Becoming A Better Teacher

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I love the face-to-face learning environment. Even when I stood before my first class, uncertain if I knew enough to teach for 10 minutes much less 75, I thrived on the energy in the room. I also felt somewhat at ease with the basics, given I could draw on a lifetime of experience as a student.

When we become teachers, most of us start by emulating the best we have known and their classrooms. In my career, I have handled the auditorium lecture, the seminar, the project-based learning course, and on-site education in the streets of another country. I had good models for them all.

Then came online.

Until I started working on a system-level "e-learning" committee, I knew little about this mode of delivery. It did not exist when I went to school. And at my institution, there was a decided distrust about the whole enterprise. Most faculty thought online education ran counter to the best of what college instruction should be. Many administrators thought it ran counter to the ethos of the institution itself.

But I needed a change and a challenge.

Out of curiosity, I enrolled in an online course at another UNC-system institution. The course was well thought out, beautifully mounted, and, with an engaged instructor, I loved it. I wanted to try teaching in this format, although I recognized that I was an advanced adult learner and

my students were largely beginning undergraduates. Luckily, my chair and colleagues said okay. Even with no institutional training or incentives, I dove in. My first time out, I taught three different fully-enrolled general education courses. Miraculously, I survived and some fifteen years later, I have no desire ever to go back to a traditional classroom.

The reasons for that change are complicated, but I want to focus on three ways in which I found myself becoming a better teacher online.

First, online teaching reinforced that learning happens when students invest in pursuing questions that intrigue them. Thus, when conceptualizing my classes, I chose to position myself as a mentor and a guide instead of the authoritative voice or the day's entertainment. By creating opportunities that assist students in understanding and formulating the kinds of questions scholars ask, I watched the learning space become less about transmitting knowledge and more about helping students find their own academic voices in line with their interests and learning goals. Rather than mastering a set of facts, we spend our time on skills such as locating appropriate academic resources, analyzing primary and secondary texts, crafting better arguments, and making persuasive and polished presentations.

Second, being attached to a computer all day produced greater diligence with my own research. The pressure of setting up an online course (and I change my courses almost every term) feels intense while it is happening. But once class gets underway, the structure of each week produces a rhythm. The teaching tasks (answering questions, grading, interacting in discussion) come in predictable spurts and get accomplished more efficiently. I am not constantly scrambling to get materials together for the next class session. This calmer and steadier pace allows me to build in the time I need for my scholarship, which, in turn, feeds back into my teaching and makes for improvements on the next course iterations.

Third, I see student needs and challenges more clearly. Believe it or not, evaluations prove key here. Do not get me wrong. Feedback about online courses invites trolling. And many students, most likely due to the physical remove, tend to be harsher with their assessments. But if you look past the complaining, you see that they are frequently saying "we are ill-equipped for self-directed learning" (especially if the expectation was for something rote). My students are smart and capable. But they have often not been pushed by an increasingly impoverished K-12 system to ask their own questions, to evaluate resources analytically, or to make cogent arguments in sound grammatical form. They are also not accustomed to seeing professors as partners in learning, who will work with them. I have to do considerable outreach and encourage students to ask for the time and attention they might need.

I still have spent more of my life in a face-to-face educational environment as opposed to online. But I now know more about the mechanics of learning because of leaving my comfort zone and teaching online. I was forced to think through my pedagogical choices. I stay current with and adapt to the available technology. And I have to work to construct a learning community, rather than counting on shared space to do the job.

Teaching online is making me a better teacher.

Questions for Consideration:

1. Who am I in the classroom? How do I define my role and how does my pedagogy reflect that position?
2. Do I make time to review my classes over the duration of each term, making certain that my assignments correspond to the learning goals I have established, including the skills I want to help my students develop?
3. How can technology be helpful to me in my instruction? What do I use outside of the classroom (e.g., to stay in contact with family and friends, to shop, to organize my life) that might be useful in the classroom?

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2018/09/becoming-a-better-teacher/