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| *Online Teaching* |
| *The Role of the Instructor and Assessments*  *Anne Elisa Brown*  *Shannon Palmlund*  *CET 747: Topical Research Paper*  *12/10/2010*  *Mark Hawkes* |
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**Online Teaching: The Role of the Instructor and Assessments**

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, “Teaching is the act, practice, or profession of a teacher,” (2010). Although this may sound simple enough, teaching has changed considerably in the past few decades. The content knowledge and pedagogical skills that teachers must possess in today’s classrooms have far exceeded those of the past. Gone are the days of simple reading, writing and arithmetic; education has progressed with each technological advancement, and teachers, who are now required to be *highly qualified* in their area of study, must adapt and not be left behind. In order to better prepare for the future of teaching, especially teaching online, and to ensure the most positive student outcomes it is important to understand both: 1) the role of the instructor in the online environment 2) and best practices with assessments.

In order for a teacher to be prepared with technological advancements in education, we must first gain an understanding of where K-12 schools are at in the development of their own policies and procedures. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) conducted a study of what policies were in place in K-12 schools. “Forty-one percent of schools declared that they had policies in place for 1) teacher-student, 2) parent-teacher, and 3) student-student communication,” (Cavanaugh et al. 2009). Although this may seem like a step in the right direction, Cavanaugh et al. mention in their article, *Research Committee Issues Brief: Examining Communication and Interaction in Online Teaching,* “More importantly than having the policy in place is the notion that everyone knows about it and how to get a hold of it,” (2009).

For this very purpose, the iNACOL have carefully created and adopted what is known as *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching* which is now available to the public. Though these distance education standards are not yet mandatory, they are essential guidelines for online teaching and assessments. Because of their importance, we will specifically focus on *A-E* and *I* for this research; a link to the *.pdf* file is provided in the works cited.

***The Role of the Online Instructor***

Education, once teacher-centered with the instructor at the core of the system, is shifting to an online learning environment that is student-centered. This can present many obstacles for instructors; it is not surprising, then, that reallocations this large can result in mistakes and misconceptions.

A common mistake made by an instructor when transitioning to an online learning environment most often involves adapting their face-to-face teaching methods (Tassinari). Administrators and institutions can make the mistake of shifting instructors to the online world without proper transitioning and training. Lack of training and transitioning can leave instructors feeling unprepared and overwhelmed, which is why following *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching* is imperative.

Many instructors new to the online environment also make the assumption that time spent administering will be the same as the traditional role. However, according to the article *“Needs, Concerns and Practices of Online Instructors*,*”* after polling 70 online educators, 76% of those polled felt that they spent more time preparing and delivering online courses than they had preparing and delivering face-to-face courses (McKenzie, Mims, Bennett, & Waugh, 2000).Due to the individual attention that the instructor must provide each student, online course instructors find themselves responding to individual questions via email and discussion posts with much more frequency than in a face-to-face environment, where a single student may ask a question and the instructor can respond to the entire class at once. It is also important to make sure that each student get prompt feedback as mentioned in S*tandard D* of the *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching*: “The teacher provides online leadership in a manner that promotes student success through regular feedback, prompt response and clear expectations,” (iNACOL, 2008).

Online learning has also created a shift in the learning environment from instructor-centered to student-centered; students are now in charge of their own learning. This shift from the central figure of the learning environment to the facilitator or guide can be challenging for instructors. Once instructors create the online courses, they change roles. The instructor needs to “take a back seat and gently guide the learners in their process by monitoring the discussion and entering it to prod participants to look at the material another way or to gently steer the conversation back on course” (Easton, 2003). This transition can be difficult for those instructors who are used to being the “sage on the stage”.

Like the traditional classroom instructor, the online instructor also has managerial responsibilities, from maintaining students’ records to facilitating self-directed learning. Differences, however, are created with the user interface. The online instructor must be able to effectively select and filter information, facilitate learning through thought-provoking questions and assessments, use technology appropriately and completely, and inspire critical thinking through meaningful discussion. In the virtual environment, keeping track of student progress can also be difficult. For example, monitoring “absences”, student engagement, and gauging student progress are more difficult in the online environment (Easton, 2003).

The technical component of the instructor role and selecting appropriate course materials are also new challenges for many making the transition from a face-to-face learning environment. Online instructors must evaluate their choices not only by their instructional value but by their ease of use and practical applications. Online courses often require instructor assistance with software and hardware, systems access, passwords, and other areas of troubleshooting. The instructor’s role is to manage the course content and technology so that it does not become an obstacle in learning. This requires and understanding and skill that is different from those required in a traditional classroom and may take time.

For example, online courses lack the opportunity to read visual cues from which to send and receive messages, make quick assessments, or take corrective action. There are no visual cues that suggest when a student is frustrated, confused, tired, or bored. Therefore the online environment requires instructors with “increased written presentation skills, some technical competencies, virtual management techniques, and the ability to engage students through virtual communication” (Easton, 2003). Without these skills, the online learning environment may be wrought with frustration on the part of the learner. Students must be able to navigate through the course and its requirements with ease and, when questions arise, be able to reach the instructor fairly easily as well.

***Instructional Assessments***

Not only are there many obstacles for in changing roles for the instructor but instructional assessments must also be revamped in an online learning environment. In *Assessment Approaches in Virtual Learning,* Palombra & Banta (1999) give a brief definition of *Student Assessment* in online learning, which is “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development,” (Rastgoo & Namvar, January 2010).

When being assessed in an online learning environment, synchronous verbal and nonverbal feedback is non-existent. Online courses lack the opportunity to read visual cues from which to send and receive messages, make quick assessments, or take corrective action. Because of this *Standard I* of the *National Standards for Quality Online Teaching*, states “a teacher needs to develop and deliver assessments, projects, and assignments that meet standards-based learning goals and measure student achievement of learning goals,” (iNACOL, 2008).

It is important for the teacher to rely on students submissions in order to gain an understanding of their abilities. “In a web-based learning environment – students knowing they will be assessed-read, write, and engage in dialogue with each other. This process ideally results in learning which can be assessed by the instructor,” (from Denned, 2007 in Rastgoo & Namvar, January 2010).

Asynchronous learning allows flexibilities for both teachers and students which is one of the many advantages in online learning. “Test taking can become flexible, feedback can be provided allowing further application and review for the teacher and student, costs are reduced because materials are not being copied and printed, and students can assess their knowledge as frequently as they need to,” (from Born, 2003 in Rastgoo & Namvar, January 2010).

There are, however, a few disadvantages dually noted. Obviously time for preparation and investments in the technology itself need to be contemplated in advance by the teacher and student. One notable remark made by Born in Rastgoo & Namvar’s article states, “An instructor does not have control of testing environments where students are allowed to take a test anytime and anywhere,” (January 2010). Because of this, it is important for the instructor to take caution when offering an online test. Rastgoo and Namvar mention that including theory such as Bloom’s higher stages of knowledge acquisition become extremely beneficial in assessments because, “they make students accountable, and also they can change student’s attitudes towards assessment,” (January 2010).

One example of higher knowledge acquisition mentioned that could take the place of a test was the e-portfolio. “An e-portfolio is a collection of realistic and diversified evidence of student learning. Furthermore, an e-portfolio represents the demonstration and reflection of personal learning processes and results within a time period,” (from Chang, 2008 in Rastgoo & Namvar, January 2010). Basically an e-portfolio is similar to a webpage created by the student that houses their electronic work. Higher stages of knowledge acquisition are utilized in the process. According to results of Lopez-Fernandez and Rodriguez-Illera research (2010), “Using e-portfolios increase student self management, self-responsibility in the learning process as lifelong and life wide learners….it also led to an increase in positive attitudes and self-efficacy in relation to students’ learning,” (January 2010).

Rastgoo and Namvar also mentioned the importance of online self and peer-assessments. Peer-assessment has been defined as, “an arrangement in which individuals consider the amount level, value, work, quality, or success of the learning products or outcomes of their peer with similar status,” (from Topping, 1998, Topping, Smith, Swanson, & Elliot, 2000, in Rastgoo & Namvar, January 2010). Basically, this is when students judge and evaluate their own work and the work of their peers. It gives students the chance to take charge in their learning. An example of this would be a discussion board that allows students to interact with one another.

***Conclusion***

Online learning has become an increasingly prevalent component of modern education and will only continue to grow as the medium in which learners around the world are instructed. As more and more instructors take the leap from the traditional classroom to the online classroom, they will be met with challenges and obstacles; none of which are unsurpassable with the right resources, training, and support.

Instructors new to the online environment must accept and embrace their new role as facilitator and guide. Instructors must learn to choose online materials and tools that enhance instruction rather than detract from it, and be technologically savvy enough to provide support to the students when using these tools.

Online instructors must be skilled communicators, communicating through written instruction and clear expectations rather than through face-to-face contact. Online instructors must also provide feedback and guidance, and facilitate critical thinking and discussion effectively through asynchronous communication tools.

Lastly, instructors must provide assignments and assessments that can appropriately guide and gauge student learning over barriers of time and space. The world of online learning is continuously reinventing itself and online instructors must be ready to reinvent themselves as well.

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