Two Tin Cans and a String

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If the fundamental agreement between students and their instructor in carrying on a public discourse through an online class is compared to two tin cans and a string between them, what happens when one of the two ends of the string doesn’t stay connected? If either the instructor or the student fails to respond across the Internet in a timely manner, then the structure of continuity and cumulative dialogue-building so crucial to the nuances of a liberal arts class falter. While the failure of an individual student to respond does not destroy the class (I call such students “flat-liners”) the failure of the online instructor to respond quickly and efficiently certainly can.

At the beginning of every semester I conduct a survey in all my online classes to determine the extent of previous experiences my students have had with this kind of learning format. In order to encourage prompt responses, I attach a small extra credit point incentive. The survey helps me determine how many—and specifically who—brings online class experiences with them to my class. And it also helps me understand what those experiences have been like for them, so that I continually update my methods, materials, themes, and assignments accordingly.

Each student is invited to briefly explain his or her ideas in a discussion forum designed to be as inviting as possible. Titled “Meet and Greet,” the forum is open for each student to make an introductory post and to respond to posts made by others (“You’re a nurse? I’m a nurse too. . .”). This not only allows me to cheerfully encourage the timid, ease the worrier, and answer specific questions about how my class will be handled, but supplies a comparable interaction students would have in an onsite class. I “listen in” as they get acquainted, an important step toward easing an initial sense of isolation and separation. After all, taking an online class is daunting, especially if this is the student’s first attempt.

In the process of monitoring threads in this introductory forum, I also gather a general idea of the initial tone of the class, assess degrees of expertise in online class taking, and identify students in terms of how they are likely to react to varying tasks: who may take a leadership role in a group presentation project, for example, who is apt to reassure fellow classmates, or who is apt to be disturbed or challenged by controversial areas, and how comfortable each is with the written format crucial to this kind of study.
Many let me know they have never taken an online class before. Others have done some learning through a hybrid class in which lecture is onsite while assignments are accomplished through Blackboard. About half to two thirds of each of my classes are fairly experienced taking classes online. In particular, I find that experienced online class takers are quite frank about what it is they don’t like about online classes, and I encourage them through the “Meet and Greet” forum to clarify why.

By far the most common complaint I’ve heard online students express has been about an instructor’s lack of communication and clarity; both for the class as a whole and for the individual student asking for greater details. Students explain the trouble with statements such as: “The teacher I had didn’t answer my questions.” “I did the assignments, but I never knew if I did them right or not.” “The instructor didn’t respond.” “I didn’t get much out of the class because I was confused about the deadlines.” In other words, the instructor may have been holding the tin can, but somehow let the string drop.

By and large, students indicated that poor online instructors simply didn’t seem to care enough to keep the class going. My question is: why would an instructor teach any class he or she is unwilling or unable to maintain—online or onsite? There might be several answers. A few years ago, I questioned an adjunct professor hired to teach a couple of online English classes through Maryland University. This was no fly-by-night, get-your-degree-quick outfit by any means, but this professor treated it as if it were. He clearly wasn’t happy taking the job in the first place, and made it clear to me he was only doing it to enhance his meager income. It was also clear he felt that teaching online classes was demeaning; that it wasn’t “real” teaching but more a matter of mechanically going through the motions in a way that served only the craft and not the art of teaching. Even though the University of Maryland is an accredited academic institution in good standing; his involvement with it was less desirable than if he had been hired to teach the same class onsite. His approach was to do as little as possible to “just run the class” until something better came along. I felt sorry for his students.

It is true that the prestige of teaching an online class is minimal if the professor desires to “step up” from teaching masses of undergraduate students their required courses into mentoring graduate students in resonating research fields. On the other hand, there are many different kinds of professors, some of whom don’t worry about that angle and are simply willing and able to teach anyone—freshmen, grandmothers, ESL students, and assorted others, traditional or non-traditional, degree-seeking or not. 1

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1 I have had at least four babies born to online students while taking my class, and one student’s pet parrot “took” the course with him, commenting on the images viewed through lectures with
Another possible issue with teaching online classes is the perception that the authority of expertise in an academic field held by the professor is undermined. It is true that onsite classes permit the instructor more leeway to improvise in the moment; online lectures must be clearly focused on topic with little room for digressions or meanderings.² However, a professor secure in his or her expertise and academic standing would not find this a threatening condition. If the point is to support students in self-directed study, to mentor, foster, facilitate, or otherwise share an interest in the course material, then this can be accomplished as well online as onsite. So a good online instructor is one accepting of the forum in the first place, and one dedicated foremost to serve the diversity of students in the class.

Certainly, placing an instructor in a class assumes a desire to teach it, just as placing a student in a class assumes a willingness to put forward the effort to successfully complete it. Everyone has different talents and strengths, and this is especially true in the academic professions. The strength of an institution of learning depends upon the ability of its administration to fit instructors to classes the way Mozart likened an aria “to fit a singer like a well-cut suit of clothes.” Just as it would be foolish to ask an elementary school teacher to teach graduate university students, so it would be foolish to ask a professor who has a low opinion of online classes to teach them.

² Discussion boards and individual emails do permit digressions; however, it is the option of students to read or ignore them, as may be appropriate. In an onsite class, everyone is “captive” to the digression, and a common complaint of onsite students is that the professor “rambles.”