"I'm your teacher, not your Internet service provider"
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“"I'm Your Teacher, Not Your Internet Service Provider""

By Ellen Laird
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The honeymoon is over. My romance with distance teaching is losing its spark. Gone are the days when I looked forward to each new online encounter with students, when preparing and posting a basic assignment was a thrilling adventure, when my colleagues and friends were well-wishers, cautiously hopeful about my new entanglement. What remains is this instructor, alone, often in the dark of night, facing the reality of my online class and struggling to make it work.

After four years of Internet teaching, I must pause. When pressed to demonstrate that my online composition class is the equivalent of my classroom-based composition sections, I can do so professionally and persuasively. On the surface, course goals, objectives, standards, outlines, texts, Web materials, and so forth, are identical. But my fingers are crossed.

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The two are as different as a wedding reception and a rave. The nonlinear nature of online activity and the well-ingrained habits of Web use involve behavior vastly different from that which fosters success in the traditional college classroom. Last fall, my online students ranged from ages 15 to 50, from the home-schooled teen to the local union president. Yet all brought to class assumptions and habits that sometimes interfered with learning and often diminished the quality of the experience for all of us.

As a seasoned online instructor, I knew what to expect and how to help students through the inevitable. But for the uninitiated, the reality of online teaching can be confounding and upsetting. It can make a talented teacher feel like an unmitigated failure.

If faculty members, well established or new, are to succeed in online teaching, they must be prepared for attitudes and behaviors that permeate Web use but undermine teaching and learning in the Web classroom. Potential online instructors are generally offered technical training in file organization, course-management software use, and the like. But they would be best served by an unfiltered look at what really happens when the student logs into class. A few declarative sentences drafted for my next online syllabus may suffice:

**The syllabus is not a restaurant menu.** In campus classrooms, my students regard the syllabus as a fixed set of requirements, not as a menu of choices. They accept the sequence and format in which course material is provided for them. They do not make selections among course requirements according to preference.

Online? Each semester, online students howl electronically about having to complete the same assignments in the same sequence required of my face-to-face students. These students are accustomed to choices online. They enjoy the nonlinear nature of Web surfing; they would be hard pressed to replicate the sequence of their activity without the down arrow beside the URL box on their browsers.

To their detriment, many of these students fail to consider that Web learning is different from Web use, particularly in a skills-based course like composition. They find it hard to accept, for example, that they must focus on writing a solid thesis before tackling a research paper. Most would prefer to surf from one module of material to the next and complete what appeals to them rather than what is required.

The difference between students’ expectations and reality frustrates us all. In traditional classrooms, students do not pick up or download only the handouts that appeal to them; most do not try to
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begin the semester’s final project without instruction in the material on which it is based. Yet, online students expect such options.

Even Cinderella had a deadline. Students in my traditional classes certainly miss deadlines. But they generally regard them as real, if not observable, recognizing an instructor’s right to set due dates and accepting the consequences of missing them to be those stated on the syllabus.

Not so with my online students. Neither fancy font nor flashing bullet can stir the majority to submit work by the published deadline. Students seem to extend the freedom to choose the time and place of their coursework to every aspect of the class. Few request extensions in the usual manner. Instead, they announce them. One student e-mailed me days after a paper was due, indicating that he had traveled to New York for a Yankees’ game and would submit the essay in a couple of weeks.

All course components do not function at the speed of the Internet. As relaxed as my online students are about meeting deadlines, they begin the course expecting instantaneous service. The speed of Internet transmission seduces them into seeking and expecting speed as an element of the course. Naturally, students’ emphasis on rapidity works against them. The long, hard, eventually satisfying work of thinking, doing research, reading, and writing has no relationship to bandwidth, processor speed, or cable modems.

At the same time, it takes me a long time to respond thoughtfully to students’ work, particularly their writing. Each semester, online students require help in understanding that waiting continues to be part of teaching and learning, that the instructor is not another version of an Internet-service provider, to be judged satisfactory or not by processing speed and 24/7 availability.

There are no sick or personal days in cyberspace. In my traditional classes, I refrain from informing students that I will be out of town for a weekend, that I need a root canal, or that my water heater failed before work. My face-to-face students can read my expression and bearing when they see me; thus, I can usually keep personal explanations to a professional minimum.

In my online class, however, students cannot see the bags under my eyes or the look of exuberance on my face. They cannot hear the calm or the shake in my voice. Thus, for the smooth functioning of the course, I willingly provide details about where I am and what I am doing, so students can know what to expect.

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However, I am still troubled by the e-mail message from an online student that began, "I know you are at your father's funeral right now, but I just wondered if you got my paper." Surely, he hesitated before pushing "send," but his need for reassurance prevailed.

And so it goes, all semester long. There simply isn't room in an online class for the messiness of ordinary life, the students' or mine, nor room for the extraordinary—the events of September 11, for example. As long as the server functions, the course is always on, bearing down hard on both students and instructor.

Still, students will register for online classes under circumstances that would prohibit them from enrolling in a course on campus. The welder compelled to work mandatory overtime, the pregnant woman due before mid-semester, the newly separated security guard whose wife will not surrender the laptop all arrive online with the hope and illusion that, in cyberspace, they can accomplish what is temporarily impossible for them on campus.

I am not on your buddy list. The egalitarian atmosphere of the Internet chat room transfers rapidly and inappropriately to the online classroom. Faceless and ageless online, I am, at first, addressed as a peer. If students knew that I dress like many of their mothers, or that my hair will soon be more gray than brown, would their exchanges with me be different? I reveal what I want them to know—the date of my marathon, my now-deceased dog's consumption of a roll of aluminum foil, my one gig as a cocktail-lounge pianist—but little of what one good look at me, in my jumper and jewelry, would tell them.

They, on the other hand, hold back nothing. Confessional writing, always a challenge in composition, can easily become the norm online. So can racist, sexist, and otherwise offensive remarks—even admissions of crimes. The lack of a face to match with a rhetorical voice provides the illusion of anonymity, and thus the potential for a no-holds-barred quality to every discussion thread. The usual restraint characterizing conversation among classroom acquaintances evaporates online within about two weeks. Private conversations fuse with academic discussion before an instructor can log in.

Are there strategies to manage these and similar difficulties? Of course. Thus, I continue with online teaching and welcome both its challenges and rewards. But educators considering online teaching need to know that instruction in person and online are day and night. They must brace themselves for a marriage of opposites, and build large reserves of commitment, patience, and wherewithal if the relationship is to succeed.