact, not via the Internet. Even the people who are constructing the virtual worlds we live in rely on physical interaction to grow and develop.

CONCLUSIONS

When I am asked now about teaching online I am much less uneasy in answering. I can see the positive aspects for both instructors and students of using this technology and don’t feel as strong an urge to stammer out a perfunctory defense like, “It’s the wave of the future so you better get used to it!” I get it now. Research is beginning to appear that supports the use of online courses in counselor education (Sells, et al. 2012; Murdock et al. 2012). Sells and colleagues (2012) in their assessment of an online counseling program, found evidence of the ability of students to form significant professional and personal relationships with other students and professors. Murdock and colleagues (2012) found no differences in counseling skill acquisition between students taking an online counseling course and those taking a face-to-face course. Universities are becoming more committed to online education, and students are responding by signing up in larger numbers each year (Allen & Seaman 2013).

As an instructor I realized some distinct positive aspects of teaching online. First, convenience: I can teach when and where I want to teach with no anchor of a set place and time to meet with my students. Second, the ability to connect with students. I am able to interact with all of my students, rather than just the ones who would have asked questions in class, or taken the time to drop by my office. Finally, I can take better advantage of advances in technology because they are often built into the university’s delivery platform. Synchronous (interacting in real time with students) and asynchronous (interaction occurs in delayed time, such as email) tools are constantly being revised and developed that make online learning more dynamic and effective. Since these are typically part of Blackboard, I don’t have to seek them out, but just pay attention to the updates provided by my university’s tech center.

There are also disadvantages to teaching online that I experienced. While the convenience of online teaching is attractive, it also means that your “class” is never out of session. It seems as though there is always work to be done, emails to answer, assignments to grade. It takes time and effort to respond to each student’s needs. The biggest disadvantage to me was not being in the room with the students. I missed the give and take of a classroom, and the energy that you can feel from them, the signs that things are going well or need to be changed. In an online course you can get this information, but that’s what it is: information. Students need help understanding something, or they don’t. In a classroom, you can feel this on a different level. You can begin to sense their enthusiasm for a topic or boredom with it. I miss that type of connection.

For me, I’ve weighed the good and the bad of online teaching. I’ve reminisced about those idyllic Lambuth days and appreciate more than ever the experience of that. But, I’ve also seen my online students develop, learn, and communicate their appreciation for their experience in my courses. I feel confident in their ability to develop into strong professional counselors. And, I have adjusted to the lifestyle, finding contentment in what I am doing and how I am doing it. I am an online professor.

REFERENCES

