Linda Boynton

Beyond the challenges of technology and time, online teaching also elicits unexpected introspection about our role as instructors, our changing relationships with our colleagues, and our evolving perceptions about the students we serve.

Deciding to teach first-year composition online meant learning new technology, studying the principles of transferring in-person pedagogy to an electronic delivery system, and acknowledging that doing so would radically change what it means to teach. So with that kind of preparation, why did the disappearance of four little classroom walls shake the academically secure foundations of an experienced teacher and elicit such introspection?

Trying to honestly assess my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher is not new to me. In fact, after twenty-five years of teaching, I still regularly pray that those students who ended up in my classes in the mid-1970s were not permanently harmed by my enthusiasm and good intentions. I still recall the first teaching evaluation I ever had. I was twenty-two and teaching first-year high school English, the proud new member of a three-person English department in a rural high school. Two older faculty members had shown me “the way” and handed me an approved curriculum that included diagramming sentences. After the first grading period passed, I was called to the principal’s office, where I expected an honest discussion about my progress. The principal simply said to me, “You do not have enough Cs.” And then he dismissed me. So I thought, “Oh. Cs. I need more Cs. He’s been in public education for thirty years so he must know the proper ratio.” And I wandered back to my classroom, confidence shaken, thinking to myself, “Okay, so how can I give more Cs in diagramming?”

Now you know why I pray every night.

When I started teaching online, I found myself at the beginning again, and a lot of those old insecurities resurfaced. At twenty-two you look outside of yourself for clues on how to behave in order to regain stability and the illusion of confidence, but at a more mature age you look inward. What I found was confusing. Besides the “bewildering array of technological possibilities, [. . . online] teachers
can be quickly overwhelmed with choices and decisions, not to mention doubts and fears” (Harrington, Rickly, and Day 4). First I would have a feeling of pride about something I did, but it seemed to be quickly followed by an unexplained uneasiness. I would feel exhilarated by an unexpected success, but that was often followed by a fatigue born of some equally unexpected frustration. Once I stepped back and tried to analyze the inconsistencies, I discovered that these pairs of seemingly unrelated feelings were actually closely connected to each other. My resulting observations after a year and half online are not grounded in verifiable valid research data. What I do offer here is what I hope George Vaughan would term “scholarship,” defined as “precise observation, organization, and recording of information in the search for truth and order” (qtd. in Harrington 413). Quite simply, I am a work in progress.

What I do know is this: for every online achievement, there is a related challenge. The achievements I discuss take fewer words because they represent the expected rewards that originally motivated me to explore distance-learning options in the first place. It was the challenges that caught me by surprise and thus require more explanation.

**Achievement 1: Teaching online broadens your connection to the world outside your own discipline.**

Learning how to incorporate technology reenergizes teaching and sets in motion a delightful introspection that just naturally leads to outreach. It also forces us outside of our comfortable, safe “discipline cocoon.” Our classroom team expands to include instructional technologists and technical support personnel. Suddenly we are sharing interests and concerns with people from other disciplines who are also negotiating this new medium. This means we cultivate new friendships and we learn with and learn from one another.

**Challenge 1: This growing network demands a public redefinition of previously negotiated roles and responsibilities.**

Fool that I was, I initially thought teaching online would be like other pedagogical adventures I have freely taken on through the years. I thought I’d be free to learn and develop in my private way, learning from my mistakes and moving forward, sharing what I wanted to when I wanted to. But I soon found that this blissful loneliness is not an option.
Oakland Community College is a large five-campus institution that serves more than twenty-three thousand students. When the walls of my classroom came down, all sorts of visitors (some invited, some not) drifted in. For example, I got a request from the college to give the names of some of my online students to a reporter for a county newspaper who wanted to do a piece about online classes. The first time I saw my students’ responses, I was looking at newsprint. When I had all of ten weeks’ experience teaching online, I was asked to give a presentation explaining online classes to a college-wide gathering of counselors. You can’t say, “Ask someone else” when there aren’t any other “elses.” After seventeen weeks’ experience, I received a request from a dean that led to a presentation about online teaching at my campus. That led to participating on a panel for the college’s professional development and training arm and a conference proposal at the urging of our instructional technologist.

When all these were done, my online teaching résumé was just eighteen months long. The surreal part is that given my minimal experience level and lack of degreed credentials in online pedagogy, under normal circumstances even I wouldn’t listen to what I have to say. In some respects I feel like a first-year teacher, trying to hardwire my own electronic teaching philosophy, but all the outside curiosity prevents a private awakening.

These outside guests are not just within my own institution, either. There are many others out there representing political, commercial, and even consumer interests creeping further into my field of vision. For example, in the spring of 2000 I went to a Blackboard Summit Conference in Washington, D.C. At lunch I sat at a table with seven other people. Usually at a conference you are there with people from your discipline, with the same problems, same challenges, and same vocabulary. But at lunch here’s what I saw on the nametags: Harvard was on my right and Princeton was on my left. I learned (not from them, but from another speaker that day) that they were somewhat concerned about the dilution of their name should their wisdom reach a more common audience. There was someone from the AFT who was there to find out why the NEA had aligned itself officially with Blackboard to write a report about benchmark standards for distance education. There was a congressional aide, a reporter for a Washington newspaper, and a software developer, nametags prominently displayed.

At one point one of them turned to me (Linda Boynton, English faculty, Oakland Community College, Michigan) and said, “So … Linda, is it? How exactly is your institution situated in all of this?” The question was pretty typical, but what happened next was a real E. F. Hutton moment. Everyone stopped chewing and looked at me, listening, wanting to know my answer to the question. At that point I had eight weeks’ experience.

My new classroom is filled with all these inside and outside stakeholders from all parts of the educational spectrum. I always knew they were there. But they used to be in my peripheral vision. Now many look to us, the rookie soldiers on the front line, as “experts,” a role we uncomfortably acknowledge.
Achievement 2: New delivery systems reignite discussions about what constitutes good teaching.

Conversations in professional arenas have returned to the nuts and bolts of how students learn and what methodology best accomplishes that noble goal we all have in common. Our evolving assessment-based culture is proof of this and our online courses will provide a valuable piece of this puzzle.

Challenge 2: Online teachers sense an ever-so-subtle hostile undercurrent of “us versus them” threaded throughout these discussions.

Our disciplines are struggling with this notion of the online classroom, trying to responsibly address issues raised by an electronic curriculum. A few years back, Thomas L. Russell published a bibliography called “The No Significant Difference Phenomenon,” which concluded that hundreds of studies showed no discernible differences in effectiveness between face-to-face and distance-learning methodologies. This was followed by the NEA/AFT-commissioned “What’s the Difference? A Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education,” which dismissed Russell’s conclusions, saying that the research he examined was questionable and thus rendered his findings inconclusive. More recently, Diperna and Volpe completed a review of the literature that purported to assess Web-based instruction. They found that after they eliminated pieces that dealt with the design and delivery of online courses and those that drew conclusions based solely on students’ self-reported attitudes and perceptions, only one study remained that actually directly assessed the impact of Web-based technology (qtd. in Farrington and Bronack 70). This ping-pong dialogue leaves us much to do with little guidance.

But hints for a different standard of accountability for online courses are confusing. Online instructors have every letter of our online courses available for public view at any moment and wonder why this same heightened sense of accountability isn’t even more urgent when it comes to what happens behind the closed doors of our on-campus classes, where what we do is never questioned and rarely witnessed. A report entitled “Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education,” prepared by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, says that both faculty and administrators agree that “subjecting distance learning courses to procedures that are more rigorous than the usual campus policies suggested a degree of oversight that was both unnecessary and detrimental to the ability of faculty to be innovative and responsive to student needs” (24). Yet the pressure exists. As hard as it was to do, I chose to be very public by writing extensive reports about my online courses and granting liberal visitor access, simply to earn the right to say that these courses should not be placed under a more powerful microscope than the one we are using to evaluate our on-campus courses. Keeping my online course private might have made that comment suspect. 
Online teachers are probably more likely to sense fear in colleagues who do not embrace technology as a valid teaching tool.

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In one of the online discussion threads of the Computers and Writing 2001 preconference proceedings, a participant asked, “Does the public nature of internet-based pedagogy help [teachers] attain recognition for the ‘scholarship’ of their teaching?” Recognition? Online teachers are probably more likely to sense fear in colleagues who do not embrace technology as a valid teaching tool. Right now some members of our teachers’ union quietly express subtle concerns about creating two tiers of faculty—one technologically based and the other not—resisting some policies that might appear to privilege one over the other, regardless of whether or not the new medium requires any special consideration. Online courses offered at our five-campus college cross geographical boundaries and thus might affect “load,” which directly affects pay. An editorial in our union newsletter raises issues such as “Are we giving online students a free ride on the issue of diversity?” The editorial proclaims, “Until we can perfect the technology which will access holograms of different people, with whom we can interact and argue controversial points of view as they ‘appear’ in our presence, it is my belief that we are failing to make the diversity requirement mandatory for all students” (“Whither” 2).

Frankly, I understand this wide range of fears and do not dismiss them as I was tempted to at the beginning of my online teaching days. Indeed, I now shame-facedly acknowledge a bit of defensiveness about any perceived attack in those early months, and I look at it as an understandable protective mental web I spun around myself because of the enormous personal investment that transferring pedagogy to this medium requires.

I too questioned early on whether or not an online learning environment could help me achieve my teaching goals. I went back and forth and finally, one day, my husband did something that pushed me over the line. He went to our file cabinet and took out my college transcript and put it in front of me. He said, “Here, look this over. Tell me how many of these experiences would have been irreparably damaged had you tried them online.” And so I looked. I won’t tell you how many classes I have little or no memory of at all. Those that were influential and memorable had something striking in common—a one-to-one connection with my instructor. They were all courses where I could recall specific, focused feedback about my efforts and individual recognition of my ideas, or they were classes that had some post-course correspondence with instructors that extended these personal connections. I also looked at my masters’ classes and remembered the colossal impatience I had after teaching all day, driving two hours to class, and then facing that two-hour drive back home. If that instructor wasted a second, I was livid. There was no online option then, but had there been, I would have explored it—and so I decided to move forward.
So what would my students miss? I am sorry to say that my transcript analysis exercise brought me to the sad and sobering conclusion that I probably overvalue, or at least exaggerate, how important I am in person. You know what it’s like—you have this great class session—you’re on, they’re on, questions are popping, you’ve drifted deeper into the lesson plan than even you thought possible and you drive home thinking, “Man, I am good at this!” Well, my commute is over two hours long so I have time for the glow to fade. And here’s where I end up too often. It wasn’t twenty-seven people; it was more likely seven or eight who did all the talking. There were many who didn’t come prepared, many who were afraid to speak, some who had the right comment but thought of it after the wrong question and so that comment shriveled up like a dried-out seed, never to bear fruit.

But teaching online turns all the microphones on. I love that part the best. Colleagues don’t always hear that and, I think even more important, can’t allow themselves to because of the conclusions that might follow. Our entire formal educational lives, on both sides of the desk, have served us well under the traditional paradigm, so why fool with it? The resulting tension creates the “us versus them.” The hard part for online instructors is having one foot firmly planted in each camp.

**Achievement 3: Online courses allow more of a “partnership” to develop with students.**

Sometimes teaching online feels like carrying out twenty independent studies with all the benefits that independent studies traditionally offer—tailored instruction, a widening of traditional course goals according to the student’s interests, and more flexibility to accomplish these two things. The course quietly becomes less about “moving through” curriculum, less about establishing a strict (and sometimes punitive) structure for point gathering, and less about accomplishing your objectives. It becomes more about helping students identify and then accomplish their objectives, which is easier to do since you have such a steady stream of individualized information about their skills and needs. The locus of power and control shifts to the center and is shared—something we always said we wanted.

My students’ access to and comfort with technology continually add depth to the courses I have created. Course knowledge is no longer limited to what comes out of my mouth, my textbook, my handouts. Students can (and frequently do) identify and share Web resources related to articles we read and issues we write about. They can pull a phrase that catches their interest off my online course materials, immediately run it through a search engine, and then forward related (and unsolicited) links to me. Teach them about a good search engine and they will send a better one.
In addition, being outside the traditional classroom makes them more likely to identify which learning strategies are working for them and which are not. Those articulated observations shape what I do next. And their instincts are right on. Consider this:

Make courses assignment-centered rather than merely text- and lecture-centered. Then focus on helping students complete the assignments. (Walvoord 5)

How about this one?

A course should be structured heavily around homework assignments. If the student works through a barrage of assignments, completes them in a timely manner and also completes them correctly, the learning has been accomplished. When we get out into the world of business or work, we are not required to memorize completely how to do our job. We need to know the [parameters] of our work. What is needed to complete “ourselves” is the knowledge of where to find information and how to use it. (Larry, online student)

Inside, they know what they need. Being online seems to make them more apt to tell us.

Challenge 3: This “partnership” requires the surrender of some previously unquestioned authority.

When students gain some control, we lose some control and must accept that the cement foundations of our well-earned authority are actually fraught with tiny fault lines. For example, when I first started teaching online, I believed that it was important to maintain firm deadlines just as I do on campus. But I noticed that students would fluctuate between getting things in three days early or getting them in a day or two late. The authoritative teacher gene in me ignited that irrational “don’t test me” reflex. “By God, I solemnly decreed Tuesday to be the due date!”

Around that time I rediscovered the film The Breakfast Club, a film that, on one level at least, portrays a wide range of teenage personalities being subverted by the supposed authority of one single pathetic teacher cast by Hollywood to represent all of us, reducing us to authoritative caricatures with an almost religious conviction of the sanctity of our own rules.

At one point, Judd Nelson closes the library door. The teacher comes in and says, “Why is this door closed?” Nelson replies, “How are we supposed to know? We’re not supposed to get up, right?” So the teacher asks Andrew, the wrestler, to help him carry out the absurd task of propping open the library door using a large metal magazine rack. So Nelson says, “How come Andrew gets to get up? If he gets up, we’ll all get up! It will be anarchy!”

That small scene coupled with the newly observed fluidity of my online students’ work habits made me entertain the thought that some of my controls might appear arbitrary and even counterproductive in an online environment. A few days later I read “Quality on the Line,” the report mentioned above that attempts to determine how well previously published general “distance-learning”
benchmarks hold up when applied to Internet-based learning in particular. One new benchmark the report added was that “faculty and students agree upon [italics mine] expectations regarding times for student assignment completion and faculty response,” mirroring this partnership that I was seeing. Perhaps I could afford to be more flexible and not worry that “if one student is late, they’ll all be late! It will be anarchy!” On campus I don’t feel I have that freedom.

This simple little evolving-deadline paradigm is one example of how teaching online forces a reexamination of procedural infrastructure. I once believed we had classroom rules and deadlines to help students learn how to function in the “real world.” But after going online, I started recognizing how my own colleagues actually function out here in the “real world.” Our solution for not having an “assignment” done is to “table it” for the next meeting, where we may “table it” again. Occasionally at meetings we are unprepared, haven’t read the documents we are supposed to discuss, arrive late, don’t support statements we make, or don’t follow through with what we said we would do. All sins are forgiven in the name of the larger goal, but we can’t bring ourselves to do that same thing in a classroom. Online that shift seems not only possible, but desirable. Take away the walls and the clock and somehow the larger goal becomes paramount again.

This surrender of authority is hard to take. We’re well-trained, up-to-date, degreed professionals who through years of education, trial, error, and recovery have mastered every corner of our craft. Or so we thought. For example, English teachers used to know the campus library like the backs of our hands. We knew what was there and what wasn’t. We could recite MLA citation formats and impress students with our tip-of-the-tongue brilliance. Now we are faced with electronic collections and constantly changing databases. Our students have access to a whole world of information, but there’s an overflowing trash can on every corner. The MLA itself can’t seem to decide how to cite these new resources and so we sit, now side by side, with our students, deciphering the new conventions in a whirlwind of relentless change. The new common-ground equilibrium is truly wonderful, but first we have to gain solid footing and, man, that first step down is a doozy.

“Partnership” is really a synonym for “power shift.” Online students sense this and act on it in ways I never anticipated. Before the last term started, a half-dozen students “interviewed” me as a possible instructor. A few actually came to my office to scope me out and see what my “intentions” were. In twenty-five years no student has ever asked me what my “philosophy of teaching” was. Luckily I have one and was able to articulate it when one student asked for it. When she left my office, I felt as if I had aced a pop quiz. It was wonderful but also a tad unsettling. Another student e-mailed me three times in three days to “test” my response time. I passed and she decided to take my course (and got an A—which I instantaneously reported to her, believe me). Most become active participants in the process and will tell you if something is not working.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, we have all adopted predefined roles for both teacher and student. But this new classroom requires a change in teaching style for many of us. “Teacher-centered teachers may have to move toward a more
Teacher-centered teachers may have to move toward a more student-centered position in the online classroom, one that accommodates a new status for themselves, that of co-learner.” (Barber 254). Online students are not the collective group of willing subjects we sometimes expect to encounter on campus, waiting for us to tell them what to do. I call this the “bull factor” because I heard about a bullfight in Spain a while back in which not one of the thirteen bulls they had ready that day would fight. Not one. Some sat down and others just walked off the job. So this bullfighter’s tried-and-true “lesson plan,” which always worked in the past, was deflated because the bulls were able to express their own ideas about how things should proceed. Online students, perhaps because their “faceless” identity breaks down some of the artificial authority our now invisible bigger desks traditionally project, feel more free to help shape what happens in their “ring.” I still have the red cape, but I have to rethink what I am going to do with it. I had to learn to listen and I am enjoying this new harmony very much, but this was a gradual awakening.

**Achievement 4: The “teachable moments” we all wish for happen frequently because of the extended contact we have with online students.**

Every faculty member prays for what are sometimes called “teachable moments,” those times when students are saying “I’m hungry—feed me, NOW!!” And there you are, ready to inspire and lift. Those are the moments that give you a glow on the ride home some evenings. The good news is that there are a lot of those online. We know that in “physical” class, students sometimes sit quietly and think and absorb, but it isn’t until later that their real questions surface, while they are at home doing homework. Online students can quickly seek clarification as they are working, simply by sending e-mail messages. The instructor can then instantaneously forward these insights, epiphanies, and puzzlements to the whole class, extending what it means to teach. Even though on-campus students are encouraged to take advantage of the same opportunity, the vast majority do not, either because it is not convenient or because they are understandably operating within the “three-class-hour paradigm” that is made up of “acceptable” contact and “unacceptable” contact. Online students have no such boundaries.

These moments sometimes happen without our even being aware of them. My first week teaching online revealed one of these. I had students reading a piece by John Taylor Gatto called “The Seven-Lesson School Teacher.” The piece has an underlying satirical tone that inexperienced readers sometimes miss. I got a phone call from one student who said this: “I’m having trouble understanding this article. If this was a real class, I would have read it once and then gone to class and let the
class figure it out for me. But I know I have to post my comments so I read it six times [they think that’s a bad thing] and now I think I get it and I want to run my comments by you before I post them.” That became a teachable moment because the student discovered she could learn on her own and I was able to teach her how to view what this victory of hers really meant.

**Challenge 4: Be careful what you wish for.**

The multitude of teachable moments, as glorious as they are, can be tremendously draining because the class bell has stopped ringing. You are always “open for business.” The literature contains ideas about how to structure your time and set boundaries, but in practice it is very hard to do. For example, you may tell students that you will be reading drafts on Thursday, but on Sunday you will get a note like this: “I know you aren’t reading these till later in the week but I thought I’d send mine along in case you get a minute. I’m just so anxious to know what you think!” There isn’t a nerve in my body that allows me to file that away for later. And then I think of other students who send in their drafts early, not daring to request quick attention—why should they suffer because they were more “polite?” And so the turnaround begins.

In order to become a better online teacher, I sign up for brief online seminars to get the feel for what it’s like on the other side. One was called “Opportunities in Online Teaching” and was intended to help educators think about whether or not online teaching would suit them. A self-assessment instrument in the course included the question “Can you dedicate four to six hours a week (any time during the day or night) to participate in the online teaching process?” I did a posted response to that and explained the enormous amount of time that teaching writing online requires beyond this suggested four to six hours a week.

The facilitator answered my posting saying that my frequent, time-consuming interaction with students was encouraging substandard work. She also said, “I recommend that you also impose a cap on the number of drafts/number of pages you will read for each student. When students know that they are limited to say, a thirty-page reading quota over the term of the course, or a two-draft submission max for a ten-page assignment, they are more likely to structure their time accordingly and pace themselves so that they can derive the maximum benefit from your feedback.”

What this reply ignores is the enormous philosophical shifts (earthquakes, maybe?) that take place when instructors transfer on-campus pedagogy to an electronic medium. As I said earlier, you stop seeing students as quota fillers and begin seeing them as partners. And it changes everything. The kind of feedback I give to students is not directive or prescriptive (“Here’s how to ‘fix’ what you’ve done”).
Thus it does not encourage lower-quality drafts that put the burden of their learning on me. The feedback I provide is very question-based, aimed at setting up a dialogue about the students’ choices, helping them justify those choices and thus raising the quality of their end products (and, more important, their own self-expectations for future projects). That’s a writing teacher’s dream that can’t be realized on campus three hours a week.

Limiting the feedback to a certain number of pages per term seems counterproductive to helping them understand how the writing process works outside my classroom. Professionals (in any career) collaborate, offer different perspectives, and then end up with something that goes far beyond what either thought possible at the beginning of the process. This “partnership” approach has been one of the best parts of teaching online.

The course is less about students fulfilling assignments and more about the two of us functioning as colleagues. Online is a great place to model that. I don’t give my colleagues page limits when they ask me to help them write a project or proposal. Also, if work I receive from students is inferior or represents less than a good-faith effort, I send it back with a simple comment: “Let me see your best work so I can help you make it better. Build on this.” That’s not the stuff that takes up my time.

The dialogue does get extensive. I can remember working with one student on a draft over the course of a couple of days. She sent a series of revisions and I helped her think of ways to go deeper. At one point, I printed what I thought was just her most recent comment but was actually the whole sequence of interactions (since e-mail keeps previous messages underneath) and the computer printed out nine single-spaced pages of text.

Besides the extra time commitment, there’s another downside to this kind of collaboration. Some students aren’t ready for it and don’t want it. After two draft exchanges, one student e-mailed me and said “For the love of God, can’t you just stop teaching!! Some people just want Cs!” On campus they can get them. On campus I would probably confer with this same student the same way and he would nod politely, make a few superficial changes, and then turn it in and take the C. But online, all my feedback is captured and becomes a contract instead of a series of suggestions that disappear into thin air. Online my words are a certified check, while on campus they are like those dollar bills frenetically floating in a game-show air booth. The clock is ticking and I always leave class hoping they have grabbed enough “currency” to make the revision process meaningful, extending the payoff well beyond my course.

Believe me, I’m no martyr. I’ve been teaching writing for twenty-five years. But it’s counterproductive to ignore how being online changes the relationship between student and instructor. Their expectations for us are higher, as are our expectations for them. That’s the heaven and the hell of it.
Achievement 5: Our online classrooms invite a wider spectrum of students to participate in our courses.

In five classes, I have had three students give birth partway through the course. I have had students doing reserve duty for the army, traveling to foreign countries for business, confined to home because of either chronic or temporary health conditions, and working odd shifts and schedules. None of them would be able to attend the on-campus sections of my courses. The vast majority, however, are the same students who also take on-campus classes as well. At the end of the term, some are still with me and some are not.

Challenge 5: These online students don’t always succeed (just as our on-campus students don’t always succeed), but the need to understand why seems more pressing with our online student population.

The question of retention is an important one, both online and on campus. I am continually learning about enhanced procedural safeguards to help students finish my courses. But make no mistake, if an online student withdraws, I feel abandoned. I desperately want them to succeed. Part of me believes passionately that their success is inextricably tied to my own success. If they walk away, they are rejecting my medium and my message. That’s a hard pill to swallow.

So who are these students who populate our courses? Who is right for an online class? After teaching five online classes, I am still unable to confidently contribute to the dialogue about which students are most likely to succeed in an online classroom. “Are You Ready for Online Learning?” questionnaires consistently ask students if they “complete what they start,” suggesting this quality as one important piece to the success puzzle. In my first online course, I became concerned midway through that some students seemed to be losing steam, and so I decided to check their histories for clues. I was shaken to learn that my group of twenty students had collectively dropped, failed, or received incompletes in 45 percent of the courses they had previously attempted (82 out of 181 courses). That knowledge put me in mother-hen mode and the retention rate in that class ended up being 70 percent. Adding my next two online classes to this initial sample yielded similar results. Collectively, in all three classes, students had failed, dropped or withdrawn from 41 percent of the courses they had previously attempted (208 out of 508). Yet the overall retention rate in those three online courses combined was 75 percent.

So what does this mean? I don’t know. I think some students who failed on campus found they could carve their own niches once the walls came down. As I said before, some of these kids feel as though they have more control over their online experience and thus find the voices they need to communicate those needs. So we might not expect them to succeed, but they surprise us and do. Others have solid academic records and we think they will easily succeed, but they choose an online course expecting it to be easier for some reason, often adding it to an
already too-full class load. They are surprised by the amount of work required and freely admit that miscalculation. Others are lost for the same reasons we lose them on campus—jobs, families, overscheduling, or just plain immaturity. They’re college material, but perhaps not just yet.

Technological challenges and the enormous time investment are critical issues for both student and teacher in this new classroom. I always dreamed (“always” being three years in tech time) of teaching both Composition I and Composition II simultaneously online for quite some time to come. But now that I am doing both, I realize that I will drop back and teach only one online course at a time next year. I am sure teaching two can be done, but when they are writing courses, it’s much harder. In addition to daily online activity, another dozen hours on weekends is not unusual. Course development and redevelopment and hundreds of e-mails fill most of my time. It’s not just the e-mail with students who have contacted me. It’s the follow-up e-mails with those who haven’t. One big problem with that is the lack of professional development time left over. I have a list of a half-dozen skills I want to master, but they will have to wait.

My decision to cut back was actually inspired by an e-mail I received while I was at home working in my upstairs office. It came from my husband, who was downstairs at the time, and it said this: “Five hours ago you told me you’d be down in twenty minutes. Can we watch the movie now?” My kids may be away at college, but my husband is still downstairs.

This, at least for now, is my fledgling contribution to the evolving scholarship about online teaching in community colleges. I share it with my colleagues fully understanding, as Vaughan warns, that it will be “subject to the criticism of individuals qualified to judge the product” (qtd. in Harrington 114). This continuing dialogue will broaden my own evolving perceptions as we all move forward, trying to stay open to both the possibilities and the pitfalls, keeping both what and how students learn best at the core of it all.

Works Cited


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