Learn Something New Everyday: One History Professor’s Journey Through Online Education

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Dr. Vera Parham

Eight years ago, I began my professional career teaching online history classes. Ecstatic as I was about gaining an income, I still held many reservations about the quality of an online classroom. As my experience broadened through numerous schools, eLearning platforms and history classes taught, my attitude toward online learning changed dramatically. I am now an enthusiastic, though cautious supporter of not just online classes, but the advancement and use of new technologies in our classrooms. eLearning is a growing trend though there are still many detractions as well as individuals who either fear or fail to see the benefits in technology use. In this essay, I hope to address both the positive and negative outcomes of online coursework thorough my own personal experience.

A poll of professors and instructors on their relationship to the use of technology in the classroom in a recent issue of Perspectives on History revealed the history profession’s tenacity to cling to the past.¹ The responses were overwhelmingly underwhelmed. Most professionals in the field seemed ambivalent or downright negative about the use of technological teaching aids like Power Point, video, and very specifically about the use of online classrooms also known as eLearning. Other statistics reveal the rising number of students demanding online classes each year and that more and more schools are creating offerings to meet that challenge.² The growth in for profit institutions which often offer entirely online degrees to any student willing to pay is another factor in the ongoing debate over the place of online classes in not just the study of history, but in higher education.

Add to his debate the widening gap between the generation of students who grew up in the age of computers and the Internet and their professors who must constantly learn and adapt to the new technologies, myself included. Cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch views this gap as a serious problem for higher education as it draws into question the significance of learning tools for the university or college student.

The tools Generation X and older were given in the classroom are very different from the ones their students expect to be given. “Classrooms built to re-enforce the top down authoritative knowledge of the teacher are now enveloped by a cloud of ubiquitous digital information where knowledge is made, not found....”3 Some even feel this gap calls into question the significance of higher education. According to Dr. Tracy Wilen-Daugen, Vice President of Research and Strategic Innovations at the University of Phoenix, “Our students engage, collaborate, and communicate in a decentralized world where information is plentiful; yet, their classrooms mostly are centralized, passive, analog environments that control information and make little use of digital tools.”4 Perhaps her perspective springs from her employment at a largely online and for profit institution. But, there is reason to find cause for concern in this gap, this “crisis of significance” as Wesch calls it. Recent trends in education show a move away from large organizational control of the classroom toward the individual user, be that the faculty member or the learner. This is due to the ease of use of some forms of technology, and the opportunity presented for low or no cost instructional innovation presented by that technology in a time of shrinking budgets.5 As professor and librarian Barbara Fisher so aptly pointed out in Thought and Action, financial woes in academia and current trends in education seem a “natural outcome of the trend to treat students as consumers, the faculty as individuals contracted to teach courses but to leave the management of the university to a growing cadre of administrators and knowledge as intellectual property to be monetized.”6

One of the biggest reasons listed in the Perspectives poll for not incorporating technology into the classroom is the changing nature of technology itself. As soon as one tool is mastered, another comes along. As soon as an instructor sets up their course with one version of Power Point, a new non-compatible version is out. “The use of technology in the classroom appears hampered by a lack of perceived pedagogical benefits in many technologies, exacerbated by steeper learning curves.”7 “Lack of institutional support and facilities” was another of the objections in the Perspectives poll.8 Technology can post an added burden to professors. This is beyond the already growing list of responsibilities from teaching to publishing, advising, com-

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8 Perspectives, p. 25.
mittee and administration work, professional organization commitments and public service. This is of course a very relevant objection, but one that prevents us as educators from moving beyond the problem. It may be that there is little we can truly do to influence our institutions to devote more of our often limited resources to improving technology, but by avoiding the issue entirely we deny ourselves the chance to experiment with new methodologies and options. Technology is ever evolving, and reliance simply on technology seems to foster a dependence on tools alone to do our teaching for us. But just as technology is evolving, so should our teaching methods evolve. Traditional methods of discussion and lecture remain important tools, but forgetting to develop is as bad as forgetting the lessons of history.

The challenge to a teacher’s authority, and the loss over control of information in the classroom is another possible source of resistance to an online class. Instead of the font of knowledge a professor was originally considered to be, the online instructor seems more like a glorified information manager. Black and white, well defined, highly organized history becomes an overwhelming mass of opinion and idea on the Internet. Of course much of that info may be misinformation, but it nonetheless challenges our status as authorities. “In a world of nearly infinite information, we must first address why, facilitate how, and let the what generate naturally from there.”

Online classes are not entirely under the instructor’s control. Instead, a professor must rely on technical experts, editors, instructional designers, and others. It’s enough to make one feel like a cog in a wheel as if they are working on an assembly line. But, if there are enough support networks in place, an instructor may feel collaboration is a benefit and that building networks across campus is a positive process.

We all know multiple perspectives are essential to learning. Multiple perspectives provide students a broader framework for understanding the past and its present practical applications. A well known route to presenting various perspectives is through discussion. After nine years of online and on-ground experience, I can say that it’s not easy to foster discussion in any class, apart from perhaps a graduate course. But online classes do offer the benefit of “protection” for students in discussion. Issues such as distractions, shyness, language barriers and status that might cause stereotyping in the traditional classroom are removed or at least less-

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10 One of the pitfalls I encountered at UHH had less to do with the university or the platform and more to do with timing. Summer school is simply a whole different ball game. Several of the students in my class were Running Start/AP high school students. I assumed these students would be easier to reach as they came from an automatically more tech savvy generation. This new generation can deal with a trial and error approach to tool use, experimenting and troubleshooting web-based technologies. Instead, they seemed less motivated and needed more guidance. I attribute this to the fact that high school students are accustomed to following direction and so wait to do what they’re told instead of exploring the class site for themselves to find the answers to their questions.
ened in the online classroom. A new engagement with information and learning is but one of the benefits offered by online education. Students online are constantly challenged to “find, sort, analyze, share, discuss, critique and create info.” Learning occurs as a result of interaction. A learner encounters material, works with it, and in the process transforms it into knowledge. Online students cannot be non-participants vs. on-ground students who can skip, sleep, or ignore their instructor. I’ve also found that online discussion provides time for students to build quality dialogue, and not to just blurt out any answer to gain participation points.

Learning styles are not static. Both instructors and students can learn to accommodate and adapt, and online classes provide the perfect opportunity for students to adapt their learning styles. The various modes of learning and interaction, from quizzes to navigating the web, to discussion, provide students with multiple options to learn and multiple tools to master the information presented. Another benefit to online classrooms is that you’re not relegated to packing readings, exams, discussion, films, and other work into 50 minutes. You can space out the information you wish to cover, and in a hybrid course, devote as much time in the classroom to significant discussion as you want, and reserve online time for test taking.

Online classes encourage a change, some might say skill development, which has been progressing over the past few years. Students these days seem to have a shrinking amount of experience with research including libraries and texts. Their comfort zone lies in doing research online. Where research was often a difficult, highly specialized historical pursuit, for the digital generation it is constantly being challenged and revised. The Internet provides access to boundless information, but it does not help students “construct” knowledge and that’s where a well developed online history course can play a key role. Students operate in a media-rich, post-literate environment, yet eLiteracy is layered on top of regular literacy. Approaches to online education tend to derive from constructivist, interactive principles of learning in which knowledge is co-created by students, and the instructor acts as the facilitator of information. Instructors are the content experts in course creation.

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This forces students to become active participants in their own learning and to take responsibility for outcomes and success. In the 20th century, higher education moved from an exclusive realm for the financial and intellectual elite, to a practical realm focused on employment opportunities and a corporate model for students. However, each university and college is different, so this is not always the case. Instead of bemoaning this fact, we as educators need to address how best to handle the changing times. We must learn to make these changes in technology and access work for us and thus for our students. The better prepared we are to take on new technologies, the better prepared our students will be. After all, how many current job postings do not list familiarity with the Internet or technological skills as desirable qualifications? Education should engage students with current and relevant practices, which in this day and age means utilizing the Internet.

America, and our classrooms, are on the road to greater, not lesser diversity. “Globalization and population trends demand that educated individuals are cognizant of diversity and can function in a culturally competent manner, both in the workplace and in the larger community.” The Internet allows for greater communication between cultures and classes, as well as generations. The growth in technology and diversity must be reflected in our methodology and teaching approach. As long as there are students looking for opportunities in life. We need to ensure those students receive the highest quality education for their money and are provided with realistic outcomes.

14 Regina L. Garza Mitchell in, Online Education New Directions, p. 92.
15 Diversity Across the Curriculum, in Online Education New Directions, p. 13.
In the end, should we encourage or discourage the use of technology in the classroom? Comparisons of online and face-to-face instruction have not shown a difference in quality.\textsuperscript{16} I believe the answer to this question must be an individual one. As professors, we are all unique; our teaching styles vary, and our strengths and weaknesses are our own. I would encourage every teacher to test out technologies and find what works for him or her. But, to keep in mind, our students will change with each passing generation. The more computers in each home, the higher the interest in online education will become. So long as distance education is viewed by most university faculty as inferior, it will remain so. Until our attitudes change, the quality of online classroom education will not. Technology is not going to radically alter education, instead it will be assimilated into how we already teach. This history of education is one of slow evolution. eLearning is more popular than ever, but the vibrancy of the physical campus remains due to the fact that an important dimension of universities is that they contain communal and societal training grounds for important life skills.\textsuperscript{17} What I hope to accomplish in any class is to challenge students to question their assumptions and to learn to build their own base of knowledge and experience. I have found that building and teaching online history courses has done the same for me. It’s the message, method, and reception that teach and transform. Not something technology magically does alone.

\textsuperscript{17} Dr. Tracey Wilen-Daugenti, p. 135.