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The rate of expansion of online classes at community colleges has required hiring and training faculty for the online class offerings. The demand is being met in large part by adjunct faculty, who, as with face-to-face classes, continue to represent a large portion of the community college online faculty.

The Trials and Accomplishments of an Online Adjunct Faculty Member

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In January 2004 I decided to pursue a doctorate. Due to the time commitments of my current position as a faculty member at a four-year college and my family, I determined that an online program from an accredited institution was the only feasible way to pursue a Ph.D. at that time.

The online process was a change from the traditional classroom that I was familiar with. Although I was aware of the classroom management system (CMS) used on my campus, which had I incorporated into my classes, the orientation to my online degree program introduced me to the process of learning online, and I came to view the online environment as a legitimate form of learning.

About a year after I began my online program, I received an e-mail about an online teaching opportunity. This came about as a result of a meeting I attended where the interim dean of City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) discussed the growing demand for quality instructors to teach online for the rapidly expanding online segment of its Center for Distance Learning (CDL). Based on my positive learning experience, I took the opportunity to get in on the ground floor of a new and growing form of teaching and applied for an adjunct teaching position with CCC for the summer of 2006. I quickly found myself in a new environment of teaching, collaboration, and assessment. This chapter documents my journey as an adjunct online instructor at City Colleges of Chicago Center for Distance Learning.

Training for the Virtual Classroom

Being an online student in a doctoral program was a tremendous help in providing a student's perspective of the online experience. I used this perspective when it came to designing my own online course to ensure I communicated clearly and often. I could also appreciate the fact that technology did not always work as planned, which prepared me to address this issue and alert students before they encountered technical glitches. A favorite saying I use in class is, "Technology is great . . . when it works." This serves as a good icebreaker for students, especially those taking their first online course.

The training that was required for new CCC online instructors and facilitators included a mandatory course, *Online Learning: An Overview*, which was offered by the Illinois Online Network (ION). Other ION classes required within the first two years of online teaching for CCC were *Encouraging Communication in Online Courses* and *Instructional Design for Online Course Development*. The ION master online teacher certificate (MOT) was not required to teach at CCC, but it was encouraged.

I went on to complete the MOT in 2008, and the program has provided an excellent knowledge base for teaching online classes. The ION sessions required for the MOT usually had several CCC adjunct faculty enrolled, and fostered collaboration on projects for these classes as well as sharing CCC and CDL experiences and ideas. These classes were good not only for the content but also because I had to struggle with how to use technology in my own virtual classroom experiences. This encounter with technology caused me to have empathy for students and not be too quick to assume that students who asked for an extension or help on an assignment or project were trying to abuse the system.

The Challenge of Physical Distance

I found it challenging from an instructor's perspective to function in the online environment and wondered what students looked and sounded like and what their body language might convey. This new venue also came with the challenges of learning how to conduct online classes and understanding my role as a teacher. CCC used the term *facilitator* in many of the training sessions. A facilitator was associated with a more hands-off constructivist approach to allow students to figure out for themselves how to assimilate and apply the material presented (Meyer, 2002).

I developed a teaching philosophy that focused on the problem-solving process, not just on getting the correct answer. This required me to resist intervening and correcting what I might perceive as a wrong or incorrect approach. I needed to let students make mistakes in order to learn and encouraged them to discuss the reasoning behind solutions rather than focusing only on the answers, which differed from my face-to-face teaching

techniques at the time. My own engagement in this online teaching and learning environment helped me better understand how to facilitate learning, and I began to understand why *facilitator* was not only a better word for *teacher*, *professor*, or *instructor* but a better approach to both the face-to-face and online classrooms. Certain issues such as distractions, shyness, and status that might cause stereotyping in the traditional classroom were removed, or at least had a lower profile, in the virtual setting.

Through trial and error, combined with training in how to engage online students, I learned how to write thoughtful questions for my discussion boards. As I asked better questions, I found that the answers posted by students began to improve from a critical thinking perspective. This led to the sharing of different opinions and respectful disagreement, which I had not experienced in the face-to-face classroom, and it became the norm in my online classes. Once I figured out how to ask better questions, offer limited input, and help guide discussions, engaged dialogue continued to grow.

In addition to learning how to conduct a class in the virtual classroom, I also had to learn how to deal with administrative issues virtually. I had had online ethics training sessions, required by both CCC and the State of Illinois, and had to submit payroll, human resource, and other forms either online or by fax or regular mail. I even had to give permission for certain staff members to execute my employment contracts because I was not on campus and CCC does not accept faxed or process contracts electronically. Although the staff were usually very helpful, at times it was challenging to find the right person to speak to about a specific topic as many staff members wear multiple hats due to turnover, promotions, and growth at CCC.

Each semester, about two weeks before classes start, there are mandatory online synchronous faculty orientation sessions with the dean of the CDL, instructional designers, student services, and technical support staff. The sessions cover such topics as the academic calendar, how to determine if students are active participants, what to do if they are not, how to communicate with students and administrators, where to find policy manuals, and to whom to address questions about policy or specific situations in class, as well as other issues that may come up in the course of a session.

After the session a recording with supporting documentation is made available for future reference. CCC will not allow anyone to teach who has not attended or listened to a recording of these sessions. There is a question-and-answer component of these meetings, as well as individual sessions with a specific instructor or designer if issues are still not clear to a specific individual. In these sessions, it was emphasized that CCC online students are very qualified, although instructors are encouraged and expected to go “the extra mile” and do some “hand holding” and advising should it be needed. Facilitators were encouraged to ask for help if they came across an issue they may not have dealt with in the past. After going through training, I found myself making many follow-up phone calls to

students as to why they had not logged in to the classroom and found that most had legitimate reasons. This awakened me to another important aspect of the online classroom in the community college setting: many students had jobs, families, and other challenges to deal with in addition to making it to virtual class and keeping up with all the assignments.

Changes in the Online Environment at CCC

Increased demands for online classes at CCC came at the same time that the college was instituting an evaluation process for all online faculty, as well as accreditation visits and review. Faculty had questions as to why the administration wanted to evaluate online faculty, which included ensuring the quality of online instruction and accreditation issues. To address faculty concerns, a series of virtual and face-to-face meetings was conducted to explain the rationale for the evaluation process and how it would ensure the quality of online instruction and aid in the accreditation process. The meetings were also a good way to get feedback and help set up the trial evaluations. This approach to introducing the evaluation process was professional, and it engaged online faculty in helping to launch the trial evaluation process. The evaluation process resulted in a checklist and scoring system, as well as an agreement that each faculty member would be evaluated every two years.

The evaluation process helped me to reflect on and consider the recommendations and how they might be implemented in future courses. Shortly after my first review, I was nominated for a Best Online Course award, for which I was runner-up. Even after the evaluation process was implemented, the administration of CCC continued to seek feedback from faculty as to the usefulness of the evaluations.

Where I Stand Today

After teaching nine classes for CCC in the CDL, from summer 2006 to spring 2009, I can look back and see progress in my ability to design online courses that facilitate learning and engage students as measured by learning outcomes, student surveys, faculty evaluations, and my own surveys taken during and after courses. I have become more willing to embrace new classroom techniques, both technical and pedagogical, based on research, recommendations, and potential for improvement of my personal skills, learning outcomes, and building community in the online classroom. With the recognition of my progress also comes a realization that I must continue to strive for better ways to meet and exceed the needs of my online students. The CCC students motivate me to embrace the concept of lifelong learning—learning anytime, anywhere regardless of place and time to learn something new to better myself and others on whom I have an impact.

I am finally experiencing a sense of connection I did not feel with earlier classes, as evidenced by the fact that I am receiving requests for recom-

mentations for students who want to transfer to four-year institutions or advance in their jobs. Students are also beginning to include me as part of their extended families by communicating about births, deaths, graduations, weddings, and other major events in their lives and the lives of their family. More than any other measure of my teaching abilities, I personally value the connection to my students' lives as a metric of success, although I am not sure how to quantify it at this time. Subjectively this connection serves to motivate me to explore new ways to connect with students personally and not just as their teacher. These relationships may be key to getting and keeping students involved in lifelong learning. As Strange and Banning (2001) observed, "The key to successful learning and, indeed, to developing students' talents, can be simply stated: 'Students learn from becoming involved'" (p. 138).

Lessons Learned and Advice for Online Adjunct Faculty

The virtual environment and the challenge of communicating and engaging students make it essential to prepare extensively, and well in advance, for the online classroom. Preparation begins with a detailed syllabus that provides specific information about when assignments are due, how they are to be submitted, how and when they will be graded, and where grades will be posted. The grading component leads to the need for detailed rubrics so that students understand the requirements (Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters, 1992). Tutorials and tools such as blogs and wikis for projects and assignments are crucial for building community and collaboration that contribute to a quality learning environment. Any use of technology needs to be evaluated for its ability to facilitate learning. Technology should not be used merely because it is new or state-of-the-art; it must be learning driven by improving the delivery and comprehension of information and must not take away from or frustrate students in their learning process (Wilson, 2003).

Do not be afraid to consider new ways to engage online students. This most likely will require training in new techniques such as podcasting, inviting a virtual guest into your online classroom using Skype, or using Second Life to illustrate a concept. If my experiences are typical, then some of these trials will not work out as planned. Do not be too quick to write off any innovative experience as a failure, though, because these trials will help you keep an open mind in considering new ways to create a collaborative learning environment in both on-site and online settings.

Online instructors have to make sure not to let any students slip through the cracks in the virtual world. The virtual classroom increases the diligence required of online facilitators to keep track of students and ensure that the goals of high retention and graduation rates at community colleges are not compromised in the online setting. Ensuring that students participate in the online class requires personal attention so that they do not get lost. As CDL online students succeed, they tell others about how the

programs, faculty, and staff helped them become successful by building their self-esteem and confidence. This should result in positive word-of-mouth among CCC stakeholders and stimulate more interest in and inquiries about CCC's online programs. The future will require more dedicated CDL faculty to commit to their students and expand the horizon of online educational opportunities for students, faculty, and all stakeholders of CCC (Allen and Seaman, 2008).

I have been an adjunct instructor since 1996 at several institutions of higher education, and after completing my Ph.D., I may still be an adjunct faculty member, a title I wear with pride. Unfortunately, adjunct faculty members are sometimes viewed in a negative light, but we have the privilege of being able to place a greater emphasis on teaching, which is extremely important in the online environment (Townsend and Twombly, 2007).

Adjunct faculty at CCC account for a substantial portion of the faculty. Since adjuncts usually are paid less than full-time faculty, teach more classes, and have less attractive teaching schedules, adjunct faculty more than likely teach because they love to see students succeed. They are in it not for the money or prestige but to be part of the success of each student, one student at a time (Townsend and Twombly, 2007).

Teaching has always been my motivation, but I must confess my initial attempts at teaching were for some of the wrong reasons. As I discovered how hard it is to be a good teacher, I have come to view the challenge of the classroom, online and face-to-face, more as a gathering of individuals rather than just a gathering, and my focus on individual students has resulted in a more positive and enriching personal experience for me and my students in online and traditional classes.

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