

ADVICE

Why I Teach Online



Mark Shaver for The Chronicle Review

By Devoney Looser | MARCH 20, 2017

I might never have sought an online teaching assignment if my husband hadn't been diagnosed with cancer. Faced with a foreseeable future of his multiple hospital stays, home recovery, and anticipated need for my amateur nursing — all while trying to care for our two children — I jumped at the chance to temporarily transition to an online teaching schedule.

Having the option to work remotely and asynchronously was a godsend. I figured my online students would have no idea if I were moderating online discussions or grading papers while sitting next to a spouse hooked up to an Oxaliplatin IV. During this family crisis, I knew I would miss being in the same room with students, and the

instantaneous give-and-take of a physical classroom. I only ever envisioned online teaching as a short-term reassignment.

I certainly never expected to love it, let alone come to believe in it as a matter of social justice and feminist practice. Yet much to my surprise, I do.

Faculty objections to online teaching remain widespread in the academic circles in which I travel. At each of the universities where I've taught, I've encountered colleagues who feared or despised it, most of the time without ever actually having taught online themselves. One department I was part of even passed a resolution against online teaching. (Unsurprisingly, that university simply found others willing to design the online curriculum that the regular faculty members refused to create.)

Years later, I still hear some of the same arguments against this instructional mode:

- "Isn't online teaching just a space for slacker students who don't want to work hard, or who don't want to take my more challenging in-person courses?"
- "Isn't the university just going to steal my video lectures and replay them after I die, paying someone a pittance to grade the papers?"
- "Isn't online teaching a lightweight, cheaply made version of our regular offerings?"
- "Isn't online teaching all about making a buck off of a lousy product?"

My answer to all of those questions, I can now say confidently — and happily, as my husband is making a recovery from cancer — is "No." Online students are just as "present" in virtual discussions; they are just as ambitious and well-directed in their coursework; and they are every bit as hungry for knowledge as the in-person version.

Whatever you may fear to the contrary, your video lectures are not poised to become precious commodities to your employer a decade hence. Video does not age well, and savvy students are unlikely to stand for a curriculum centered on long-ago recorded images of a dead professor, passed off as up-to-date instruction.

Online teaching — like any kind of pedagogy — can be done well or poorly. It can be offered with or without appropriate workloads or challenges for students.

And as for making a buck? That depends on quality and cost to students. It's true that online teaching is not currently subsidized by scholarships or financial aid as often as on-the-ground instruction. That varies by degree program and institution, of course. But by

such logic, the very fact that online students may be paying full freight for the opportunity to earn a degree ought to put the onus on faculty members to offer good instructional value. We shouldn't just throw up our hands.

The stereotype that online instruction is less rigorous, or that students cannot be engaged in it with appropriate rigor, isn't borne out by my experience. Anyone who's taught an on-the-ground class has looked out into the classroom and seen boredom or disconnection. By comparison, my online students were choosing when to log on to do their work. They seemed very tuned in when they did. It's possible I'm just not as skilled at recognizing online students merely going through the motions, but I found them, as a group, exceptionally dedicated, motivated, and talented.

My perceptions were shaped by hearing how they ended up back in school. For most of them, an online program was their only path to a degree. They lived in rural areas, had no transportation, faced restricting disabilities, found themselves with demanding family obligations, or couldn't find in-person courses offered at times that would allow them keep their jobs. An online education was rarely their first choice, but it was often their only option.

One of my most talented online students was a stay-at-home parent living thousands of miles away from the university. She's raising nine children under the age of 14. In what previous era would she have been able to continue her education? At my institution (Arizona State University), we're told that our "typical" online student is a female who, for a variety of reasons, left college the first time without taking a degree. She returns to us years afterward, often with significant financial and familial obligations. Why didn't I realize sooner that online teaching is a feminist issue?

A chance, face-to-face encounter drove that point home to me. It was at a robust December commencement ceremony. That day I had the privilege to serve as the faculty marshal, carrying a big, heavy flag, leading hundreds of regalia-sporting faculty into the arena. I felt a little like a triumphant suffragette. How many institutions had even had female faculty marshals at their commencements in the year I was born, I wondered?

It was a meaningful ceremony to me for other reasons, too. My mother and aunt were in the crowd, visiting from a faraway state. Neither has a bachelor's degree. As a teenager, I'd watched my mother labor to complete an associate degree at the local community college, but I was the first in my family to earn a B.A. Because my mother and other relatives couldn't afford to travel to watch me graduate when I earned my Ph.D., they had never had a chance to see me wearing my doctoral robes. It was a big deal to me that these women who raised me were there proudly clapping in the audience on that December graduation day.

After the ceremony ended, I went outside of the arena to wait for my mom and aunt. I saw a young graduate, standing by herself, carrying one of the enormous balloons that had dropped from the ceiling during the ceremony. Everyone else around us was hugging someone or taking a photo, so we made eye contact and smiled.

"Congratulations!" I said to her, because I felt happy, and because it seemed to be the right thing to say to a new graduate standing by herself.

"Thanks!" she said, brightly.

The conversation might have ended there, but she then asked for my help. She was looking for one of her professors, she said, in order to thank her for changing her life. The problem was that she wasn't exactly sure what this professor looked like. It had been an online course. She told me her professor's name and discipline, but ours is a large university. I couldn't help spot the faculty member.

I asked her more questions about her studies and future plans. She'd flown in from her snowy Midwestern state to walk at commencement. The online degree she'd just earned was her second bachelor's. Her first had been in an on-campus experience, but this online degree, she said, meant much more. That's because this time around, she'd studied what she was passionate about, instead of what others had wanted her to. I teach courses on Jane Austen, so her story struck me as like the heroine Anne Elliot's in *Persuasion*. This student "at seven-and-twenty, thought very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen." She stood there, before me, in her second, stunning academic bloom.

Earning her degree hadn't been easier the second time, she said. Her online degree was actually far more challenging than her on-the-ground college experience had been. She loved that and was weighing pursuing a graduate degree. I emerged from our conversation convinced that she would go on to do great things — and I told her so. I realized that, in that moment, I must do my best to stand in for her wished-for online professor.

It was only later that I realized how she, too, had served as a stand-in for me. I wished I could have looked all of my online students in the eye and congratulated them in person, shaking their hands and thanking them for their insights, energy, and enthusiasm. I would have told them about the great things I believed they were going to go on to do. I felt the loss of that in-person exchange.

I do not, by any means, advocate for online education as a utopian pedagogical space. Indeed, events like graduation ceremonies convince me that online teaching can never supplant in-person instruction.

Even so, there was a pleasure in talking to someone else's online student. It made me imagine the enterprise we're engaged in as large and containing multitudes. Many of my online students — the majority of them hard-working women with very complicated lives — started out in situations like my mother's and my aunt's. The degrees that many of our online students are earning today would have gone unearned a generation ago.

Faculty know better than any other professional group that every reliable indicator demonstrates how a more-educated populace is to the benefit of us all. For that reason alone, online students do not deserve even a smidgen of snobbery, skepticism, or scorn. Online students deserve — like all of our students — unfailing encouragement, deep admiration, and the best instruction we have to offer. Although all signs point to my not needing to request online teaching next year, if I have the chance, I'll choose to do it again.

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