Teaching and Learning in a Virtual Environment

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The classroom environment for many students has changed. A teacher is no longer needed to stand before a group of students, lecture, disseminate a list of questions to be answered for homework, and dismiss the class. Many schools no longer consist of traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms with a physically present teacher. In the online environment, students and teacher are virtually present. Technology is the conduit used to transfer teaching and learning.

According to a National Center for Education Statistics 2006-07 report, 61% of two- and four-year colleges offer online, hybrid/blended online, or similar distance education courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 6) and that number is increasing. Likewise, Picciano and Seaman (2009) estimated that over a million K–12 students were enrolled in online courses during the 2007-08 school year. Some states have mandated that students take a minimum of one virtual class to earn their high school diploma. This new learning dimension is cause for thought as to how to maximize its potential to satisfy teachers’ and students’ needs.

The pedagogy of online learning versus face-to-face learning continues to be a concern for many K-12 and postsecondary educators, particularly student academic preparedness, maturity level, and study skills acquisition. Online teachers are being challenged to redefine their roles and assumptions of teaching and learning (Wiesenberg & Stacey, 2008). Kreber and Kanuka (2006) indicated the following:

Given the expanding interest and demand for online learning, coupled with the results of studies showing that higher levels of learning are not easily achieved in online courses, there is an imperative to advance our
understanding of how to facilitate effective online learning activities. (p. 121)

In the online environment, students are responsible for their own learning and success, while teachers act as facilitators and guides (Berge, 2009; Salmon, 2004; Smith, 2005). Teachers must, however, provide students with the support, resources, and tools they need to be successful.

Well-planned syllabi and well-defined policies with clear expectations and rules written succinctly by the teacher are essential resources for students. The online student’s responsibility is to become familiar with the teacher’s syllabus and policies. Reading the documents several times, highlighting pertinent information such as assignment due dates, and examining assignment criteria and rubrics are most important. If a student is unsure what to do, the student should ask the teacher for clarification. An important reminder for students is that the online teacher must follow the institution’s policies — policies that may not allow flexibility for such things as late assignments, make-up work, or personal emergencies.

Successful institutions and systems that undertake teaching in virtual environments encourage and support teamwork (Berge, 2009). Online teachers can assist students in fostering a sense of community by having students work in groups or teams to engage, discuss, and work on projects. Team projects afford students the opportunity to take turns leading and following. The virtual classroom is another avenue to encourage the process of learning.

All students, whether attending traditional or online classes, deserve a quality education that assists them in reaching their potential and prepares them to be productive citizens in a global society. The North American Council for Online Learning [NACOL] (2010) established national standards for online teaching for K-12 educators. Council standards include the following: teacher knowledge of concepts and structures needed to be an effective online teacher to foster success in students; teacher knowledge of and ability to use technologies to sustain and promote student learning and engagement in the online environment; teacher ability to incorporate activities for students to demonstrate learning by applying, participating, collaborating, and interacting substantively online; teacher competence in enhancing student success using clear expectations while giving prompt, detailed feedback; teacher modeling ethical online behavior; teacher ability to meet the needs of all students; teacher ability to assess student learning accurately; teacher ability to design assessments that meet course learning goals and objectives; and teacher proficiency in
using data driven assessments to adapt course content to foster student learning (NACOL, 2010).

Many K-12 school systems, community and technical colleges, colleges, and universities use “Quality Matters Standards” established by MarylandOnline (Martin, 2012). Quality Matters examines course design and incorporates peer-to-peer feedback to establish best practices for course overview and introduction, learning objectives, assessment and measurement, instructional materials, learner interaction and engagement, course technology, learner support, and accessibility (OIPQMP, 2011, slide 13).

“Best practices” that teachers use to foster student learning in the online environment are evolving. Best practices include humanistic aspects of learning, such as addressing students by first name, including personal experiences in responses, and integrating current happenings into weekly discussions. Responding promptly when asked a question, publishing and using rubrics for each assignment, and interspersing humor into the virtual environment are necessary and appropriate. Important practices to include in the online environment are incorporating media into learning, making learning relevant, and gathering feedback from students.

To be successful teachers in the online environment, teachers must adapt some of their ways of teaching. Teachers who wish to teach students online must familiarize themselves with the best practices needed to maximize student learning when teaching in virtual environments. More research needs to be undertaken to acquire the knowledge needed to prepare online faculty to fulfill the needs of students and to assist them in reaching their potential (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011).

References


