

Chapter 4

Feeling Like a First Year Teacher: Toward Becoming a Successful Online Instructor

Lloyd P. Rieber
University of Georgia, USA

Gregory M. Francom
University of Georgia, USA

Lucas John Jensen
University of Georgia, USA

ABSTRACT

An ever increasing number of college instructors are finding themselves asked or required to teach online. While some embrace this opportunity, others are making this transition with some reluctance. The move from face-to-face to online teaching can be difficult, and unprepared instructors may become discouraged or, even worse, may allow mediocrity to creep into their teaching. In this chapter, a different perspective is offered to instructors who are experienced, but new to online learning to help them make the adjustment—imagining once again themselves as first year teachers. Doing so should help them to revisit the enthusiasm, daring, exhilaration, and yes, even terror that they experienced when they first began teaching. Three fundamental principles are offered to guide college teachers in their earliest online teaching experiences. Examples are provided to show how one instructor found innovative ways to use online technology that were consistent with his teaching style.

INTRODUCTION

Learning to teach well is difficult, yet very rewarding. Becoming a good teacher requires years of

hard work combined with a never ending commitment to improvement. However, few things compare to the feeling of pride and satisfaction in knowing that one's students have tackled a difficult concept, principle, or skill. New teach-

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ers encounter many well-documented difficulties in their first few years of teaching (Fry, 2007; Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Martin, Andrews, & Gilbert, 2009). These difficulties can stem from a variety of sources, including inadequate resources, unclear expectations, personal isolation, difficult work, role conflict, and reality shock (Gordon & Maxey, 2000). The transition toward becoming a new online teacher may also result in some of the same difficult experiences. For instance, new online teachers may find themselves without needed digital resources to effectively teach online. They may not know where to find useful learning activities that would be the equivalent to activities done face-to-face. Expectations for online teaching may be different than those in face-to-face classes. A new online teacher may find that the work required to teach a particular online course is more than that required to teach the face-to-face equivalent (Papastergiou, 2006). The role of the teacher might also change, leading to feelings of personal isolation and role conflict in which the teacher does not know what type of person he or she should be while teaching online. Discouragement and frustration can arise when the realities of online teaching interfere with personal teaching preferences. Activities that new online teachers desire to do may not be possible because of the limitations of online teaching tools.

Many experienced college faculty who have achieved the reputation of being a good teacher are now faced with the task of moving their teaching to online environments, and some find themselves very unprepared. The purpose of this chapter is to tell the story of one faculty's transition from face-to-face teacher to online teacher with the hope that it will give other experienced college instructors a useful case with which to compare as they make similar transitions.

A note about how this chapter is written. It is presented largely as a first person account by the lead author – Lloyd Rieber. The other two authors – Greg Francom and Lucas Jensen, doctoral candidates at the University of Georgia

– likewise share their first-person experiences of *being students* in online learning environments. All three authors also worked together to extend and integrate these very personal accounts into the broader emerging literature in online learning and education.

BACKGROUND

Before beginning my career in a tenure-track higher education faculty position, I (Rieber) was a public school teacher for five years, with most of that time spent teaching fifth grade. I've often joked over the years that I hoped my students from my first year of teaching received an education somewhere down the line because the only person who probably learned anything that year was me. It was an amazing year, and I never worked harder or learned as much in so short a time. But, with a lot of help and support from my principal and several experienced teachers at the school – combined with a mixture of perseverance, courage, daring, humility, and terror – I slowly found my way. Of course, I also had some skill, knowledge, and a beginning teaching philosophy (however fragile) gained from my teacher education program at the University of Pittsburgh. Over the course of the next five years I think I became a good teacher. Those five years were an incredibly formative time for me as a professional educator, one that has informed and guided me and my university research in the 25 years since I left the public school classroom.

I have thought a lot about my first year of teaching as I have made the transition to teaching online. I earned a reputation of being a good college teacher, yet I knew I was entering into instructional territory for which my past experience had not fully prepared me. There was the same excitement, enthusiasm, and fear that I had when I first started teaching fifth grade. Similarly, I also had the advantage of having colleagues – some in academia and some not – who had been teaching

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