Preparing Instructors for Online Learning

Previous articles in this series have explored the rationale for choosing to offer online courses and have provided steps to assist in the choice of a learning environment to house those online courses. This article takes the next step in the series and addresses the issue of preparing instructors to teach in the online learning environment. When instruction moves online, necessary changes to instructional strategies are required. Not all classroom teaching methods will work online. In this article we will explore the changes that instructors need to consider as they make the transition from classroom to online teaching.

Of the topics explored in this series, the preparation of instructors for online learning may be the most significant component. The importance of well-prepared instructors for the online learning environment cannot be overstated. It is safe to say that a mediocre online course can be made a great learning experience given a well-equipped online facilitator. However, even a well-designed and well-implemented online course can have dismal results if the facilitator is not prepared or equipped for the online learning environment. It should not be assumed that because an instructor has classroom teaching experience that the person will make a good instructor online. Certainly there are teaching practices that carry over from a classroom to the online learning environment. However, there are significant differences between teaching in a classroom and teaching online. These differences must be recognized and appreciated, and instructors should be prepared for the changes that are necessary as teaching moves online.

This preparation of instructors for the online learning experience is a vast topic. When this author learned the techniques, skills, and methods to become an online facilitator, it was through a series of online courses that spanned nine months and the reading of thousands of pages of texts. The best practices of preparing to teach online can only be summarized in this article. It is our goal in this article to give guidance to instructors for further preparation.

Fundamental Changes in Instructional Strategy

Instructors must make adjustments as they prepare to teach online. One fundamental change involves the shift from physical classrooms to the nonphysical teaching space of the Internet.

When teaching in a classroom, instructors are able to observe the thinking processes (or sleeping habits) of students and thereby gauge the extent to which students grasp the material at hand. In the online learning environment, those physical responses are not available to the instructor. There are many ways to gauge student learning in the online learning environment; they just are not visible. The instructor must adapt his/her instructional strategy to accommodate this change in response from the students.

Online instructors must also **intentionally** seek to establish and encourage community in the online learning environment. In a classroom setting, most instructors assume that community occurs outside of the classroom -- either during the breaks between classes, during meal breaks, or after normal school hours. When teaching moves online, there are no other spaces for community development. The online learning space is where students will develop community if it is to happen.[1] The instructor must be prepared to develop, encourage, and model the type of community that is expected. The instructor will need to make allowances within the course for a certain amount of community-building exercises.

Another fundamental shift is the ability to let go of exclusive **control** of the learning process while encouraging and assisting students to assume some control over the learning process. This does not mean that instructors have no control of the learning process online. It does mean that the expectation for online students to engage in the learning process increases. Online instructors must be willing to encourage both increased participation from students in the online learning experience and to give some control of the learning environment to the students.

This fundamental shift also exhibits itself in a changing role of the instructor. This change may best be illustrated through an analogy of Sage on the Stage versus Guide on the Side. Most instructors in a classroom operate in the role of Sage on the Stage: the authority, guardian, and expert in a given set of content (none of which is necessarily bad in and of itself). In the digital age, there is an abundance of easily accessible information that was previously held in reserve by scholars, meaning that the instructor is no longer the gatekeeper of information. Never before in history have so many people had access to so much information. Anyone with an Internet

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[1] A question may arise about the necessity of community in the online learning environment. Research and experience support the conclusion that intentional focus on community development in the online learning environment can increase student retention and completion rates of the online course, reducing dropout rates and maximizing the achievement of course learning outcomes. More will be said about this topic below.

connection can access vast amounts of information on almost any topic. And today's student will tend to reference material online as a first course of action. While there may be benefits to the availability of such vast stores of information, there is also a need for guidance, as not all of the available information is of the same value. The role of the instructor in this instance must change from sage to guide -- from the instructor **giving** the information to the instructor **guiding** students as the students locate and use information. The role of the instructor changes from sage to guide as the instructor seeks not just to fill the student's brain, but to guide the whole student into practical application of learning.

In order to prepare instructors for the online teaching experience, eDOT has developed a short online course entitled Becoming a Skilled Facilitator. This six-week course is designed to demonstrate the online learning environment for instructors who have never before experienced an online course. The course aims to give instructors a positive experience online prior to their first online facilitation role, so those instructional strategies can be replicated and modeled to students. Throughout the course instructors will explore many of the changes that are suggested in this article for online facilitators. eDOT offers this course at regular intervals and more frequently if there is the demand or a special request.

Preparing Instructors for Online Learning

The ministry must make provision for the development of instructors for their responsibilities as instructors in the online learning environment. Following are some issues for ministries and instructors to consider as instructors prepare to teach online:

- **What is *community*, and why should an instructor seek to develop community within the online learning environment?** These are significant questions for the ministry and the instructor to consider and address. For instructors making the transition from classrooms to online learning environments, these questions may seem very strange as the development of community is rarely an instructional strategy of the classroom setting. In his relevant, helpful, and recommended article on this subject entitled "Developing Online Learning Communities," Mark Maddix identifies five elements of community:
  1. A sense of shared purpose
  2. The establishment of boundaries defining who is a member and who is not

3. The establishment and enforcement of rules/policies regarding community behavior

4. Interaction among members (both faculty and students)

5. A level of trust, respect, and support among community members[2]

Community in online courses forces each student to become a participant in the learning, which in turn assists in the achievement of learning outcomes for a course.

In the online learning environment, the intentional development of community is necessitated by the twin desires to reduce the sense of student isolation and resultant dropout and to increase student development in Christlikeness. Literature in the field and experience suggest that community in the online learning environment improves **all aspects of learning**. Online courses that fail to develop community experience higher dropout and non-completion rates and exhibit less certainty of spiritual formation within the student.

- **How can the instructor develop community online?** Community can be developed in online courses as instructors:
  - Make **intentional** choices to develop community
  - **Encourage** and **guide** students to develop community
  - **Model** the interaction required to create community

Community will happen only as instructors expect, encourage, and model it within the online course. Community will not happen if instructors only desire it to happen but take no action to foster and encourage community development. For some instructors, this will be a leap because this is not often a focus in face-to-face classroom instruction. Practically this means that instructors must include intentional and frequent times of interaction between students and the instructor throughout the online course. The development of community will most likely include both content-based and sidebar[3]

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[2] Maddix, Mark A. "Developing Online Learning Communities." *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education*. Ed. Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2012. 32. Print.

[3] Some examples of sidebar discussion forums are: a) an initial forum where each member of the course introduces him/herself to the group and the group interacts based on these introductions; and b) a forum for students to ask questions about the Learning Management System, to announce travel plans or sickness, or to chat with other students on non-course topics. eDOT entitles this second forum the Coffee Break and encourages participants to use

discussion forums, but it also may include small group activities and peer review of assignments. The resources listed below contain extensive examples and explanations of methods to increase community.[4]

- **Can instructors develop spiritual formation in online learning environments?**
  Instructors may question whether it is possible for students to grow as disciples of Christ in online courses. This is a valid question that bears exploration because face-to-face discipleship is what many instructors are familiar with in their experience. The argument suggests that spiritual formation requires face-to-face involvement in a person's life.

  It can be stated with confidence through both research and experience that online learning can contribute meaningfully to spiritual formation in the lives of students. Several of the resources listed below address this issue directly and forthrightly, validating the conclusion that online learning can be a contributing component to the development of spiritual formation in the lives of students.[5]

  Spiritual formation in the life of a student will require the same emphases on community and interpersonal communication that are encouraged in online courses. As instructors build community in the online learning environment, they will be creating the atmosphere necessary to encourage and sustain spiritual growth in students. Intentionality is required to develop spiritual formation in the online learning environment, just as it is required in any discipleship or mentoring relationship.

- **How will instructors assess learning online?** Similarly, how will instructors assess growth in Christlikeness online? In face-to-face classrooms or settings, instructors are able to gauge learning both through the physical responses of the students to the lecture and through the students' responses to questions. In the online learning environment, the physical responses of students are removed from the instructor. At the same time, the

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the forum to inform the class/facilitator of problems, questions, illness, prayer requests, or other life events that may affect their participation in the course.

[4] Of particular interest in this discussion are the texts by Anderson, *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*; Maddix, Estep, and Lowe, *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education*; and Palloff and Pratt, *Building Online Learning Communities*. Each of these texts, listed under "Resources to Consider," contains chapters dedicated to the specifics of creating community online.

[5] In particular, see Maddix "Developing Online Learning Communities," Kemp "Social Presence in Online Learning," and Lowe "Spiritual Formation as Whole-Person Development in Online Education." Each of these articles contains additional supporting documentation, and all are found in *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education,* edited by Maddix, Lowe, and Estep.

opportunities to assess students through questions increase in the online learning environment. Time constraints in the classroom limit an instructor to hearing from a minority of the class population. Online, these constraints are removed. It is possible and desired to require each student to record his/her responses to questions through discussion forums and also to require the student to defend or modify those responses through a dialog process with other students and the instructor. Just as an instructor learns the writing style of a student over time in the classroom, an online instructor will learn the unique "speaking" style of a student in the forums. Discussion forums online can be a powerful means to assess student learning, growth in discipleship, and implementation of the course material. Used in connection with peer-reviewed assignments and testing assessments, the ability to gauge learning goals online can be even more effective than the classroom environment.

- **How can instructors change their role from sage to guide?** As instructors make the transition, it is most important to recognize the differences between teaching in a classroom and teaching online.
  - o Instructors must learn to guide students in the learning process rather than dictating the process. This may require student-to-instructor negotiation about the process of learning. The instructor must learn to give students a meaningful role in the learning process and allow the students freedom to make choices about the learning process. For example, students may find a resource that is more up-to-date, more appropriate to their context, or more understandable to their level than a resource suggested by the instructor. The instructor retains final say and responsibility for the learning process, while allowing for some freedom and flexibility within the learning process.
  - o Instructors must learn to teach using discussion methods. Rather than delivering content through lecture methods, instructors in online learning environments are encouraged to teach via questions. Instructors may assume that content can be delivered via texts or resources (as opposed to lecture). Learning requires students to interact meaningfully with that material. Instructors need to ask students questions that will force higher-order thinking of application, implementation, and change. Using Bloom's taxonomy, this would translate to the Analysis, Synthesis,

and Evaluation levels of learning.[6] This level of interaction is especially necessary as instructors look to develop spiritual formation online.

- o Instructors must balance interaction in forums so the students feel neither isolated nor stifled by facilitator comments. Many classroom instructors will feel a strong need to comment on every student post. While the instructor certainly needs to model the practice of responding to student postings in the discussion forums (especially in the initial weeks of the course), the instructor must learn to temper those responses so the students are able to interact meaningfully with each other. As the course progresses (assuming that the instructor has modeled the process of responding to postings), the students should demonstrate the ability to interact meaningfully and the instructor can respond less to postings and focus more on guiding the discussion back on track or on challenging assumptions.

- **Can instructors use video or synchronous video chat as a substitute lecture method?** There are two parts to this question: Can instructors use video in the online learning environment? and Should video be used as a substitute to the lecture method? Research suggests that video in short segments (less than three minutes) can have positive educational benefits in the online learning environment. So, if video is used in short clips that are infrequently placed throughout a course, the inclusion of video may be beneficial. Short, synchronous chat may be used occasionally within a course with positive educational benefits. This does not mean that video should be used as an online substitute to lecture. Video beyond three minutes and especially extended "talking heads" tend to alienate online learners, as does extended, regular synchronous video chat. Students desire online courses for the flexibility (especially time flexibility) that they offer to the

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[6] eDOT here assumes a working knowledge of Bloom's taxonomy and provides a brief overview. For a more comprehensive discussion of Bloom's taxonomy, please consult Anderson and Krathwohl, *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives,* listed under "Resources to Consider."

Bloom's taxonomy provides a classification of learning objectives within education. The taxonomy divides learning objectives into three domains (groups): cognitive, affective, and psychomotor. A goal of the taxonomy is to encourage educators to focus on developing learning that spans the three domains rather than focusing education exclusively on the cognitive domain.

In the cognitive domain, the taxonomy provides a hierarchy of objectives in this order: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Revisions to the taxonomy suggest that the final three levels (analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) may be parallel, not hierarchical. "Bloom's taxonomy." Wikipedia.org. Web. 18 Feb. 2014.

student. Any activity that detracts from that freedom (such as a requirement of regular video chat) will tend to be resisted by the students. Remember also that the use of video will require online students to have higher bandwidth. Only a survey of students' current technical capabilities will determine if they have the necessary bandwidth to support video as a training tool.

At the same time, instructors need to be sensitive to the needs for visual representations of material and utilize them appropriately. For instance, navigation items in an online course could use visual markers that will serve to guide the students through their visual senses. There is often a tendency of educators to view the online learning environment as merely "a vehicle for digital text delivery of their lecture notes . . . ."[7] Akkerman advises that instructors seek to present course content in meaningful visual ways within the online learning environment. An example may be an infographic that takes a large body of content and demonstrates the relationships within that content through a visual form. Amvonet is a company that specializes in innovation in education. As of 25 October 2013, Amvonet posted an infographic about online collaboration via this website: http://www.amvonet.com/resource-center/infographics/online-collaboration-delivery-platform/. The resource contains a great deal of information but uses a visual method to communicate that content.

- **What are some best practices for online teaching?** As instructors prepare for online teaching, they will need to seek solutions that allow them to develop these practices. In his article, "Best Practices in Online Teaching," Osborne identifies five guidelines for effective learning online, which include the following components:
    1. Preparing the course with **intentional** community-building elements prior to teaching it. This topic is known as *instructional design*. The next article in this series will develop the topic of instructional design more fully.
    2. Establishing and modeling **social presence** in the online course through introductions and regular contributions to discussion forums.

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[7] Akkerman, Jay Richards. "Visualize More: Effective Online Teaching Methods." *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education*. Ed. Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2012. 91. Print.

3. Facilitating **effectively** online by maintaining a balance between responding (commenting or redirecting) too much and not responding enough.

4. Establishing and maintaining **boundaries** in the online learning environment so students have manageable expectations of the instructor's schedule and response times.

5. Bringing effective **closure** to the online course by reminding students of project or assessment deadlines, acknowledging that they have met requirements for the course, and encouraging students to share any final thoughts with the group.[8]

- **How will the ministry prepare and support instructors for their online teaching role?** Palloff and Pratt (*The Excellent Online Instructor: Strategies for Professional Development*) give many suggestions to assist instructors in their professional development path towards online education. Instructors may need sabbaticals to pursue outside courses of study to prepare to teach online. The ministry may need to hire a consultant trained in online facilitation to teach, guide, and coach instructors in online instructional strategies. Instructors may need to be mentored in online instructional strategies and to gain experience and comfort with teaching online. As with any professional development for staff, there will need to be financial and time concessions in order to allow these instructors to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to become good instructors online.

- **Can any classroom instructor become a good online facilitator?** While it is possible for anyone to learn the skills of being a good online facilitator, it should **not** be assumed that every classroom instructor will make a good online facilitator. There are differences in skill sets and commitment to the online learning environment. Additionally, not every instructor will be able to foster the community necessary online and may not be able to meet the time requirements necessary for online instruction.

Conclusions

Teaching a successful online course will require instructors to think and act differently from the classroom environment. These changes can be mastered by instructors who are willing to modify

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[8] Osborne, C. Damon. "Best Practices in Online Teaching." *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education*. Ed. Mark A. Maddix, James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2012. 81. Print.

their teaching methodology. The preparation of instructors for teaching online is a critical consideration. It is not too strong to say that the preparation of instructors for teaching online is the single most important component of a successful online learning program. Instructors will need to learn new ways to interact, encourage, and guide students in the learning process.

Taking the time to consider the questions presented here will give online instructors a firm foundation in the new role of online course facilitator. It is recommended that instructors gain some experience in online learning before teaching online and that they be allowed to complete courses on the subject prior to teaching online, if desired.

Things We Did Not Say

In this section eDOT desires to clarify some common misunderstandings given what has been discussed above.

- eDOT does not desire to convey that classroom instructors are incapable of learning to teach online. Some of the best online instructors are also the best classroom instructors. Often, when classroom instructors already use discussion as a form of teaching in a classroom setting, that instructor will be able to make a very natural transition to online instruction. Regardless, it is possible for a classroom instructor to learn the skills and methods of teaching online. Each instructor needs to make an individual decision about his/her desire to teach online and be assessed along the way to determine competency. Under no circumstances should any instructor be forced to teach online just because a need exists.

- eDOT does not intend to suggest that Bloom's taxonomy is problem-free or to be accepted without critical evaluation. Bloom's taxonomy is useful to encourage educators to think beyond rote-memory education and to focus on areas of learning beyond just the cognitive domain, especially in Christian education which deals extensively with attitudes and actions. Spiritual formation does not involve just the brain, but also attitudes and actions. Bloom's taxonomy can be useful to remind the Christian educator that we are NOT called to make scholars of Christ, but rather we are called to make disciples who think, feel, and act like Christ.

Resources to Consider

Anderson, Lorin W. and David R. Krathwohl, eds. *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing*: *A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: Longman, 2001. Print.

Anderson, Terry. "Teaching in an Online Context." *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*. 2nd ed. Terry Anderson, ed. Edmonton: AU Press, 2008. Electronic file. PDF of the text available < http://www.aupress.ca/index.php/books/120146>.

Maddix, Mark A., James R. Estep, and Mary E. Lowe, eds. *Best Practices of Online Education*: *A Guide for Christian Higher Education*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2012. Print. 6 March 2013. <http://infoagepub.com/products/Best-Practices-of-Online-Education>. Many chapters in this text address the issue of facilitator preparation for the online learning environment including chapter 3 "Developing Online Learning Communities," chapter 4 "Social Presence in Online Learning," chapter 5 "Spiritual Formation as Whole-Person Development in Online Education," chapter 7 "Best Practices in Online Teaching," chapter 8 "Visualize More: Effective Online Teaching Methods," chapter 10 "Generating and Facilitating Effective Online Discussion," and chapter 11 "Online Faculty Development."

Moisey, Susan D. and Judith A. Hughes. "Supporting the Online Learner." *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*. 2nd ed. Terry Anderson, ed. Edmonton: AU Press, 2008. Electronic file. PDF available at <http://www.aupress.ca/index.php/books/120146>.

Palloff, Rena M. and Keith Pratt. *Building Online Learning Communities*: *Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007. Print.

_____. *The Excellent Online Instructor*: *Strategies for Professional Development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. Electronic file.