What Makes a Great Online Teacher?

Instructors need to connect with students – whether that happens in-person or via the web

By LAURA DESENA

Online teaching strategies are, at their core, much like brick and mortar strategies: the central objective is for a teacher to impart content knowledge to students. Teachers accomplish this through engaging and inspiring students, through communicating their expert knowledge, but beyond that, and perhaps more importantly, through sharing their passion for the subject and its relevance to students' lives. If education is productive, students are finally confronted with themselves – their innermost thoughts, their belief systems, their moral values, and their aesthetic values.

Teaching inspires a journey: it should be an authentic experience. The fear with online learning is that the experience is two-dimensional and not three. This is a common misconception. The student in the virtual world is still on a journey – in some cases it will be largely self-guided and in other cases teacher-directed. In the online environment, dialogues can be conducted across centuries, across oceans – and through infinite cyberspace – and all in the immediate moment through Internet connectivity. This is the 21st century environment. It represents the chaotic energy of fast-paced access to information (not of all it credible, of course) that we need to help students navigate, providing them with critical thinking skills to discriminate among sources of information.

Cyberspace Advantages What better place

to achieve this than within the environment itself: the virtual world? Students are confident in cyberspace and we can leverage this confidence, experienced in their comfort zone, into a productive learning environment. Instead of being a means of escaping reality, it can be a means of better understanding reality through an academic lens.

In a traditional classroom, teachers assess students' acquired knowledge through vehicles such as essays, exams, participation, and collaboration. All of these may also be evaluated in the virtual environment. Occasionally – particularly with participation – they can be more meaningfully assessed in an online course than in-person. A reticent student can often be coaxed to engage in critical discourse from the security – of what seems like – an anonymous voice. In virtual spaces, like wiki and blogs, students validate or refute the ideas of their peers in discourse that they would perhaps shy away from in an actual classroom. Challenging ideas in a virtual environment with its perceived distance, becomes easier and more inviting. This builds confidence, which often manifests later in their written academic arguments.

Traditional models of instruction, student-centered and teacher-directed, are duplicated in the virtual environment. In asynchronous online instruction, the student works independently, studying

e-content and is periodically in contact with the teacher for guided instruction via email, discussion boards, wiki, blogs. The instructor assesses knowledge gleaned from independent and guided study. In synchronous online instruction, the teacher is present for every lesson in the virtual classroom to instruct and to provide immediate feedback to the students, as he/she would be in the brick and mortar classroom, and the teacher's body language (through videocam) can be observed as part of the visual cues a student often needs – praise and perplexity, affirmation and correction. Hybrid online instruction is a merging of both experiences, the asynchronous and synchronous.

Asynchronous Online Learning Asynchronous instruction does not occur in real time. It is essentially guided, not interactive, instruction. Asynchronous courses may be designed by teachers within your district or your district may purchase prepackaged courses from online schools. What follows are recommendations for teachers who are designing and teaching asynchronous courses for their districts. These suggestions do not necessarily reflect the prepackaged asynchronous content delivery offered by online schools.

Asynchronous Instruction Teaching in an asynchronous setting requires guiding students through meaningful assignments, such as readings of e-documents, or doing research projects or collaborative work. Posted lecture notes, podcasts of recorded content, and even video recordings of lectures via YouTube should be considered as more dynamic presentations.

Teachers must encourage engagement – long distance – by maintaining consistent contact with students, check-

ing e-mails regularly. A specific course outline, including established deadlines for assignments, should be provided. It is important to keep the student on track to complete the material in timely fashion. It is in the students' best interest for teachers to be unflinchingly firm on established deadlines. Responding to students' queries, via e-mail, should be done within 48 hours so that students' questions are addressed while they are still relevant. (Some prepackaged online schools claim instructors will respond to students' email queries within three to four business days.) Independence and self-pacing is fostered in this style of online instruction. (In prepackaged online programs, self-pacing is touted as an advantage.) But, students must not feel they are floating in the vacuum of cyberspace: this means back and forth dialogue with the instructor and peers. The best forum for this is the discussion board. The instructor should post to the discussion board to keep the conversation going – to validate, deepen exploration and, when necessary, correct. Students should be directed, in their postings, to support their arguments (formal and informal) using primary and secondary sources, including embedding links so that a dimension is added to discussion that moves well beyond learning in the brick and mortar classroom. This model of discussion (interpretation and evidence) prepares them well for the rigors of higher education. Because the discussion is conducted online and not in the classroom, students will have immediate access to external sources. A lesson on discriminating among sources, particularly among Internet sources, is critical.

**Asynchronous Assessment** Traditional assessments apply: essays, research papers, collaborative assignments, open-book exams. Students submit work as e-mail attachments or through posting on websites like *http://www.wikispaces.com* When giving quizzes or exams, an honor code must be established.

Resources Several online schools offer prepackaged courses so that districts need not find a teacher willing to create an asynchronous course. Essentially, they package all course materials and offer content delivery asynchronously (not in real time). In New Jersey, administrators may consider the New Jersey Virtual School *http://www. njvs.org/default.aspx* In addition, there are national companies such as VHS, Virtual High School, *http://www.govhs.org/Pages/ WhyVHS-Home*. A New Jersey based company, IOE, Inc *http://innovationson-* *lineed.com/default.aspx* offers synchronous and hybrid courses tailored to New Jersey school districts' needs.

Important to maintaining brick and mortar standards is ascertaining the level of interaction between student and teacher. Is the content packaged into what is essentially an online textbook, followed by an online multiple-choice test, which students may retake several times until they receive a passing grade? Does the online school offer guided instruction – regular teacher/student interaction – how often and through what means (e-mail, discussion boards)? Does the teacher assess the coursework or does the program/ computer?

Synchronous Online Learning Synchronous instruction takes place in real time: teacher
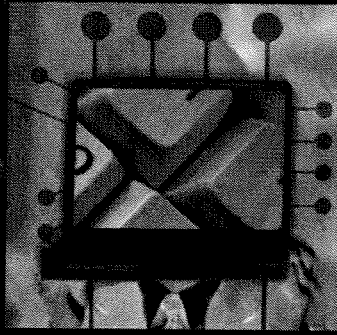
and students log-on and enter the virtual classroom together. Every session is led by the teacher. The virtual classroom comes equipped with a whiteboard, chatbox, audio/video capability, e-notebook, emoticons (for immediate student feedback), Internet access, applications, and breakout rooms (for collaborative work among students). Microphones and speakers allow students and the teacher to speak to each other during the session. Access to the Internet is immediate for teacher-led discussion of external sources. As students interact in real time with the teacher and with each other, the social element of learning is not compromised with this model of instruction. Synchronous instruction comes closest to mimicking the brick and mortar environment. Questions are addressed by the instructor in the moment, rather than deferred to an e-mail response days later. The synchronous environment allows for both teacher and student-centered learning. The teacher may use the whiteboard to post notes, pose questions, invite student problem solving (students may write on the whiteboard). Students are invited to take charge of the microphone for a presentation, or to converse in a foreign language. They may have group discussions and work on group projects in breakout rooms during class time.

Synchronous Instruction Teachers must engage students. The virtual classroom offers a variety of tools to facilitate this. Productive teaching involves using these tools in a meaningful way. The tools should not be a distraction but, collectively, a method of effective delivery. Excellent teachers have a variety of styles; adapting the environment to the teaching style is key. Many instructors open with an

outline for the session and teach to these objectives through a combination of lecture and PowerPoint presentations for visual engagement and elaboration, then move to open discussion, and onto the Internet for secondary sources for extrapolation, ending the session with a question and answer segment. Others will present problems to be solved on a whiteboard and ask students to work out the answers directly on the whiteboard, inviting each student to participate in one stage of the solution. In language classes, students are invited to speak to each other. Individual presentations of researched information or of a persuasive speech on a topic allow for student-centered experiences. Debates and critical discourse are possible in real time. Students can be directed to take notes using e-notebook and instructors can send handouts to students during the lesson.

For science instructors, there are virtual labs: one example – a website hosted by University of Oregon, Department of Physics offers many fascinating labs including this one on the "Moons of Jupiter" – *http://jersey.uoregon.edu/tmp/orbits.html.* There are virtual fieldtrips to museums for students of art and history (see *The Teachers Guide: Virtual Fieldtrips http://www.theteachersguide.com/virtualtours.html.*) There are primary source documents for all subject areas. Preparation is key to excellent instruction in this environment. If a teacher's presentations are all text-based, he or she will not be attending to all learning styles in this vibrant environment.

Classroom Management Online instructors must check in with each student during the class session by directly asking questions or inviting responses. This ensures that a

student who is logged-on hasn't minimized the virtual classroom and opened another Internet window to play a computer game, surf the net or has walked away from the computer during the session. Periodically asking questions, which require an emoticon, or yes or no answer, is an effective way of making certain students are really in attendance. Students also have private chat capability, so monitoring the chatbox is important. It should be announced at the start of each session that the teacher is able to read all chat messages, including those sent "privately" to another student. Just as teachers would not allow whispering in the back of the room, they should not allow private, irrelevant chatting in the virtual classroom.

Synchronous Assessment Participation may be assessed in the virtual classroom, enabling the teacher to evaluate students' knowledge in the moment. Open book exams, essays, or projects may be submitted as e-mail attachments. Presentations – individual and group – may be evaluated in real time. Tests may be e-mailed or administered online to students within the context of an established honor code.

Hybrid Instruction Hybrid instruction merges asynchronous and synchronous experiences. Assignments include discussion board postings, dialogue with the instructor via e-mail, and studying independently (asynchronous instruction). But there are also regularly scheduled meetings in the virtual classroom for review or introduction of content (synchronous instruction).

Common Ground The qualities that make for an excellent teacher in the traditional classroom are the same in the virtual class-

room – the ability to engage and motivate, facilitating the transfer knowledge from expert to novice. The techniques are somewhat different because the environment is different, but the essentials remain the same. Dr. Valorie Phillian, who teaches a synchronous online course – French IV – at Northern Highlands Regional High School in New Jersey, reflects on this virtual meeting in real time with students. "As is true in the regular classroom setting, this connection along with interaction and intellectual curiosity combine to create a valuable learning experience."

What works for the teacher in the brick and mortar environment – that which defines her/his style – is translatable in the virtual environment through creativity and innovation – and there are, of course, the infinite possibilities that the finite space of a brick and mortar classroom cannot provide.

One important aspect that instructors must consider when teaching an online course – and school districts must consider when approving such courses – is that instructors must be open to assessing their courses continuously. Since some students taking online courses report experiencing a sense of disconnection, the assessments should examine whether students are provided with the essentials of a quality online education. Those essentials include clear and continuous guidance, prompt and constructive feedback, well-designed assignments and meaningful opportunities for interaction and support.

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Logged-On Learning

K-12 online education is growing throughout the country. What's happening in New Jersey?

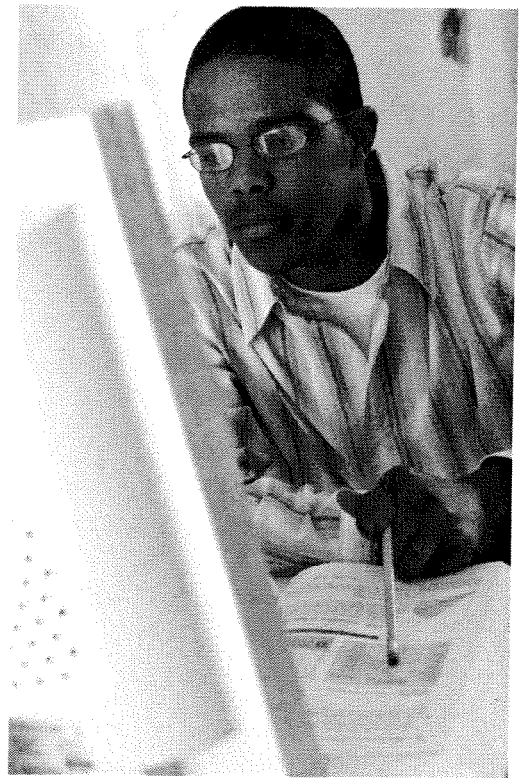### By JANET BAMFORD

Whether it's called online learning, e-learning, virtual classes, cyber-education, or other names, the practice of a student being educated via the web is growing quickly.

The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) estimates that more than 1.5 million K-12 students across the nation were engaged in online and blended learning (which involves an online component) for the 2009-2010 school year. Those numbers have grown quickly. In 2000, there were about 50,000 student enrollments in K-12 online learning.

Nationally, 82 percent of all public K-12 school districts offer online courses to students, according to the Sloan Consortium, a non-profit organization that promotes online education.

It's no wonder. Many of the advantages of online learning are readily apparent. Virtual classes allow smaller or more rural school districts to offer courses they might not otherwise be able to offer. Motivated students who face scheduling conflicts can take a course online that they otherwise couldn't. Students who have failed a course can take an online course for credit recovery. Districts can use online courses as home instruction for students who are on a short- or long-term leave.

New Jersey Lagging? Like the rest of the country, New Jersey has seen growth in online learning, although there are no solid figures on how many students are taking online courses.

Public legislative hearings on the topic of online learning were held on Nov. 23 by the Joint Committee on the Public