

## 5 Common Fears about Teaching Online—Fact vs. Fiction

By Patti Shank, PhD, CPT

One thing new online instructors often have in common, whether they feel pressured to teach online or are more enthusiastic, is a great deal of anxiety. Teaching online involves a set of new technical, administrative, and instructional skills. Many are not thrilled about teaching online unless they feel confident that they can do a good job. And they often have fears that make them feel that doing a good job is going to be difficult, or worse. I often hear these five common fears and misconceptions from new online instructors, and other instructional designers who work with faculty tell me they hear much the same.

1. Online courses aren't as good as face-to-face courses.
2. My course can't be taught online.
3. I won't be able to connect with my students.
4. The software and systems are too hard to learn.
5. Teaching online will take more time and effort.

Like most fears and misconceptions, there's a small grain of truth in each. But being able to discern fact from fiction in each of these is a good first step toward feeling more confident that learning these new skills is not so difficult.

### Online courses aren't as good as face-to-face courses

Research shows over and over that it is primarily course design and teaching quality that make instruction good or less good, not the medium used for teaching and learning (see the *No Significant Difference* reference at the end of this article if you need some

convincing). Many people consider face-to-face courses to be the gold standard, but we've all experienced enough dreadful face-to-face courses (Econ 405! Ugh!) to dispel this notion.

Both online and face-to-face instruction have unique advantages and challenges. For example, it is often easier, because of time considerations, for everyone to contribute in an online class. But it is easier to get immediate help in a face-to-face class. One of the primary considerations, then, when teaching online, is how to use the advantages and manage the challenges. Some face-to-face courses utilize online components in order to take advantage of their benefits. Online courses sometimes utilize some synchronous (same-time) components in order to improve motivation and allow students to get immediate help. These days, good instructors use the tools that best help students learn, and that often means combining online and face-to-face elements.

### My course can't be taught online

It is harder to teach courses that involve in-person performances or require immediate feedback online, but there are well-established ways to get around many of the difficulties. Some instructors use a hybrid (online + face-to-face) format for these kinds of courses so that much of the course is online, but certain performances or feedback sessions are in person. Performance and feedback sessions do not need to happen in a central face-to-face classroom, though. I taught an online presentations skills course that required students to perform for an in-person audience and to submit documentation and evaluations after the performances. Many online nursing

instructors require that students' performance be monitored by outside proctors. Some instructors use Web conferencing systems such as WebX or Elluminate and desktop sharing systems such as Microsoft NetMeeting to hold online synchronous meetings where students and instructors can share information, ask questions, and get help.

### I won't be able to connect with my students

Instructors fear that not being in the same room with students will inherently result in a lack of connection. In fact, it is relatively common for students to feel disconnected with instructors in face-to-face courses. That shouldn't be the case in either environment. When teaching online, there are some well-established methods for connecting, getting and giving feedback, and managing students so that the connection, while different, can be as good or even better. Because an online course tends to be ongoing (not event based, such as Wednesday from 4 to 8 p.m.), there's a potential for more connections, feedback, and help than are possible in most face-to-face courses. Students can communicate with each other and provide help; documents and projects can be peer reviewed; and the instructor can facilitate in-depth discussions. A discussion without a time limit provides more possibilities for shyer or more analytical students to participate, and research shows that this often happens.

Online instructors can integrate feedback into online course activities to gauge student motivation, understanding, and satisfaction. This can include

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self-assessment quizzes and reflection questions. They can examine student participation (or lack of it) to determine who needs help and can reach out personally to those who are not participating. Many online instructors design their courses with more frequent deliverables than in a similar face-to-face course so that students are able to more easily stay engaged and on task.

### **The software and systems are too hard to learn**

It's true that teaching online requires the use of systems and technologies that take some effort to learn. Most institutions have classes for new instructors so that they can become proficient, and new online learning instructors should avail themselves of these opportunities to learn. In addition, many institutions provide help so that new online instructors can convert their face-to-face courses to an online format. Still, it can be a daunting task.

My Subaru mechanic tells me that keeping up-to-date on cars requires constant learning and unlearning these days. He had to learn how to use an online system that helps him keep up, and this system is constantly being improved. My accountant says that tax law changes each year require gobs of time and effort to keep up with. My point? Many folks are dealing with a continual need for reskilling, so our profession doesn't have a monopoly on needing to learn new things. And since we're (hopefully) teaching the next generation of people who will need to be constantly learning, we certainly ought to walk the talk.

### **Teaching online will take more time and effort**

Some instructors have put a lot of effort into building lecture notes and

slides and worry that these won't translate well to the online environment. That's true. Online courses often work best when they are more project- and activity-based, and a fair amount of redesign may be needed. This certainly can be time-consuming. What new online instructors often tell me, however, after we have finished redesigning their courses in a more project- or activity-based format, is that

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these project- or activity-based courses are better for students and more fun to teach. Many take all the lessons learned in redesigning for online back to the classroom. Students in these redesigned courses often recommend these courses over the dull lecture-with-slides-type face-to-face courses and give instructors higher evaluations, so there's a definite-ly a payoff for all involved.

There are some aspects of teaching online that actually take less time and effort. You can literally teach in your pajamas. One of the greatest parts of teaching online is how the administrative features of many course management systems allow you to track, grade, and provide feedback in ways that are far easier. Students can't pull out the "I-lost-my-syllabus" excuse because all materials are available online or use the "I-handed-it-in-but-you-must-have-lost-it" defense because the system logs in the time and date for homework

submissions. This allows me to be more of a teacher and less of a babysitter.

Anxiety provoking as the skills new online instructors need to learn are, they often make us better instructors. They make us reconsider how we (and others) learn, and our courses are often better as a result. Many of us implore our students to be open to new ways of thinking and new skills, so having us walk the talk is good. The first step to getting over the typical fears described here is seeing how many of them aren't exactly true, and it helps to see the positive flip side of each fear. Don't get me wrong, I don't think it's easy; I just think it's worth it.

### **To Learn More:**

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