

From Real to Virtual Classrooms: The 10 Key Transition Points

By Lawrence C. Ragan, Ph.D.

Dr. Lawrence C. Ragan is the Director of Faculty Development for Penn State's World Campus. Ragan has written and spoken extensively about the skills necessary for effective online teaching. Lately, he has turned his attention to the stage that precedes the online teaching experience—the experience of transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Because it's not just a matter of mastering skills for a new environment. It's a matter of creating a relationship between the old environment and the new. Of looking at the new style of teaching in the context of the old.

What continuities are there between the two modes? What skills and assumptions carry over from one to another? Which don't?

What are the ideas that will seem the most difficult to classroom teachers? Can new concepts be explained in terms of concepts they are already familiar with?

The process for developing online teachers begins in the traditional classroom. It's all a matter of finding the best path from kind of classroom to another. Here, according to Larry Ragan, are the key transition points along the way:

1. Teaching Presence

Probably the most difficult of all concepts to internalize when transitioning from the face-to-face to online classroom is an understanding of how to establish and maintain “teaching presence.” In the face-to-face classroom, presence is established in a physical dimension. In the online classroom, teaching presence may take on a new and “virtual” meaning. Teaching presence online is less about being in the same time zone or same geographic

space and more about being active and instructionally present with the learners.

Contrary to the belief of many novice online educators, the role of the online faculty member requires more, not less, attention to the role of instructor. In most online learning environments the role of the faculty member shifts from a conveyor of information about a specific domain to a facilitator and guide to the online learner. This shift of roles does not come easily to many as instructors

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revert to the methods they observed throughout their own learning path. Many of the traditional teaching methods do not translate well to the online classroom.

2. Changing Classroom Dynamics

Although online learning can take various shapes and forms, a fundamental shift of “classroom dynamics” occurs when transitioning from the face-to-face to online experience. The very concept of a “classroom” must be reconsidered, from a specific location where course participants gather to a learning environment without light switches or podiums. The type of and frequency of interactions changes online and new boundaries for classroom behavior may need to be established.


The ability to effectively educate geographically dispersed learners who are located in multiple time zones changes the nature of interactions between course participants. The nature of this change is often a more difficult to imagine for novice online faculty who only have face-to-face experiences upon which to base their assumptions. “What is it like to interact with students in a meaningful way when you may be separated by one, or two, or even five time zones?” “How do I conduct ‘class’ each day?” “How will we build a learning community when we’re not even in the same town?” “How will the learners know that I am the instructor?” These are among the common and valid questions when considering this transition to the online classroom.

Until one experiences the unique dynamics of engaging with course participants in an online classroom, it is difficult to conceptualize the shift in classroom dynamics. The pleasure of receiving the first posting to a discussion forum or getting to know the online learner in more personal and meaningful ways is hard to describe until experienced. These changing dynamics, some positive and others not so positive, are best appreciated through experience.

3. Time Management

Both research and practice bears out that teaching online can require more time than teaching face-to-face (Smith, 2011; Barnes, 2009; Ekerd, 2006; Allen and Seaman, 2010). It is generally accepted that the online classroom will require an additional 10-15% of faculty member's time to successfully complete the course. This simple reality has been a barrier for faculty considering the transition. The increased time demands can present a formidable barrier to

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online teaching success. Attempting to analyze where the additional time is spent in the online classroom is probably, in the end, not as critical as providing faculty with the core skills and time management strategies they need to survive in the online classroom.

Today, many best practices for effective time management have been identified and can be included in online instructor preparation programs. Techniques that enable better organizational skills, structuring and scheduling course activity timeframes, and the use of social networking systems as part of the class communication can be used to help control and manage online instructional time. Over a period of offerings, many online faculty have developed their own repertoire of strategies for gaining efficiencies when teaching online. These time saving methods, such as course operation checklists and grading rubric tools, can be shared with the novice online instructors.

4. Learner Characteristics

The access to an education enabled by online learning ensures a richness of learner diversity as never before. Individuals across the globe can participate as equals in the online classroom. Barriers of language, race, gender and other visible signs of differences can be neutralized in class discussions, team projects, and other class interactions. This potential diversity of learners can also challenge the faculty member to reconsider what she knows and believes of the students in their class.

Of particular interest in online learning is the trend of adult learners returning for either first-time college-studies or advanced post-graduate efforts. These individuals bring with them a unique set of work/life experiences and learning goals that can greatly influence the pace, relevancy, and tone of the online classroom. How to best address the needs of all students begins with a thorough appreciation of the diversity represented in the online classroom.

5. Technology Interface

It may appear obvious that technology presents an aspect that needs to be addressed as faculty transition from the face-to-face to online classroom. The nature of the pressure technology places on the novice online educator can easily be over, or under, estimated. Gaining the necessary technology skills to manage an online course requires an appreciation of the evolution of technical competence. The specific technological skill sets required to “survive” a first or even third online course offering can be very different than those developed after five or more offerings. As the initial challenges of simply logging in to and accessing the course content are conquered, the more rewarding and sophisticated methods of using technology to support strategies such as team building and group exercises may be addressed.

When providing faculty with technical training in the learning management system and related tools, it is easy to assume that all technical capabilities should be explored and taught. It is easy to overwhelm the novice instructor with the multitude of system features when all they really require are the basics. Most learning management systems are complex, data driven environments with hidden and often overwhelming levels of nuances. A mind-numbing number of boxes to be checked, switches to be flipped, and toggles to be set can easily confuse and alienate the novice user. ●