

## Chapter 12

# Turbulence and Transformation: One Professor's Journey into Online Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*The chapter uses kayaking as a metaphor for describing the lessons learned by the author as he worked towards helping future school leaders develop ethical understandings in an online course. The chapter describes basic challenges of teaching online, guiding principles of transformational learning, and defines ethical leadership. The author describes key online learning components, including the role of the instructor as facilitator, using engaging and challenging content, establishing a strong learning community, deep reflection, and practice of learning in the real world. The author also shares specific examples of course structures and assignments and observations and reflections from participants in the course.*

### INTRODUCTION

We live in an age of abundant opportunity. I teach in the mountains of Western North Carolina, amidst the Appalachians and the Smoky Mountains, where numerous rivers flow. They alternatively ease their way across valley floors, twist thrillingly around mountain spurs, and cascade turbulently down rocky slopes. This is kayak territory. The kayak and the rivers that carry it have become the metaphor for my teaching and learning. As a newcomer to the professoriate and to online education, I have

journeyed like the kayaker on a river of teaching opportunity, alternatively crashing, hoping, and exalting in the thrill of the ride.

Like the kayaker in rough water, I have been turned upside down by “flaming” discussion posts or by my own course mismanagement; I have shot the rapids of raging discussion threads, not knowing where things would wind up but hoping that they would smooth out in the end; and, much more frequently, I have exalted in the growth of course participants, including myself. This chapter describes my journey as an online instructor in personal terms. The chapter also identifies salient features of this river of learning.

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Western Carolina University is a regional comprehensive university located in an isolated western North Carolina. The university is the primary service provider for preparing school leaders for 17 rural counties. With the move to an online principal licensure program in 2005, the institution's base of service has expanded to nearly every county in the state. Over 200 students come from different backgrounds and with different experiences seeking licensure to become school principals. They are committed to "making a difference" in their schools. They come from different teaching environments, rural, suburban, and urban. Course participants have varying ethnicities, beliefs, and experiences as teachers and school leaders.

This chapter shares my search to create a transformational experience in an online course that leads course participants to take action to improve their schools. The course, EDL 620, was originally designed as an ethics and law course for aspiring school administrators. I purposefully redesigned the course when I took it over. By using Jerry Starratt's (2004) book *Ethical Leadership*, I hoped to change participants' concepts of ethical leadership by weaving understanding and experience into action on issues of social justice. The goal of facilitating personal transformation in sixteen weeks in an online course has forced me to explore a variety of approaches and to develop an emphasis on reflective practice and risk taking. Learning to build a course that served the needs of the learners has been like learning to navigate the rapids during a rainstorm.

This chapter is designed for those who are new to online teaching and for those who wish to transform both their own teaching and the learning of people served in their courses. The chapter explores the nexus of online teaching, principles of personal transformation, the artistry of teaching and the topic of ethics. I will take readers through an analysis of key elements of EDL 620, a course in Western Carolina University's online Masters of School Administration program. It is not my

intent to propose a single best model. Instead, I hope to stimulate reflection and curiosity and to the reader's perspective by sharing what has worked for me.

### **Beginnings**

The majority of this paper focuses on the challenges, techniques, and lessons related to teaching ethics in an online environment. However, four topics need to be introduced and summarized in preparation: the transition from face-to-face (f-t-f) to online teaching, foundational ideas about transformational learning, the aesthetics of the teacher as facilitator, and the definition of ethical leadership. An understanding of the basic issues or features in these areas will assist in understanding why certain practices have worked.

In my first attempt at online teaching, I established mandatory quotas for posting on each discussion board and failed to include any small group interaction. All of us in the course quickly became overwhelmed with hundreds of messages, wildly divergent discussions and irrelevant or meaningless posts. Unfortunately, I am not alone in making such a mistake. The transition from f-t-f to online teaching is a daunting one for several reasons. As faculty learn about a new instructional delivery system, often with insufficient training, they need to redesign course materials, and figure out changes in pedagogy simultaneously (Ray, 2009).

Several studies discuss the importance of training prior to using online delivery systems, however the issue goes deeper. Many faculty begin online teaching attempting to replicate or compensate for traditional f-t-f pedagogies (Dolloph, 2007; St. Clair, D., 2009; Zemsky & Massey, 2004). The attempt to merely duplicate f-t-f experiences is unfortunate as the online world offers a unique environment with its own inherent strengths and weaknesses. While the transition to online teaching can be grueling, the unique ability to shepherd participants on individual journeys is rewarding.

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