Misconceptions and Realities about Teaching Online

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ABSTRACT: This article is intended to guide online course developers and teachers. A brief review of the literature on the misconceptions of beginning online teachers reveals that most accept the notion that putting one’s lecture notes online produces effective learning, or that technology will make education more convenient and cost-effective for all concerned. Effective online learning requires a high level of responsibility for learning on the part of students and a reduction of the teacher-student power differential. This, in turn, has major implications for faculty and course development, student selection criteria, the cost of instruction, and the outcomes of education. Effective online teaching focuses on processes of learning rather than outcomes, and is consistent with modern principles of learning that emphasize focusing on issues of high interest to learners, teaching students to use skills of active and effective learning, providing prompt feedback, and enabling students to establish learning goals and employ alternative paths to achieving those goals. Multiple ways of operationalizing these goals online are presented. Tips are offered concerning selection of students who are capable of benefiting from the online experience, developing curriculum that is user-friendly, using resources that stimulate good writing and critical thinking, and limiting class size to a manageable number.

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There is much more to online teaching than putting standard curriculum online, especially when one is teaching relatively unsophisticated students. Not surprisingly, research shows that neophyte online course developers typically have major misconceptions about the pedagogy that produces effective online learning.¹ Whatever topic one teaches online, some basic differences between online and in-person teaching need to be considered. Web-based teaching is a new technology that raises many hopes

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-- some true and some false. Among those who first contemplate online teaching, false hopes abound. These false hopes are probably fostered, at least in part, by overly optimistic early writing about web-based instruction. Fortunately, practice-based research has defined many characteristics of effective online pedagogy. Recent writing is more realistic and based on actual practice (see, for example, http://www.sloan-c.org/effective/browse.asp).

The Misconceptions of Beginners

Diane Conrad\footnote{Conrad} interviewed five first-time online instructors in an online graduate program at a Canadian university. These instructors needed to transition from their old role as a subject matter expert and talking head, to that of a facilitator who structures a learning environment in which students contribute to the actual content of course topics, as well as the analysis. However, the reflections of these first-time online instructors on their performances focused largely on their roles as deliverers of content; they indicated little awareness of issues of collaborative learning, students’ social presence, or the role of community in online learning environments. None of these instructors indicated much awareness of the social domain of online learning -- the creation of a friendly social environment essential to online learning such as that described by Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt\footnote{Palloff and Pratt}, and by Mauri Collins and Zane Berge\footnote{Collins and Berge}.

The Social Domain of Online Learning

Collins and Berge summarized changes in the roles of teacher and student in the ideal online environment.

\begin{table}
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\caption{Changing Instructor and Student Roles}
\begin{tabular}{|p{11cm}|p{11cm}|}
\hline
\textbf{Changing Teacher Roles} & \textbf{Changing Students’ Roles} \\
\hline
Teacher changes from oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide, and resource provider & Students change from passive receptacles of knowledge to builders of their own knowledge \\
\hline
Teacher changes from provider of answers to expert questioner & Students change from memorizers to problem-solvers \\
\hline
Teacher moves from provider of content to designer of students’ learning experiences & Students seek multiple, rather than single perspectives on topics \\
\hline
Teacher moves from solitary role to a member of a learning team (reduces teacher isolation) & Students move from ethnocentrism to increased multi-cultural awareness \\
\hline
Teacher autonomy changes to working with tasks that students help to construct and assess & Students work toward fluency with the same tools as professionals in their field \\
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