

## Out of Sync: The Time-Sucking Shock of Teaching Online

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One of the more startling revelations for those who first venture to teach in asynchronous, online learning environments (OLEs) is how much time it takes. Even for the experienced teacher/trainer, this can come as a shock. Explaining the finer points of your syllabus; making last minute changes to your reading list; negotiating due dates; establishing attendance; or getting to know your students are activities that can be taken for granted in the simple elegance of a brick and mortar classroom, where on a good day synchronous chit-chat, propinquity, body language, and the comforting nearness of the university coffee shop creates a rapid exchange of ideas and a feeling of fellowship. But to the uninitiated, these activities often become laborious in OLEs. A student asking a question in person not only gets a prompt response from the teacher, but the rest of the class can hear her answer. What's more, if the student doesn't understand her, they can immediately tell her so, giving her the cue to rephrase her response and to look for understanding on the student's face. (The question as to why some students actually do not speak up in class is the subject for another essay.) An exchange like this takes a few minutes in real time. In an asynchronous environment this process can take days. Redesigning something as simple as a thirty-minute classroom discussion into an online discussion board format can turn into a week's worth of lengthy reading and postings. Sure, one way around the time-sucking inconvenience of asynchronous communication is to design hybrid courses where brick and mortar meeting times, or streaming, real-time communication is also present. But the asynchronous component of a hybrid course will still have the same characteristics of delayed and sometimes stifled interaction.

Because of these and other aspects of OLEs many are exploring effective ways of training experienced teachers how to teach online. One example I find helpful is Dorette Sugg Welk's application of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) in helping teachers handle the OLE (2006). ZPD, put simply, is the conceptual space between what a learner can learn independently, and what they learn with some form of outside assistance. Understanding ZPD becomes important when one considers what students can learn independently through problem-solving, and what they learn by interaction with a facilitator or peer group. Certainly ZPD is relevant to all learning environments but in OLEs, where students sometimes feel isolated and where

student-teacher and student-student interaction is filtered through the asynchronous environment, it is a critical consideration. But Sugg Welk is just one example of a how-to. The plethora of articles and books focused on OLEs is testament to the fact that new or adjusted teaching strategies are necessary to successfully teach online. So the good news is that there is a lot out there on how to teach online. But that's also the bad news. Subjects such as ZPD are important and interesting but are not the type of reading the novice needs when they have been told that they have to teach an online course NOW and they feel overwhelmed by the amount of time they suddenly discover asynchronous online teaching requires.

**"With so many how-to choices out there, how does one winnow out the [articles and books] that help save time, when time is of the essence?"**

With so many how-to choices out there, how does one winnow out the ones that help save time, when time is of the essence? I'd like to suggest two resources that are practical, easy to read, and insightful. One of the peskiest problems for the novice online teacher is how to moderate the class discussion board. The book, *Facilitating Online Learning: Effective Strategies for Moderators* (2000), provides a roadmap on how to lead a class through the tributaries of the class discussion board. This book is written for the novice and offers lots of real world examples of what to do to make it through the course and, by gosh, actually teach. Topics include how to define one's role as a moderator; how to keep discussion focused on the topic; how to lead; how to encourage others to lead; and how to build a sense of community. The writing style is accessible and there are many graphics to help illustrate the points made in the text. A quick read-through will assist any novice in framing how they plan to approach moderating their class discussion boards and other forms of asynchronous communication.

Perhaps the most helpful paper for this writer has been Atsusi Hiruni's (2003) advice on how to plan for the efficient use of teaching time when designing or redesigning an online course. Hiruni embraces the time-sucking aspect of online teaching and has developed helpful strategies for controlling interaction without sacrificing quality. Of note is his advice on how to align instructional events with learning objectives so that the teacher can introduce the material at the right moment and thus, save time. He offers advice on establishing protocols and rubrics and the examples he provides can be easily adapted to individual use. For more information on how to deal with the time it takes to teach online consult the bibliographies of the works cited, as well as Joseph Cavanaugh's interesting study, *Teaching Online: A Time Comparison* (2005).

### References

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