

Teaching Nonprofit Management Online: Instructors' Experiences and Lessons Learned

Paper Presented to the 1998 ARNOVA Conference

Kathleen Fletcher

University of San Francisco

Copyright © 1999, Kathleen Fletcher. All rights reserved.

(Highlighting added by FutureU CEO Gail Terry Grimes)

Teaching via the Internet is a very different experience from teaching in a classroom. Instructors may miss the lack of face-to-face contact and real-time discussions found in the traditional classroom. The students have less opportunity to challenge the instructor, and the instructor has fewer chances to learn from the students. Many of the instructor's tried and true methods must be drastically adapted to fit the online venue. All this presents the instructor with immense challenges in preparing and teaching courses in this new medium.

Looking critically at the experiences of instructors used to classroom teaching when they switch to online teaching is of great interest because of the increased availability of this kind of educational format. Many universities and professional schools are exploring this option in order to increase the range of students they can serve. Technology makes specialized education such as nonprofit management available to many people who do not live near one of the institutions that provide in-classroom programs. But instructors have not been trained in online teaching; most are learning on the job. Looking at the experiences of those teaching online can help develop training for instructors who wish to teach in this new medium.

The Institute for Nonprofit Organization Management at the University of San Francisco first offered an online version of its Development Director Certificate in 1997 and then offered it for the second time in 1998. The experiences of those teaching in this program, all of whom had previously taught in the traditional classroom, point out the **pitfalls and satisfactions of this type of teaching**. Those teaching online for the second time applied lessons learned from their first attempt. Those teaching online for the first time learned from the veterans and experienced challenges of their own.

This paper includes a description of the experiences of six instructors who have taught in the USF online certificate program and compares their experiences to relevant literature. The instructors were interviewed by phone in September, 1998. To the opinions found in the interviews and the literature, I have added my own experiences and observations. As an adjunct faculty member at USF, I taught one of the online courses in the Development Director Certificate program

for the first time in the summer of 1998.

The Development Director Certificate

The University of San Francisco has offered a Development Director Certificate since 1993. The program consists of five 8-week courses: Philanthropy and Fundraising; Marketing; Annual Giving; Grantsmanship; and Capital Campaigns, Major Gifts, and Planned Giving. An all-day introductory session at the beginning of the program and an all-day capstone session at the end are also included. In addition to coursework in the five classes, students do an organizational project which is presented at the capstone session. Instructors are typically adjunct faculty who are professionals in the fundraising field, either consultants or development directors.

Since students need to attend class in San Francisco weekly for approximately a year, the on-campus program is limited to those who can do so, mainly those who live in the San Francisco Bay Area. The online version of the Development Director Certificate allows students who live farther away to participate in the program. The certificate is not entirely online, however. Students come to the USF campus for six weekends during the year-long program. The first weekend consists of the introductory day on Saturday and the first session of Course One on Sunday. During the next seven weeks, the students complete Sessions 2 through 7 of the first course online. They return to the campus for Session 8 of the first course on Saturday and Session 1 of the second course on Sunday. This pattern continues to the end. The sixth weekend consists of the last session of Course 5 on Saturday and the capstone session on Sunday.

The in-person part of the program, of course, mediates some of the difficulties of online teaching in that the instructors have the opportunity to interact face-to-face with the students at the beginning and end of the course. This does not, however, change the fact that **online teaching is a very different experience** than classroom teaching. In the following interviews, **the instructors provide insight into that experience**. If they had not been able to interact at all with the students in a face-to-face situation, their answers might have been more extreme, but the substance of those answers would probably be similar if not identical.

The mechanics of teaching online in this program include **a certificate website** on which the courses are posted. **Each course has eight sessions; each session includes five components separately posted: Topics and Learning Objectives; Lecture; Assigned Readings; Assignments; and Activities**. Instructors write the lectures, assign the readings, develop written assignments to be submitted by e-mail or fax, and design online activities such as visiting relevant websites and communicating with each other in the conference section of the course website. The initial posting of the courses is handled by the administrator of the program. Conferencing software is included, but the program does not include real-time chat software.

Because of the in-person component of the program, students tend to live in the Western part of the United States. Some live in the Bay Area and could, presumably, have taken the program in its traditional classroom format but

preferred the online format for its convenience. Others live in Western states such as New Mexico and Hawaii. Cohort groups have been small both times the certificate program has been offered, probably because of the novelty of this medium. Nine students enrolled in the 1997 certificate program and six in the 1998 program. Most students were in their 20s and 30s, most fairly new to development, and a few were career changers.

Results of the Instructor Interviews

The six instructors interviewed include two men and four women. Three are consultants, two are fulltime development directors in large institutions, and one is a fulltime faculty member at USF. All six are experienced classroom educators who have taught in the classroom version of the Development Director Certificate or the Master of Nonprofit Administration program, or both. One has taught twice in the online certificate program, one was preparing to teach a second time at the time of the interview, and four have taught online once. Questions asked of the instructors included:

- How would you characterize the role of the instructor in online teaching?
- What are some of the ways online teaching differed for you from classroom teaching?
- How did you encourage communication among students in the online portion of the course?
- About how often did you log on to the course to monitor the students?
- About how often did you write to students using e-mail or conferencing?
- Did you use any collaborative or team projects or assignments in the course? If so, how did they work out?
- What did you like most about teaching online?
- What did you like least about teaching online?
- What would you do to improve the way the certificate program is taught online?
- How might you change your online teaching the next time you teach online?
- What do you think promotes student learning in online courses?

Role of the instructor in online teaching. On the one hand, instructors saw their role as similar to that they used in the classroom: facilitator of learning, planner, direction-giver, source of information, guide. One instructor remarked that many of the basic curriculum and instruction tasks were the same. Lectures, for example, still have to be prepared, and they have to be written out word for word rather than delivered from notes. Two people stated that they found the role of the instructor much more passive than in a classroom situation. One described the role as being a monitor rather than a facilitator. Another person suggested

that he felt more like a consultant to the learning process than he did in a traditional classroom. Many of these comments imply that **learners are more self-directed** in the online format than in the classroom situation, and that **instructors support the learning process in a less teacher-directed way**.

Differences from traditional teaching. Instructors cited a number of ways in which online teaching differed from classroom teaching. On the positive side, this medium allows instructors to give **more personal attention to students**. One person said he was able to ponder every question and answer in some detail, which he could never do in a regular classroom. Online teaching, then, allows more thoughtful intervention.

Almost all of the instructors remarked about the **lack of human interaction**, the **inability to monitor individual reactions**, and the **challenge of keeping students engaged in the learning process**. A troubling factor was the **unevenness of student participation**. One person stated that she couldn't always be sure the students were learning; they were delivering on assignments, but the signs of learning one sees in a classroom were not discernable. Another talked about the emotional content of education and wondered how we can effectively handle that when teaching online.

Several instructors talked about the differences between preparing for traditional teaching and for an online course. Whereas many teachers prepare for traditional classes on a week-by-week basis, in the online format (at least in USF's program) all lectures and related assignments had to be prepared in advance and put on the server before the course began. One instructor said she used more resources and citations when preparing lectures because, in the absence of in-person class discussion, she wanted to make sure students heard more than one point of view.

Frequency of online communication. Almost all instructors reported going online **at least daily** to monitor the class, and most reported communicating back to students on a daily basis as well. One who had taught twice said she went online a little less frequently during her second teaching assignment than during her first, mainly because she was more familiar with the medium and more relaxed about it. One instructor remarked that the discipline of constantly monitoring the class was a major adjustment in teaching style.

Encouraging communication. When asked how they encouraged students to communicate among themselves and with the group, instructors mentioned sending personal e-mails to students encouraging them to participate more. One instructor stated that the more she wrote, the more the students did. She asked a lot of questions in the conference section, and this seemed to motivate students to respond more frequently. Another instructor required that everyone in the class come up with solutions to the same fundraising problem and post them in the conference section. She felt that this particular approach, which she also uses in a traditional classroom setting, worked better online than in the classroom because everyone had to respond individually.

Instructors mentioned the conferencing software as a limiting factor in

communication. One instructor who taught the fourth course in the certificate program reported that one of her students said he only really "got" conferencing during that course. There appears to be a learning curve for students as they get used to communicating online, and one important role of the instructor is to understand the barriers students face in communicating and help them get past those barriers.

Collaborative projects. Only one of the six instructors had tried using team projects in her online course. Groups of three were assigned a project and expected to communicate online or by phone or fax. The problem was the uneven participation of the students; several did almost nothing while others did more than their share. This, understandably, caused resentment among those who really did the work. Two people in one group refused to go on with the project at all until the third person joined in.

What instructors liked about teaching online. All of the instructors found the online teaching experience rewarding. Several cited the convenience of not having to drive to a classroom and of being able to work at any time of the day or night. One mentioned that she liked having everything prepared before the course started. The ability to document students' participation in the class was also mentioned as a positive factor, as was the ability to teach students hundreds of miles away.

Several instructors cited the satisfaction of taking time to prepare thoughtful answers to students' questions and to give each student personal attention. One mentioned that she thinks better while writing than while talking, and she believes the online format is particularly appropriate for people who like to write. Another instructor mentioned the novelty of teaching online and the fun of experimenting with a different form of delivery.

What instructors didn't like about teaching online. Two factors were mentioned most often when instructors were asked what they liked least about teaching online: the lack of face-to-face interaction, and the frustration of not having all the students participate at the same level. The interplay, give and take, and fun of interacting with a group are missing. One instructor said that if he told a joke, he didn't know if the students laughed or not. Another said she missed seeing students' eyes, and she especially missed seeing something go "click" in their faces when they got something. Another instructor felt that the lack of a social underpinning of the class decreased motivation and made it harder to coax the nonparticipating students to get more involved.

How instructors would change their online teaching. Instructors were asked how they might change their online teaching if they taught in this format again. Two mentioned that they would make more use of online resources—directing students toward relevant websites, using multi-media approaches, and so on. Another mentioned that she would make sure all her resources are current since there is no excuse for out-of-date material in a forward-looking technological format. Another would enhance the conferencing aspect of the course and set up more situations to which students were expected to respond. Another said she

would **put a lot more information into her lectures because the conferencing format did not provide as many opportunities for imparting information** as she had expected. In preparation for teaching online a second time, she has also put together a course reader of materials to supplement the lectures, textbooks, and conferencing. Finally, one instructor said that if she taught online again, she would understand how much time it really takes to teach in this format and would manage her time better. She mentioned **getting overwhelmed at times by the number of e-mail messages and conference messages** she had to answer.

What promotes student learning in online courses. The question asked of instructors about what they think promotes student learning in the online format caused most to pause and reflect. The answers given show that the same kinds of things which promote learning in classroom situations do so in online situations: **careful choice of learning assignments and helpful feedback from instructors**. As in professional education of all kinds, motivation to enhance one's career is also a factor, as is doing practical exercises that apply what is learned.

Some special attributes that instructors felt promoted online learning were also mentioned. The greater amount of personal attention paid to each student and the immediate (or within 24 to 48 hours) response to questions enhance learning. The fact that students have more time to reflect before answering a question than they do in a face-to-face situation promotes critical thinking about issues. One instructor mentioned that students must participate because they are required to respond individually rather than being able to hide in the group.

Related Literature

The experiences of the online teachers at USF are not unlike those of other instructors found in several articles on online teaching. **Carlson (1997) stresses the importance of building a virtual classroom community**. She states that students must feel involved in the course, with the other students, and with the instructor in order to succeed. The online environment should be composed of three characteristics: socialization, active participation, and collaboration. To decrease isolation and increase socialization, she suggests asking students to post short, individual biographies. She also suggests that instructors establish a newsgroup or mailing list composed of class members. The instructor should make it clear to students that they may contact him/her using private e-mail as well as the course website. To get students to participate actively, Carlson suggests that they be required to participate in online discussions; the more participation, the more the class will be like a traditional one. Furthermore, students who are shy and quiet in a traditional classroom may be more comfortable communicating online. As for collaboration, Carlson suggests group projects for which the students need not get together physically but can communicate via e-mail or chat software.

Carlson states that both empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that online learning is an effective delivery method for education. She cites a study in which **McCollum (1997, cited in Carlson, 1997) found that a statistics class taught online outperformed the same class taught in a traditional classroom**.

Furthermore, McCollum found that, **in the absence of the professor, the students formed study groups and felt a sense of the class as a community.**

An informal survey of students who took a seven-week online course from Carlson in 1997 showed that 16 of the 17 students enjoyed the course format. The majority cited convenience and flexibility as advantages of the course. The major disadvantage they cited was the lack of oral communication in class discussions. However, the majority said the advantages of the online format definitely outweighed its disadvantages. Furthermore, Carlson found that the students were indeed actively involved in the course: There was an average of over 100 hits per student on the website during the seven-week period.

Ursery (1996) writes of the implications of the online format in designing courses and creating learning environments. The information-guiding aspect of the instructor's role becomes more important than the information-providing aspect. The instructor must be actively involved in monitoring and guiding the class, often on a daily basis. Designing online courses involves a pedagogical shift to the construction of an open learning environment. This is very different from simply using technology to reinvent or revitalize the traditional classroom.

Ursery suggests that **online discussions have greater depth** than normal face-to-face conferencing because students have more time to reflect and prepare their responses. Because of the importance of discussions, online instructors should review comments every day, including weekends, to answer questions, keep the discussion on track, and offer observations to students' comments. Due to the fact that instructors need to respond to all student communications in a timely manner, Ursery suggests that online teaching takes more time than regular classroom teaching and further suggests limiting class size to no more than 15 students, with 8 to 10 students as the ideal number. Shoemake (1996) echoes that suggestion. After teaching a class in public relations in a virtual environment, she decided to limit future classes to 15 students, fewer if possible.

In a recent study, Berge (1997) attempted to find out more about how instructors teach in an online format. He hypothesized that online teachers would use a teaching style that characterizes **a learner-centered approach in their teaching.** His survey used 10 instructional principles which Yelon (1996, cited in Berge, 1997) had identified as attributes of excellent teachers: meaningfulness, prerequisites, open communication, organized essential ideas, learning aids, novelty, modeling, active appropriate practice, pleasant conditions and consequences, and consistency. He reported results based on the responses of 42 post-secondary teachers who had taught online courses. He found that the teachers did exhibit Yelon's principles but that, while Yelon couched the principles in terms of expository, teacher-centered instruction, the responses of the online teachers showed an emphasis on shifting the responsibility of learning to each student. For instance, teachers relied on their students to find their own meaning in the activities they carried out as part of the course. They built a community of learners through online communication. They used more student-focused than direct instruction. **They modeled the norms for online discussion by being active members of the discussion group.** They emphasized

reliance on peers and group interaction to create the conditions for learning. They believed that arranging the conditions for students to practice skills learned in the course was one of their primary functions, and they emphasized making their course consistent with, and relevant to, students' job or other life experience.

Summarizing his findings, Berge suggested that the following are **characteristics of online teaching in formal, post-secondary education: student-centered learning; self-reflection; discussion and collaboration, and authentic learning activities**. Instructors viewed being able to guide learning by asking the right questions as more important than being able to give students the right answer. They believed in giving students the opportunity to assess their own learning experiences. All but one of the responding teachers used group discussion in their online format. Thirty-six of the 42 teachers used at least one collaborative technique such as group inquiry, peer support, or peer review. Thirty-seven of the 42 used at least one of the following authentic learning activities: inquiry, problem-based, practice-based, projects, or case studies. Berge thus believed his hypothesis to be true: Teachers in an online format did employ a learner-centered approach. However, he did not ask the respondents one important question: whether they had changed their off-line teaching style once they had gone online. Therefore, whether these teachers always used a learner-centered rather than teacher-centered approach is unknown. Berge suggests that the choice to use particular teaching methods may be something internal to the teachers and not an effect of the online environment itself, but this study did not provide evidence either for or against that supposition.

Reflections

Several points made in the articles cited above are related to the comments of the instructors interviewed for this paper. Carlson's emphasis on building community among online learners through socialization, active participation, and collaboration was noted by the instructors, sometimes for its absence. Presumably, USF's certificate students receive more socialization than the average online group because of the six in-person weekends on the campus, but this did not prevent unevenness of participation among the students once they got online. Though equal participation is seldom achieved in a classroom situation, at least the classroom instructor knows the students are present and appearing to listen, even if they are quiet. Furthermore, the classroom instructor can call on students in real time to encourage them to participate. Participation can be required in various ways by the online course assignments, but still not all students comply. In online instruction, it is much more obvious to the instructor when someone is not taking part in discussions. Instructors reported using e-mail and phone to urge students to become more active in the discussions, and they also reported feeling frustrated about that aspect of online teaching.

Though Carlson suggested collaborative projects for students, this was not a common practice of the instructors in the certificate program. Only one instructor tried this, and she did not find that it worked well. The limitations of the software may have been one reason for this; there was no chat software provided for real-time interactions. Another reason the attempt failed, according to the

instructor, was the unevenness of student participation; students were not willing to participate unless their entire group was involved. Perhaps collaborative projects will become easier to accomplish as both students and instructors learn more about working in this medium and are able to manipulate the communication tools more effectively.

Ursery's comments about the instructor's information-guiding role becoming more important than the information-providing aspect seem to be borne out by the experiences of the certificate instructors. Written lectures are relatively short in the weekly online sessions. Students are directed to online resources as well as print resources for information relevant to the course. The instructors guide the discussion through posing questions and introducing topics to which students are required to respond in conference postings. Instructors comment on student postings, adding new information but also confirming that which students have supplied. Ursery suggested that designing online courses involves a pedagogical shift to construction of a more open learning environment, and this observation seems confirmed by the role the certificate instructors play.

Ursery also suggested that because the online discussion is such an important learning tool, instructors should review comments daily and respond to all student communications in a timely manner. This was indeed the practice of the instructors interviewed. All said that they logged on daily, and sometimes more than once a day, to monitor the course. Ursery suggested a class size of not more than 15 students, given the amount of time the instructor must spend. Class sizes for the certificate program were less than that, and instructors still found the work very time-consuming.

Berge found four major characteristics in his study of 42 post-secondary instructors who had taught online: student-centered learning; self-reflection; discussion and collaboration; and authentic learning activities. Instructors in the certificate program exhibited these characteristics as well. The format of the certificate program really requires that the instructors use student-centered learning as a basis for their instruction because lectures are relatively short and much of the learning takes place through online interaction. Instructors encouraged students to reflect on their learning through the conference discussions. They did not assign collaborative projects, but they did use authentic learning activities that had a practical application to the students' work. However, as in Berge's study, there is no indication of whether the predominant teaching style of these instructors actually changed when they went to an online format. It may be that instructors who have a more student-directed teaching style are drawn to online teaching, whereas faculty who have a more teacher-directed style are not.

My own experience mirrored that of my certificate program colleagues and that of the authors cited. **I found the experience very satisfying, but I was surprised at how time-consuming it was.** Like the others, I went online daily to monitor the class, and I spent a good deal of time responding to student comments and posing questions. I had designed the assignments so that there was at least one topic students were required to discuss in the conference every week, and I added my

own entries frequently. There were one or two short written assignments that students submitted by e-mail every week, and I read those and sent comments back to the student within a day or two of receiving them. I also looked for Internet resources to pass on to them throughout the course. The daily work was one of the major differences from classroom teaching. In the latter mode, I spend concentrated time preparing for a weekly class and grading papers, but I do not engage myself with the course or the students every day. In online teaching, the concentrated time came before the course in preparing the material to be posted to the server. The daily online time added up to more than the four hours I spend in a weekly classroom course. Thus I agree with Ursery's point that online teaching takes more time than classroom teaching and that classes should be kept small.

Like my colleagues, I experienced the frustration of not all students participating equally. I had to write several "where are you?" e-mail messages. Two students fell far behind in their weekly assignments, both the written ones and the conferencing requirements. The conference postings and written assignments of the students who did participate fully, however, were very gratifying. As several of my colleagues stated, I enjoyed the opportunity to carefully think through the answers that I gave to students' questions. I got to know the individual students better through their online postings and weekly assignments than I do in classroom situations, where my attention cannot be so devoted to one person at a time. Though I appreciated the opportunity to meet the students at USF for the first session, I agree with one of my colleagues who said that the in-person sessions are nice but not necessary for good online teaching. One of the students was absent for the in-person session at the beginning of my course, but I got to know him quite well by e-mail and felt that I was not treating him differently because I couldn't picture his face. Were I to teach in an entirely online program, however, I would want photographs of the students and short biographies posted for the whole class to share.

I believe one key to the success of the course I taught was the weekly assignments, both written ones and conferencing requirements. Without the requirement to participate in discussions, some students will hide behind their computers, just as some stay silent in class. The students reported to me that they felt isolated when their peers were not participating in discussions, and they liked the structure of regular conferencing assignments. They also liked the weekly written assignments, and they appreciated the almost immediate feedback I gave them on those assignments. The two students who did not participate as much seemed to "be in over their heads" as far as the time commitment was concerned. Since the certificate program is not a degree program, these students may not have been as concerned about their grades as traditional students. Their relative absence from the discussions, however, was noted and missed.

I found teaching in this new medium to be both challenging and exciting. As software improves and both instructors and students become more comfortable in the online format, additions such as collaborative projects should become easier to include and should enrich the coursework. Students who are motivated to learn can get a great deal through the online format, and instructors with

student-centered learning styles will find it satisfying. One of the instructors interviewed for this paper remarked that we are pioneers in this new arena but that all educators will have to get used to the medium soon. I believe that as well, and I look forward to further adventures on this online highway.

Lessons Learned

Summarizing the experiences of my colleagues and me, I would say that the first lesson is to **expect online teaching to demand daily attention and more total hours than classroom instruction**, especially when teaching in this format for the first time. A second lesson is that **all students will not participate equally**, and those that don't will require personal attention from the instructor to get them more involved. A third lesson is that **much of the instructor's role will be to guide learning through online discussions and refer students to relevant resources rather than to impart information**. A fourth lesson is that there is great satisfaction in online teaching even though face-to-face interaction is missed. Instructors find it particularly gratifying to be able to give students individual attention and to have time to prepare thoughtful responses to student comments and questions. Finally, a fifth lesson is that good online teaching, while different in methodology from classroom teaching, is based on the same principles as good in-person teaching: respect for students, care in selecting meaningful assignments, and thoughtful attention to student responses. Good classroom teachers will be good online teachers if they are willing to make the necessary accommodations to this new medium.

This paper is essentially a case study of the experiences of one group of seven instructors in one program at one university. There is much more to be learned through research into the experiences of other instructors and of students who choose to take online courses. Much research into the effectiveness of online learning vs. classroom learning should also be done. This paper is meant only to provide a glimpse of this new medium through the eyes of a few people who have experienced it. We can all look forward to much more being written about this exciting new educational arena.

References

- Berge, Z. (1997). Characteristics of online teaching in post-secondary, formal education. *Educational Technology*, 37 (3), 35/38-47.
- Carlson, R. (1997). *Educating online: Creating the virtual classroom community*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 412934)
- Shoemake, B. (1996). *Cyberspace class: Rewards and punishments*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 400574)
- Ursery, Danney. (1996, October). *Teaching online: Design issues and the creation of an asynchronous learning environment*. Paper presented at the annual conference of Alliance/ACE, St Pete Beach, FL. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 402511)

For further information, contact:

Kathleen Fletcher, Consultant and Researcher in Nonprofit Organization Management

415/454-7585 (phone); 415/454-1560 (fax); fletcher@usfca.edu (e-mail)

Copyright © 1999, Kathleen Fletcher. All rights reserved.