

# Teaching Style in the Online Classroom

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## INTRODUCTION

As with the long line of learning technologies that preceded it, the integration of online classrooms has progressed beyond the experimental stage and entered the mainstream at many colleges and universities. Today, more than three-fourths (76.6%) of campuses offer online course registration, compared to 70.9% in 2002, half in 2001, and a fifth (20.9%) in 1998 (Campus Computing Project Survey, 2003). It should be noted that the larger the institution, the greater the percentage offering distance education courses, with 87% of institutions with over 10,000 students offered distance education in 1997-1998 (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In addition to classes offered entirely online, it is projected that 50% of all college courses will be hybrids (i.e., include both online and classroom elements) within a decade (Arnone, 2002). Many proponents of online learning see hybrid or blended learning as a way to correct mistakes of the past and to create a new and better form of active learning (Gold, 2001; McDonald & Postle, 1999).

Despite this general sense of optimism, little research has been done that examines the conditions necessary to promote successful online learning (Quitadamo & Brown, 2001; Toki & Caukill, 2003). Much of the research conducted comparatively studies distance and traditional methods of education (Diaz & Bontenbal, 2001; Hall, 1999; Russell, 1999). Results from much of this research, however, seem to indicate that the technology, while a catalyst for major change, is itself not nearly as important as other factors, one of which is the role of the instructor (Berge, 1996; Glassman & Barbour, 2004; LaMonica, 2001; Masie, 2000, 2003; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Many experts suggest that the key to radical change, and ultimately the true success of online learning, will not result from advances in technology, but rather changes within the instructor and with the instruction (Barker & Baker, 1995; Berge,

1995; Girrod & Cavanaugh, 2001; Hicks, Reid & George, 1999; Johnston, 1998; Matuga, 2001; Morse & Truman, 1996; Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Despite current trends toward an increased emphasis on the use of online technology-based learning environments, surveys of faculty computer usage indicate that there are wide variations in the levels of receptivity and involvement to their use. Jaffee (1998) estimated that only a relatively small percentage, 20-30%, of the faculty population use new instructional technologies such as asynchronous learning networks. Many faculty continue to view teaching in the virtual environment, without a classroom, as an unattractive alternative. To many, the classroom has taken on the status of a sacred institution. It has historically centralized all the power, authority, and control into the hands of the instructor and, in doing so, has heavily shaped and reinforced their identity as a teacher. Teaching, for these educators, in the virtual environment is incongruous with their basic understanding of the essential nature of teaching (Arnone, 2002; Jaffee, 1998; McFadden, Marsh & Price, 1999; Schifter, 2000). Why do some instructors quickly and easily embrace changes enabled by advances in technology while others do not?

Through a review of literature, this paper explores whether an instructor's personality type and teaching style can be used to help predict those who will be more apt to easily and successfully make this transition and/or whether it can be used to suggest ways to ease the transition for instructors faced with the need to do so. The research approach used will first examine the demographic profiles of those instructors who are predisposed to being innovative, and review the changing role of the instructor occasioned by the transition to the online environment. Key principles by which effectiveness of teaching in higher education can be judged are used as the basis upon which to examine if any particular teaching style(s) appears more suited than the others to the online environment.

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE ONLINE INSTRUCTOR

According to the National Education Association survey (2000) of its members, distance instructors have a similar demographic profile to those that teach strictly in the in-person classroom. After all, many of these instructors also spend much of their time in the traditional classroom. According to the survey, the majority is full-time, tenured faculty, split evenly between full professors and lecturers/adjuncts, and represents a cross section of all academic disciplines. Areas in which they differ somewhat is that distance learning faculty are more likely to teach at a community college, and they are slightly less likely to be over the age of 51 (National Education Association, 2000). This is contrary to common perceptions of the typical online educator being a young teacher; the majority are seasoned, senior educators with extensive experience in their field (Harasim, 2000).

## DIFFUSION OF INNOVATION

Perhaps the most accurate way of differentiating the profile of the online instructor from his/her traditional peer is to recognize that individuals who are predisposed to being innovative will, in all probability, adopt an innovation earlier than those who are less predisposed (EFILWC, 2004; Fuller, Norby, Pearce & Strand, 2000; Surry, 1997). Following a pattern for the diffusion of innovation defined by Rogers (1995), at one extreme are the “innovators” who make up no more than 3% of the population. These pioneers, intrigued by new developments in technology, take the risks to adopt an innovation very early in the diffusion process. At the other extreme are the “laggards” who have absolutely no interest in using new instructional technologies and resist change until late in the process, if ever. Between these two extremes are the “early adopters,” “early majority,” and the “late majority,” with the widest chasm in the overall distribution occurring in the transition from the early adopters to the early majority. The early adopters, who make up about 10% of the population, combine their interest in and competence with technology with the desire to incorporate it into their teaching repertoire. The early majority, who comprise approximately 35% of the population, combined with the late

majority, who comprise another 35%, represent the majority of all faculty members (Jaffee, 1998).

The online instructor’s profile most likely fits that of the early adopter—a largely self-sufficient, visionary, horizontally networked individual (e.g., has a high proportion of interdisciplinary and cross-functional links in his or her personal network) who favors revolutionary change, is visionary, and possesses a strong technology focus (Geoghegan, 1995).

## CHANGING ROLE OF THE INSTRUCTOR

The profile listed above is a snapshot of an individual who is perhaps most likely to voluntarily make the transition to the online environment. This profile, however, does not necessarily reflect the individual who will achieve the most success online. The tendency of many instructors who are making the transition to the online environment is to simply transfer their experiences and methodologies, often untouched, into the online environment. They appear to be lingering under the impression that the same conceptual framework, teaching styles, and approaches used in their traditional face-to-face classes will also work in their online classroom (Diaz & Bontenbal, 2001; Gold, 2001; Johnston, 1998; McDonald & Postle, 1999; McFadden et al., 1999; Quitadamo & Brown, 2001; Rossman, 1999).

Although technology-driven concerns must remain secondary to well-designed learning goals and objectives for effective learning to take place (Berge, 1995), online learning technology, especially asynchronous, changes the teaching process and the role of the faculty. In general, four categories of role functions tend to emerge as the more common encapsulation of the roles of the online instructor (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001; Berge, 1995; Coppola, Hiltz & Rotter, 2001; Gold, 2001; Mason, 1991; Paulsen, 1995; Rossman, 1999). These can be categorized as follows:

- **Pedagogical (intellectual; task):** Certainly, some of the most important roles of online instructors revolve around their duties as an educational facilitator. The instructor uses questions and probes for student responses that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles, and skills.
- **Social:** Creating a friendly, social environment in which learning is promoted is also essential

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