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# How Online Teaching Made Me a Better Instructor on Campus

Michael Lohle Ph.D.

*University of Bridgeport*, [mlohle@bridgeport.edu](mailto:mlohle@bridgeport.edu)

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## INTRODUCTION

Stes, Min-Liliveld, Gijbels and Van Pegem (2009) defined instructional design as the facilitation of course design to enhance student learning. Their literature review compliments another by Kelebritchi, Lipshuetz and Santiago (2017) that asserted communicating course policies and objectives at the outset, implementing clear course modules, enhancing learning with active dialog that mixes video, audio and engaging content and instructors who perceive their role as facilitators are all as important as an institution's will to mount an effective online program. They also confirmed direct translations of on campus course content into online courses tends to be ineffective.

Bierne and Romanoski (2018) concluded these observations reinforce the need for the 13,000 instructional designers employed in the United States and acknowledged mystery surrounds what they do. They confirmed instructional designers design, train, manage and provide support for online course development and the top challenge cited by instructional designers is the struggle to collaborate with faculty. The consultancy Intentional Futures (2016) published an analysis that discussed the role by referencing the experiences of three instructional design practitioners at various stages of their careers and reconfirmed Bierne and Romanovski's conclusions. Intentional Futures also observed faculty who are comfortable teaching face-to-face may have a difficult time adjusting to the online format and are often not interested in changing their style of teaching. They recommended contacting instructional designers early and often when designing an online course.

The U.S. Department of Education published an analysis of online course delivery that confirmed two things. First, comparisons of spending and cost savings accrued for states and municipalities implementing online courses with comparable face-to-face instruction were difficult due to a lack of common definitions upon which to base these comparisons. Second, while strides have been made to bolster available research into the design, development and delivery of online courses such research is still in its infancy (Bakia, Shear, Toyama, & Lasseter, 2012).

Recognizing the available body of research about effective online instructional design and the role of instructional designers is evolving, the reality that faculty often find it difficult to adjust to the online format and the fact that a one-to-one translation from campus based course material to the online format is problematic, this paper asks the research question: *Can the application of online instructional design techniques in face-to-face classes empower on campus instructors to be more effective? If so, how?*

This analysis applies the narrative qualitative approach (Creswell, 2007) to discuss the author's lived experience in applying online instructional design techniques in on campus courses. Conclusions and recommendations for future research are also provided.

## FINDINGS

After twenty-six years in business the author was hired as a full time faculty member at a small college in the northeastern United States. With no previous academic teaching and instructional design experience he was asked to design an online project management course. Leadership's directive was to replicate the on campus experience online. He was introduced to the instructional designer assigned to this project and embraced this designer's advice. The relationship proved effective as the author and his instructional design partner won an award for this course's design.

Later the author was assigned the translation of complex, campus based courses into the online format. Leveraging his systems background, he invested more than a month documenting each course in detail and provided a special "instructor's page" on his school's learning management system (LMS) course "shell" with spreadsheets that guided online instructors through each course. He realized like a well-designed information system, a good online course shell stands on its own. He also learned when designing online courses it is helpful to think everything through and convey the course policies clearly via easy-to-understand modules, a concept reinforced in the literature. Throughout this time he worked closely with instructional designers and their advice consistently proved helpful, so much so that he also consulted with them on campus based course designs.

Over time the author learned what worked and what did not for online courses. For example, students appreciate a streamlined, modular structure in their course designs. Also, online instructors who assumed responsibility for delivering his courses wanted to project their own identity so he introduced current events and instructor's choice assignments to facilitate this. Then he had an epiphany. His on campus courses would benefit from the instructional design techniques he applied online. He reengineered all of his on campus courses in the online style with active support and guidance from his instructional design peers.

### ***Summary of Improvements***

Now, each LMS course shell walks students through the learning activities. Writing the syllabus is a three step process:

*Step 1:* Write the syllabus' front matter introductory material

*Step 2:* Develop LMS modules for each course session

*Step 3:* Transcribe those LMS modules to the syllabus.

Quizzes leverage reusable test banks and the LMS' built-in randomization features disrupt cheating while automated rubrics remove grading confusion. Online discussions enable a "flipped classroom" where lecture videos free class time for team exercises and shy students who were uncomfortable with traditional classroom engagement find their voice (The University of Texas at Austin, 2018).

With his first online course the author recorded .MP3 audio lectures. Then he discovered video. This proved controversial as leadership thought these recorded lectures confused students when other instructors delivered the online courses he designed. On the contrary, several students later

confirmed they took the author's on campus courses after seeing his videos. The author then recorded videos for every course he was responsible for and they proved helpful. For instance, one semester he contracted laryngitis and played the lecture video during class. Likewise, having lecture videos empowered him to attend conferences without wasting student and faculty time with substitutions. Videos also enhanced student accountability because they provided details they could refer to at their own pace. Finally, students found his personalized video assignment feedback both engaging and helpful. This is discussed further in the following sections.

### ***The Student Experience***

Applying online instructional design techniques to on campus courses enhances the student experience by providing clarity and structure via clear requirements, expectations and posted schedules. Students perceive instructors who have thought about, planned for and worked through all aspects of their courses as well prepared and authoritative. Meanwhile, videos empower students to review material at their own pace, an especially helpful benefit for students for whom English is not their first language. Providing every support the student requires including samples, checklists and in class examples reinforces the impression the instructor is not the students' lecturer, he or she is their coach, providing everything they need to succeed. Finally, students enjoy video assignment feedback and it fosters strong bonds with the instructor that reinforce the class' team esprit.

Students also enjoy using video conferencing tools. Once the author's University was closed during a snowstorm so he decided to convene an online video conference instead and was gratified his entire class attended. Since then he holds video conferences whenever school is closed due to storms and also conducts student team presentations via video conferences to approximate the experience of communicating on virtual teams.

### ***The Instructor Experience***

Applying online instructional design techniques provides productivity for the instructor. With each new course proven modules and methods can be reused or "tweaked," rebuilding is not required. Moreover, employing the LMS' automated grading saves time and alleviates human error and confusion. Considering these positives it is helpful to debunk several myths faculty has shared with the author.

#### ***Myth: No "Fudge Factor"***

Faculty often think an LMS removes their ability to apply a "fudge factor" for interpretation in grading. Such "fudge factors" can be built into LMS course designs, they just need to be considered during the design phase.

#### ***Myth: A Well-Designed Course Shell Removes Flexibility***

A well-designed LMS course shell enhances flexibility because instructors can rest assured their course's core design is effective. This frees them to focus on their course delivery and to better respond to class developments.

*Myth: Video Feedback is More Time Consuming than Written Feedback*

Before employing online instructional design techniques the author wrote extensive assignment feedback. After he became accustomed to the intuitive, free flowing, forward momentum of verbal feedback he realized video feedback saves time. Then he learned students did not read all of his written feedback while they eagerly viewed his video feedback in entirety and concluded video feedback is imperative.

*Myth: Faculty Must Look Their Best on Video Recordings*

Students confirm video feedback humanizes their instructors and they appreciate this personal touch. The author assumes a more casual, conversational approach when providing video feedback than he assumes in the classroom. Students emerge feeling they know him and this goodwill carries over to the classroom.

***A Solid Knowledge Base***

Using an LMS to take attendance, track class participation and record class scores and related documentation provides a comprehensive knowledge base for future analysis. When applying online instructional design techniques on campus instructors emerge with useful data. For example, the author used documentation from an online course to conduct a longitudinal study where he devised and tested a grounded theory designed to assist online instructors in managing virtual student team projects (Lohle & Terrell, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018).

**CONCLUSION**

Instructors that apply online instructional design techniques on campus foster enhanced clarity, productivity and student interaction while saving time. Improved instructional design and enhanced student and instructor experiences result with the added benefit of the development of a solid knowledge base. Also, as the research confirms, engaging instructional designers early and often has a strong, positive effect on course design.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Although this narrative cannot be generalized to a larger population, since more research is required to fill gaps in understanding about online instructional design, the role of the instructional designer and the costs and benefits of online courses, a review of one person's lived experience confirming the benefits of applying online instructional design techniques in on campus courses is helpful. The author recommends conducting a grounded theory study focused on the research

question to furnish a theoretical model that provides a framework for further study, understanding and application (Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

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