# Chapter 1
# The Journey from Dissenter to Advocate:
## Insights Gained while Teaching Online

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter details the experiences of a university professor whose perspectives shifted from one of initial dissent to eventual advocacy for online learning as a delivery mode for her reading/literacy courses. Spanning eight years, her distance education teaching practices were shaped by her personal ventures as an online student, the outcomes gained by enhancing the social presence of her online courses, collaboration with colleagues, and systematic examination of her online teaching practice relative to its rigor, quality, and effectiveness within a teacher preparation program. Insights gained while teaching online conclude with recommendations for faculty members, institutions, systems, and organizations with vested interest in the future of teacher education.*

## INTRODUCTION

While teaching teacher education courses during the past 12 years at two different universities, the impact of technology on my own teaching and learning has gained a far greater reach than I ever imagined. As a fixed-term instructor at my alma mater, I taught a full load of face-to-face courses for two years after earning my doctorate at a teacher preparation institution where online instruction was non-existent and personal interaction with students was greatly valued. Spending time as both a graduate student and an instructor/supervisor of preservice teachers in this environment left an

imprint on me that has not faded. It was for this reason, which I never considered, nor imagined, teaching students via any mode other than face-to-face as I accepted a tenure-track teaching position at an institution almost twice the size of my alma mater. While I was initially impressed with the access to and support for technology in my new setting, I was unaware as I penned my name on my contract of its long-standing reputation for distance education delivery within rural areas of the state and with the military across the globe. My experience with technology integration and distance education would encounter a shift into fast forward and lead me through a transformation from dissenter to advocate of teaching and learning online.

In the following chapter, the details of this personal journey will unfold in terms of examining the literature related to the evolution of online instruction in higher education settings. This literature frames a plea to develop more numerous and effective online course offerings issued in 2005 by our incoming university system President, Erskine Bowles (Durham, 2005). He discussed the inevitable growth of online learning in higher education and challenged our faculty members to realize that if we did not offer such courses, for-profit institutions would. He punctuated his message by saying that surely *we* could do this better than *they*. His call, as well as my own experiences as a student, as an instructor, and as a volunteer in surrounding public schools, impacted me deeply and fueled my thirst for challenging myself as a technology learner, an academic, and an online instructor. Last, I offer some reflections and recommendations based on what I have learned during this journey and suggest future possibilities for how online teaching and learning can become more rigorous and rewarding for teacher educators and their students.

## ONLINE LEARNING: FACTS, FIGURES, CHALLENGES

The literature related to online distance education has a somewhat brief history since 1981 when online courses were first offered to adult education students through the Electronic Information Exchange System (EIES) (Harasim, 2006). Developed and managed with funding from the National Science Foundation at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, EIES was originally created for use in scientific research communities. Specialized communication systems that evolved within EIES later led to the initial development of courses delivered through university-based computer networks to undergraduates at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. By 1985, the first graduate courses offered in a similar manner premiered at the University of Toronto and New York's New School of Social Research which led to degree programs at these same institutions one year later and at the University of Phoenix in 1989 (Hiltz, Turoff, & Harasim, 2007).

The launch of the Internet in 1989 paired with the advent of the World Wide Web in 1992 led to increased opportunities and global access for learners to further develop their understandings online. Few settings have been impacted more dramatically by this increase than American higher education (Moller, Foshay, & Huett, 2008). Enrollment in online classes at the college and university level has skyrocketed since the Internet's debut and has most recently been further boosted by competition among for-profit, private, and public institutions. Evidence from the Sloan-C 2010 report, *Class Differences: Online Education in the United States* (Allen & Seaman, 2010), substantiates this significant and ongoing growth in online instruction since its early beginnings, designated by courses where at least 80 percent of content is delivered online.

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