

Finally I Can Be with my Students 24/7, Individually and In Group: A Survey of Faculty Teaching Online

Athanase Gahungu, Ed.D.
Chicago State University

Mary I. Dereshiwsky, Ph. D.
Northern Arizona University

Eugene Moan, Ed. D.
Northern Arizona University

Abstract

Teaching online is relatively new at Chicago State University (CSU). In this paper, twenty-four instructors who taught web-based, or web-enhanced courses during the spring and fall 2003 semesters CSU were surveyed about issues that they and their students had experienced in online communication. It was found that online learning was quickly developing into an effective mode of instruction. However, faculty and students appeared to have more or less “jumped into” the online classroom without being adequately prepared, and creation of effective, online, learning communities was still a work in progress.

Introduction

The Office of Distance Learning (ODL) at Chicago State University (CSU) was created in 1999 to provide credit and non-credit courses to students in need of "learning from a distance" (<http://www.csu.edu/DistLearn/>). These courses are offered by utilizing four modes of instruction: a) internet-based courses (CSU Online), b) interactive television courses using videoconferencing networks, c) computer-instructed courses, and d) satellite downlinks in partnership with PBS and U.S. Department of Education. The researchers attempted to explore whether or not faculty and students at CSU have mastered online communications during this short history. Specifically, the text-based environment of online communications does not allow for nuances of verbal communication, tone of voice and body language. As a result, the risk of misunderstanding is higher than in the traditional face-to-face instructional environment. Along with this risk comes the challenge of enhancing an open climate among online students and instructors, and maintaining ‘netiquette:’ courteous tone and content of the written message. Therefore, the focus of this study was instructor perceptions regarding issues of civility in the online instructional communication environment: challenges as well as successes with the various modalities (email, course room posting, and chat room, among others). Cases of disagreement about such perceptions between undergraduate and graduate faculty were noted.

Review of Related Literature

Online instruction has substantially effected changes both in the way teachers teach and in the way students learn. Of special importance is the impact online instruction has had on the role of the instructor, from authority figure to facilitator (Ryan, Carlton & Ali, 2004). In turn, this role of facilitator has altered, positively and negatively, communication processes between teachers and students. According to Ryan, Carlton and Ali (2004), communications processes have not only changed, but gained depth, as they are “based on well thought out responses” (p. 80), rather than spontaneous comments on which traditional teaching relies. Asynchronous communication is a prevalent privileged means of communicating feedback between or among students and with teachers, even in classes using chat room conversations (Curtis, 2004).

One of the challenges that instructors must face is how to deal with the somewhat uncontrollable climate that the lack of face-to-face contact allows (Laird, 2003). The asynchronous, cyberspace, participation could create an illusion of anonymity, after the first few weeks of calculated, polite, exchanges. Often “private conversations fuse with academic discussion” (Laird, p. 44). Under that illusion of anonymity, academic exchanges may become tainted with unanticipated “racist, sexist, and otherwise offensive comments” (p. 44). Overall, however, online teaching can help create, through group e-mail or listserv, a greater sense of community than traditional instruction does (Monroe, 2003). The instructor has the latitude of providing feedback to students privately or publicly. Similarly, students can choose to communicate with the teacher and the rest of the class in the same manner, and as often as they desire.

Nonetheless, the success of online instruction will be achieved when instructors know how to make students aware of time requirements, explain assignments expectations clearly, and respond to students’ e-mail on a daily basis (Doutrich, Hoeskel, Wykoff & Thiele, 2005). Only then will a learning community be created. However, have universities and colleges prepared instructors for faculty’s added responsibility of monitoring students at a distance as opposed to the traditional, face-to-face format? In their study of factors related to instructors’ willingness to participate in distance education, Lee and Busch (2005) concluded that “universities interested in enlisting more faculty members in Distance Education instruction should provide adequate training opportunities” (p. 114).

One of the remaining questions in creating learning communities seems to be whether communication at a distance can effectively replace the social interaction that happens in a traditional, face-to-face, classroom. Researchers such as Yelon (2006) discuss whether or not online teaching is better than traditional, face-to-face, teaching. Others such as McInnerney and Roberts (2004) argue that online teachers could still build learning communities if they included some form of synchronous communication in their lessons through forums such as chat-rooms. Whether one chooses to engage in the debate or not may have little impact on policy makers who seem to have already been won by the appeal of online learning. The push may come from high schools, as states such as Michigan, are setting the tone by approving a new high school graduation requirement that would make all students take at least one online course (Carnevale, 2006). If the new requirement is implemented, and when other states follow suite, one

should wonder how universities will be adequately prepared to capitalize on the online communication and learning skills students bring from their homes and high schools.

Methods and Procedures

During the spring and fall 2003 semesters, all faculty members at Chicago State University (CSU) who taught web-based and web-enhanced, asynchronous, courses were electronically sent a questionnaire about issues that they and their students had experienced in online communication. The list was obtained directly from CSU's Office of Distance Learning (ODL). According to the Office, there were 58 such faculty members in Spring and/or Fall 2003.

First, the questionnaire asked faculty members to describe their experience in online teaching, specifically: a) the level of students (undergraduate, graduate, or both) they taught, b) the number of semesters they had taught online, c) the number of courses they had taught online, and d) the tools they used to communicate with students. The second set of questions dealt with the faculty members' attitudes (Strongly Agree, Moderately Agree, Moderately Disagree, Disagree) and behaviors (Always, Frequently, Sometimes, Never) in online communication. Finally, respondents were asked to elaborate, in an unstructured format, on areas in which their online teaching needed improvement, as well as on areas where they did well.

The accompanying e-mail cover note provided assurances of confidentiality and anonymity as per Chicago State University's Institutional Review Board guidelines for research with human subjects. The recipients were asked to word-process their survey responses directly onto the file and to return them to the researchers as an e-mail file attachment. A follow-up e-mailing was conducted after two weeks with those study subjects who had not yet returned the completed survey.

Initially, 16 faculty members, or 28% of the available population returned the questionnaire. Nine others returned the questionnaire at the second mailing, thus totaling 25 study subjects, or 43% of faculty members that the Office of Distance Learning had identified. One of the 25 did not provide information related to courses s/he taught online, or the number of semesters s/he had taught. Therefore, only the responses of 24 participants were included in this report. Table 1 displays the number of semesters that 24 respondents had taught online. The largest number of respondents ($n = 6$) had only taught online one semester.

Finally, a year and half later, three of the faculty members who returned questionnaire were asked to elaborate on their responses by telephone. Did the responses they gave still hold true? Their confirmation of initial responses or added nuances were included in the discussion section.

Table 1: Total Number of Semesters Faculty Have Taught Web-Based or Blackboard-Enhanced Courses

# Semesters	# Faculty
12 semesters	1
7 semesters	3
5 semesters	1
4 semesters	3
3 semesters	5
2 semesters	5
1 semester	6

The number of web-based or Blackboard-enhanced courses taught by each of the 24 respondents ranged from one to five (Table 2). The majority of respondents ($n = 8$) had only taught one course.

Table 2: Number of Different Web-Based or Blackboard-enhanced Courses Taught

# Courses Taught	# Faculty
5 courses	1
4 courses	4
3 courses	4
2 courses	7
1 course	8

Table 3 represents the breakdown of online faculty by academic levels taught. Four respondents were graduate-level faculty members; 10 were undergraduate faculty; and 10 were both graduate and undergraduate faculty.

Table 3: Online Students by Degree Level

Level Taught	# Faculty
Graduate	4
Undergraduate	10
Both	10

Tools that respondents reported using in communicating with students were summarized in Table 4. All respondents used e-mail to communicate with students. The use of tools such as electronic bulletin boards, group features on the Blackboard, or chat rooms was reported in rather insignificant frequencies.

Table 4: Tools that Faculty and Students Use to Communicate

Tool	Total Faculty	Undergr. Faculty	Graduate Faculty	Both
E-mail between individual student and instructor	24	10	4	10
E-mail among students	15	6	3	6
Virtual Conference Center (VCC)	9	3	2	4
Discussion Board	8	4	-	4
Class-wide listserv	5	3	1	-
Chat room	3	2	-	1
Blackboard Digital Drop Box	2	2	-	-
Subscriptions to existing Internet listserv(s)	1	1	-	-
Webboards	1	-	-	1
Group Features on Blackboard	1	1	-	-
Instructor's Website	1	1	-	-
Examinations	1	1	-	-
Geocities Course Webpage with Blackboard Features	1	1	-	-
Fax	1	-	-	1
Electronic Bulletin Board	1	-	-	1

Summary descriptive statistics were computed for each demographic item and all fixed-choice survey items. These statistics consisted of the total number of subjects who selected each response choice per survey item. In addition, the total number of “don’t know” values was tallied for each survey item.

Findings and Results

Table 5 displays the absolute response frequencies for faculty “Attitudes” contained in the “Attitudes and Behaviors in Online Communication” section of the survey. Response frequencies were recorded by grade level that faculty members taught: undergraduate (U), graduate (G), and both levels (B). The most frequently selected response category is starred for each item and sub-group of respondents.

Table 5: Attitudes in Online Communication: Absolute Response Frequencies per Survey Item and Grade Level Taught

Item #	Item Topic	SD			MD			MA			SA		
		U	G	B	U	G	B	U	G	B	U	G	B
1	More Challenging to Express Emotions Online	1	1	1	3	-	1	6*	1	8*	-	2	-
2	Easier to Misinterpret Written Communication Online	4	1	2	4	1	3	2	-	2	-	2	3
3	Instructor Felt Adequately Prepared for Online Classroom Communication	-	2	-	2	-	3	3	1	5	5	1	1
4	Standards of Communication Should Be Identical Regardless of Classroom Format	2	-	2	-	3*	-	3	-	4	5	1	4
5	New Online Students Need Help with Communication	3	-	-	2	-	2	5	3*	3	1	-	4
12	Easier for Shy Students to Withdraw Online	3	-	1	5	2	7*	2	2	1	-	-	1
13	Easier to Misinterpret Directions Online	2	-	2	6*	2	2	2	1	4	-	-	2
14	Harder to Express Enthusiasm Online	4	1	2	2	-	3	5	1	4	-	1	1
15	Students Are Comfortable Sharing Private Communication with Online Instructor	1	1	-	1	-	1	6*	3*	5	2	-	2
17	Lack of Visual Cues Makes It Harder to “Read” One’s Online Students	2	-	-	4	2	-	3	2	6*	1	-	2
18	More Tempting to Respond with Anger to Online Messages	6*	1	1	2	-	4	2	3*	4	-	-	1
19	Too Inhibiting to Express Candid Emotions Online	6*	3*	3	4	1	4	-	-	3	-	-	-
20	Online Classroom Not an Adequate Substitute for Face-to-Face Communication in Some Subject Areas	2	-	1	1	-	1	3	2	3	4	2	6*

Note: U = 10 Undergraduate faculty; G = 4 Graduate faculty; B = Faculty who teach at both the Graduate and Undergraduate level.

For instance, six out of the 10 faculty members who taught at both the graduate and undergraduate levels “strongly agree” that “online classrooms may not be an adequate substitute for face-to-face communication in some subject areas” (item #20). The majority of undergraduate faculty members (six out of 10) and the majority of graduate faculty members (three out of four) “strongly disagreed” that it would be “too inhibiting to express candid emotions online” (item #19).

Likewise, undergraduate faculty members “strongly disagreed” that it may be “more tempting to respond with anger to online messages” (item #18). Except for these three items where respondents clearly took extreme positions (“strongly agree” or “strongly disagree”), no clear preference was expressed for items #1 through #17. Respondents stayed on the safe side of issues by checking the “mildly disagree” or “mildly agree” options. For instance, the largest number of undergraduate faculty members (six out of 10) and faculty members who were both undergraduate and graduate (eight out of 10) “mildly agreed” that it was “more challenging to express emotions online” (item #1), and that “students are comfortable sharing private communication with online instructor” (item #15).

Taken together, the faculty members who answered the survey questions at CSU had the following perceptions of online teaching:

- It is more challenging to express emotions online than it is in other formats;
- It is not easier to misinterpret written communication online;
- Instructors felt adequately prepared for online classroom communication;
- Except for graduate faculty members, respondents thought that standards of communication should be identical regardless of the classroom format;
- New online students need help with communication;
- It is not easier for shy students to withdraw online than it is in other formats;
- Students are comfortable sharing private communication with online instructor;
- It is not easier to misinterpret directions online;
- Lack of visual cues makes it harder to “read” one’s online students;
- It is not more tempting to respond with anger to online messages than it is in other formats;
- It is not too inhibiting to express candid emotions online; and
- Online classroom is not an adequate substitute for face-to-face communication in some subject areas.

Table 6 represents the absolute response frequency for “Behaviors” that respondents observed in their online students. The most frequently selected response category is starred for each item and sub-group as in Table 5. The group of graduate faculty members seemed to be aware that students “have never typed in all caps” (item #6). The same faculty members never had to “stop flame wars among students” (item #10). Undergraduate faculty members, on their side, thought that their students “frequently” focused on issues in expressing disagreement (item #7). However, many faculty members conceded that students “seldom” used features such as *emoticons* appropriately (item # 11).

Table 6: Behaviors in Online Communication: Absolute Response Frequencies per Survey Item and Grade Level Taught

Item #	Item Topic	DK			N			S			F			A		
		U	G	B	U	G	B	U	G	B	U	G	B	U	G	B
6	Students Have Typed in All Caps	-	-	-	5	3*	5	4	1	4	1	-	1	-	-	-
7	Students Focus on Issues in Expressing Disagreement	--	3	2	-	-	1	1	-	3	6*	1	2	2	-	2
8	Students Have Deleted Instructor's E-mail Before Reading	6*	3*	5	1	1	2	3	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-
9	Students Have Deleted Other Students' E-mail Before Reading	7*	4*	7*	-	-	1	3	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
10	Instructor Has Had to Stop Flame Wars Among Students	-	-	-	9*	4*	6*	1	-	3	-	-	-	-	-	-
11	Students Use Emoticons Appropriately	2	1	-	1	2	2	6*	1	6*	-	-	-	1	-	2
16	Online Students Miss Face-to-Face Classroom	-	-	-	4	2	1	5	1	6*	1	1	1	-	-	1

Note: U = 10 Undergraduate faculty; G = 4 Graduate faculty; B = Faculty who teach Both at the Graduate and Undergraduate level.

Table 7 represents marked differences in responses provided by graduate and undergraduate faculty members. The numbers of responses per value are significantly different for graduate and undergraduate faculty for Questions 2, 3, 4, and 7 based on chi-square analyses ($p < .05$). First, faculty members were asked to list three things that they and their students did especially well in their online communications. Responses were grouped by key themes and frequencies were tallied. The following are aspects of online teaching in which faculty members thought they did especially well.

Table 7: Marked Differences between Graduate and Undergraduate Faculty, by p Associated with Chi-Square Tests

Question		Undergr	Grad	p
Question 2: Easier to Misinterpret Written Communication Online	SA	0	2	0.04*
	MD	4	1	
Question 3: Instructor Felt Adequately Prepared for Online Classroom Communication	SA	5	1	0.02*
	SD	0	2	
Question 4: Standards of Communication Should Be Identical Regardless of Classroom Format	SA	5	1	0.01*
	MD	0	3	
Question 7: Students Focus on Issues in Expressing Disagreement	F	6	1	0.00*
	DK	0	3	
Question 11: Students Use Emoticons Appropriately	S	6	1	0.13
	N	1	2	
Question 16: Online Students Miss Face-to-Face Classroom	S	5	1	0.50
	N	4	2	
Question 18: More Tempting to Respond with Anger to Online Messages	MA	2	3	0.52
	SD	6	1	

Things Students and Faculty Do Especially Well in Online Communication

Online teaching made communication easier: At least 10 faculty members thought that their communication with students was better in online teaching than it was in other formats. In their own words, respondents wrote that, thanks to online teaching,

- most students are capable of using the communications skills offered by programs such as Blackboard, the chat, the Discussion Board and E-mail;
- (they) communicate via discussion board, and the digital dropbox;
- (they) communicate often;
- (they) get to the point of the communication quickly. The students seem more apt to contact me via online communications than other communications (e.g., face-to-face, phone call);
- (they) communicate in an easily understood format;
- (students) use attachments to send messages;
- (students) are polite;
- (they) respond to Emails rapidly; and
- (they) use email effectively.

Management of assignments and assessment has been improved: According to nine respondents, faculty members were able to manage students' assignments and other assessments better in online teaching than they would on other teaching formats. In the excerpts, below, respondents thought that, thanks to online teaching, they were able to:

- communicate grade and test information;
- keep track of everyone's comments;
- document requirements for the class;
- provide assignments for the next class period;
- let the students know what their grades are;
- clarify exact specifications of assignments;
- submit assignments and give feedback;
- define assignments; and
- resolve any misconceptions about assignments.

The same group of faculty members thought that online teaching had helped their students to submit assignments more efficiently, observe deadline dates, ask many questions regarding assignments, and exchange drafts. Faculty members recognized that, in online teaching, "usually the students are more time efficient—for example, returning messages, handing-in assignments than I am in responding to them."

Online teaching is a team building strategy: Eight respondents thought that online teaching had made it possible for them to build teams out of their classes. According to the respondents, students were able to:

- help each other with schoolwork; share knowledge and information; seep in touch and encourage each other;
- work in small groups;
- append emotion to fact;
- attempt to cooperate and communicate frequently;
- share issues that are relevant to the whole class;
- communicate openly; and
- express emotional support for each other.

In addition, respondents thought that online teaching had helped them become "open and honest in posting and e-mails."

Online teaching has helped improve instruction and learning: As a teaching format, online teaching, according to seven respondents had improved the instructional and learning processes, overall. In the following excerpts, teachers illustrate how online teaching helped to improve teaching and learning. According to the respondents, students were able to:

- openly express new concepts;
- ask for clarification;
- use the Discussion Board effectively;
- ask and respond to questions; and
- discuss relevant personal experiences; and

The respondents also thought that

- Chat rooms gave the students an opportunity for give and take discussions. These can be lively and the students appear to enjoy them; and

- Discussion boards appear to be good ways for students and instructors to interact, but there is not the same sort of involvement you find in the chat rooms.

The online teaching format was also a “good way of testing whether people read the material through their responses,” according to respondents.

Online teaching has allowed for class continuity outside the traditional classroom: Seven faculty members thought that online teaching had helped to extend class activities beyond the confines of the classroom walls. Teachers were able to:

- (organize) group sessions in virtual lecture hall;
- respond within 24 hours of postings;
- provide responses to lessons; and
- clarify confusion

As for students, online teaching helped them to:

- sustain good conversations; sometimes the discussion from one session flows to others and outside the virtual classroom; and
- students take advantage of the 24-hour availability of course documents and information.

Furthermore, after class sessions, “e-mail is used for question and answers relating to assignments and the understanding of concepts.” For two faculty members, online teaching had helped in coping with technical problems in online communications. The two faculty members thought they learned “bearing with the annoyances of online communication (such as disconnections).” They had also learned to “make do with the situation despite its limitations.”

One last good thing that at least one faculty member thought was attributable to online teaching was resource management and identification. The respondent thought that online teaching had allowed for better resource identification. The faculty member thought the format had made it easier to send links to students, for instance.

Areas Where Students and Faculty Could Use Improvement in Online Communications

Finally, each respondent was asked to list three areas where s/he and students could use improvement in online communications. When responses were summarized, five areas that need improvement were identified.

Need for tutorials in best usage of online teaching tools: At least 10 respondents thought that they and their students would benefit from tutorials in better usage of online tools. Below are excerpts attesting to such a need.

- The students may be familiar with the forms of communication, however, many of them will not experiment to improve these skills by using the more complex functions available in these areas; They do not read the student manuals to obtain this information and would rather rely upon the instructor to interpret the manual for them;
- Students (should be) required to attend online or classroom workshops on how to navigate course website, send email and attaching documents;
- Many students are under-prepared in terms of their computer knowledge and experience. Some students need work in basic computer skills. Students need to be more computer literate (sending empty email, sending attachments more than one time etc);

- Students (should be) required to attend workshops on how to use Microsoft word and Excel programs;
- Being able to reliably take tests and quizzes online;
- Learning how to use the discussion boards and use them!;
- Learning to use the Chat Room so that comments don't always get out of sequence; and
- Participating in more interactive discussion.

Teachers should receive an orientation to strategies bin online teaching: Eight respondents identified teaching strategies that would help them become better online teachers. The following excerpts include both strategies to improve personal routines and strategies for maximizing the efficiency of the online teaching format:

- Making an effort to include other students who are less assertive in their communications; Schedule chat sessions with more meaningful topics; Develop clearer instructions in the course syllabus
- Being able to build good quizzes and tests for online use (We need Blackboard Enterprise Edition);
- Coordinating and participating in synchronous online activities;
- Expressing/accepting time limitations
- Being disciplined about follow-up
- Using discussion board—real time chatting has not been a priority.
- Checking and responding to Discussion Board threads in a timely manner; Students must understand that the instructor is not available 24 hours a day, and Instructors must set up regular times for availability and response to questions.
- (Reading and understanding) protocol sheets given at the beginning of class explaining e-mail etiquette, etc.
- The online class should be organized so that chat room sessions are required...the problem is scheduling the time when most if not all members of the class wish to attend. The chat room is the most lively opportunity for exchanges; however, the majority of the class chooses not to attend for one reason or another. It appears in some instances that they are challenged with the idea of utilizing technology to communicate in this manner. Other students seem to find the experience rewarding

Students should receive an orientation to rules of online communication: Seven respondents thought their students could benefit from a specific orientation to strategies for more effective communication. According to them, students should

- watch spelling and grammar; (and learn) proper use of attachments;
- use full sentences to explain concepts or needs;
- (stop) using non-approved abbreviations;
- (stop sending un-checked documents and message). Sometimes a student is in such a rush to send a message that they do not reread the message to see if it says what they want to say. In many instances they have misspellings, grammar problems etc. They have not made careful use of the software available to them to insure that they project their best appearance;

- (acquire and use CSU e-mail accounts). Not all students consistently use and check CSU email accounts, making it very difficult in Blackboard;
- complete more lessons earlier in the semester so as to not to be piled up at the end of the semester (many students need to pace themselves better); and
- use some help with procrastination.

Need for more assistance from support services: Five respondents identified assistance from support services as an area that still needs improvement. For some, support is limited; for others, the assistance is not appropriate. Below are excerpts:

- I need additional training to utilize all the features of Blackboard; there is limited support from CSU staff to help.
- Inform instructor of the abilities of the online exam features.
- Test students' hardware to ensure compatibility with internet requirements of course
- Blackboard digital drop box instructions given out, clearly explaining everything about the process
- The students and I could use a tutorial on online communication platforms/programs (e.g., Blackboard)

Need for tutorials in the utilization of special teaching technology features: At least three respondents identified the preparation to use some specific features of the online technology as an area of improvement. Features such as "chat-rooms," "gradebook," and media were still puzzling them:

- I am not really certain how to use the chat rooms effectively;
- Instructor should have more control over the gradebook features; and
- Make better use of media technology such as video, music, etc.; Explore mobile format of communication such as wireless communication to reduce the amount of time spent at home or school in front of a computer screen.

Need to establish a better process to manage class enrollments: Finally, two respondents identified enrollments into their online classes as an area that needed improvement:

- Administrators at CSU need to *give teachers ability to manage class enrollment*. Tying things in with Banner is completely insane. Also, students need to be able to put their own, non-CSU email address into blackboard. It takes me weeks to get all students up and running in my course with CSU's Blackboard. In comparison, Harold Washington College and Harper College is simple and all students are on board in the first day
- Some students who register may be computer illiterate. *A screening process to permit students to register for an online course* should be implemented to deny access to students who may be easily frustrated and make no progress in learning. It is unfortunate that they were permitted entry to the class because there are others who may have the appropriate background and experience were denied entry because of class caps of 25.

Discussion

When the survey was conducted, online and web-enhanced instruction at Chicago State University (CSU) was relatively new. Many of the areas for improvement that were identified may have already been incorporated into the new online developments. The school has made the Blackboard technology widely available to more classrooms. Many teachers have received training in the utilization of the technology, and the school is considering the adoption of such “avant-garde” technology as ELLUMINATE for synchronous online instruction. ELLUMINATE will offer “live virtual classroom software for online meeting and training with 2-way voice, whiteboard, and chat live virtual classroom software for online meeting and training with 2-way voice, whiteboard, and chat” (<http://www.elluminate.com/>). However, as the three faculty members interviewed one year and half later confirmed, the state of online teaching and online communication described in this study is more than a request for technology vulgarization. It is an assessment of the limitations of the online technology, if comprehensive planning and constant self-renewal are not incorporated in the adoption process. Furthermore, the perceptions that faculty members reported seem to be applicable to other online teachers, even at schools with a longer tradition of such technology. Indeed, most of the findings echo these researchers’ earlier survey of teachers’ perceptions of online communications at Northern Arizona University, a school with a longer tradition of online teaching.

First, the online teaching format poses challenges to teachers and students with respect to communication, on the one hand. Second, on the other hand, the online forum was not viewed as a valid teaching and learning forum unless built on standard rules of classroom communication. The online classroom is not either a hiding place for shy students to withdraw, or a sub-standard venue that inhibits “candid” exchanges of thoughts and emotions. Nonetheless, the findings also seem to speak to the concerns of Draves (2002) that online teaching is still a work in progress, or as he put it, “We don’t know how to talk online yet.” Below are points worth noting from this study of faculty online teaching at CSU.

Online Education Has Failed to Create Learning Communities

Responses provided by online instructors at CSU point to the relative predominance of private e-mail use between instructors and students, and from student to student. These researchers wonder whether the direct “correspondence” model is how students either see online learning, or would like to see it. Such prevalence seems to go with the high rating for “comfort in expressing private communication with instructor.” Why do students continue preferring the old one-to-one correspondence school model instead of creating a learning community, and enhancing group work, that research recommends? It appears that, if indeed creation of learning communities is the goal that distance learning must achieve, then there still is more to do to prepare both faculty members and students for their roles. Similarly, even within private communication, it appears that such means of online expression, such as the use of “smileys,” and other forms of conveying enthusiasm or anger continue to be misinterpreted. The researchers

wonder whether such forms of communication are the panacea of online “geeks,” which may never reach the average online “communicator.”

Online Communications Have Made “Housekeeping” Easier

Online learning seems to be developing into an effective mode of instruction. For instance, the modal response disagreed with “easier to misinterpret directions.” Could this finding represent a sort of ‘learning curve’ with regard to online courses being more popular and more prevalent? At the same time, this study highlighted one of the strengths of online teaching, which appears to be the increased comfort that teachers have found in assuming the otherwise boring “housekeeping” work of grading assignments, communicating comments, and keeping track of everybody’s participation. Future research in distance education should look more deeply into issues of capitalizing on this strength. The Blackboard platform that is the main classroom software used at CSU appears to be a relatively more user-friendly classroom than WebCT or WebCT Vista. Would this ease of grading, tracking comments, and communicating seven days a week with students be any different in a school that uses other classroom software?

More Orientation Is Needed

In responses to open-ended questions, many respondents expressed a need for tutorials and technical assistance in and orientation to varied areas, including best usage of online teaching technologies, teaching strategies, and rules for communication. This need for orientation seems to suggest that many faculty members and students have more or less “jumped into” the online classroom without being adequately prepared. More needs to be done to ‘get them ready’ rather than remediation of orientation deficiencies once they are in. The issue of whether all students should be enrolled in online classes was also addressed. Students with poor academic skills, or who have no prior orientation to online instruction, should be identified and provided with proper orientation, or remediation, before “jumping into” online classes.

Conclusions

Overall, this study echoes most of the findings of other researchers, especially our earlier survey of faculty online communications at Northern Arizona University (NAU) (Dereshiwsky, Moan & Gahungu 2002). Similar to online faculty at NAU, CSU instructors acknowledged the challenges that online teaching poses to faculty. Both groups also thought that lack of visual cues makes it harder to read one’s online students, and that new online students needed help with issues of communication. All these perceptions attest to the need for faculty to become better prepared for the online class format, and for more assistance in and orientation to skills required to teach how to effectively communicate online.

Both groups of faculty members “disagree” that it’s easier for shy students to withdraw. Whether this finding means that online instruction has come to the rescue of shy students, or whether it constitutes their refuge, is an issue that could not be explored in this study. Similarly, both groups of faculty concur that it was more tempting to respond with anger to online messages than in the traditional face-to-face classroom. As such, online teaching does not seem to have succeeded in finding strategies for instructors

to monitor “flame wars” and other unintended, insensitive exchanges among students, who might use the virtual context as a shield. Finally, the study raised a concern voiced by other researchers that “talking online has not happened” yet. Will the online classroom in the 21st Century grow to be the equivalent of traditional face-to-face forum, or will it continue being considered an inadequate complement? Is there room in the future of teaching when the online classroom will become an adequate substitute for face-to-face communication in all subjects?

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was conducted at Chicago State University, a school that is relatively new to the distance learning arena. The total number of respondents was not large enough to allow for comparisons between new and “seasoned” instructors, in general, or for a comparison of long-time users of online technology and less technology-savvy instructors. The results discussed above might also be interpreted differently in a school that supports other types of online platforms in addition to the relatively user-friendly Blackboard. The school has now acquired more instructional technology hardware and software (Blackboard, Livetext, SMART board presentation technology, software for synchronous communications, etc.), and more support has been made available to faculty and students. A new study ought to be conducted to evaluate how the school is adjusting to the new environment. Has the planning of the new technology and its implementation been comprehensive? Are faculty and students candidly sharing new skills, strategies, and challenges? Is the school constantly evaluating its technological acquisitions to ensure continuity of support and survival power of the Blackboard and Livetext software, for instance? Is the school committed to continued support of distance learning, in general, and the software and hardware it is currently using? Such is the framework that Picciano (2006) offers for ensuring that technology planning is effective and responsive to the needs of an institution: comprehensiveness, collaboration, commitment, and continuity. In addition, as the review of literature suggested, if online teaching requires new strategies and skills than do face-to-face formats, then simply wide dissemination of new instructional hardware and software may not be enough. Constant and consistent training of teachers and students in how to effectively creating online learning communities must be carefully implemented and evaluated.

References

- Carnevale, D. (2006, January 6). Michigan Considers Requiring Online Course for High-School Students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52(18), A.45.
- Curtis, R. (2004). Analyzing students' conversations in chat room discussion groups. *College Teaching*, 52 (4), 143-148.
- Dereshiwsky, M. I., Moan, E.R., & Gahungu, A. (2002, June). Faculty perceptions regarding issues of civility in online instructional communication. *United States Distance Learning Association Journal*, 16 (6). ISBN: 1527-5080.
- Doutrich, D., Hoeskel, R., L. Wykoff, & Thiele, J. (2005, January/February). Teaching teachers to teach with technology. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 36 (1), 25-31.
- Draves, W.A. (2002). *Teaching online* (2nd ed.). River Falls, WI: Learning Resources Network.
- Laird, E. (2003). I'm your teacher, not your Internet service provider. *The Education Digest*, 68 (7), 41-44.
- Lee, J.A., & Busch, P.E. (2005, November/December). Factors related to instructors' willingness to participate in distance education. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 99(2), 109-115.
- McInnerney, J.M., & Roberts, T.S. (2004). Online learning: Social interaction and the creation of a sense of community. *Educational Technology and Society*, 7(3), 73-81.
- Monroe, B. (2003). How e-mail can give you back your life. In T. Owen (Ed.), *English Journal*, 92 (3), 116-118.
- Picciano, Anthony G. (2006). *Educational leadership and planning for technology* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Ryan, M., Carlton, K.H., & Ali, N.S. (2004). Reflections on the role of faculty in distance learning and changing pedagogies. *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 25(2), 73-80.
- Yelon, S. (2006, March). Face-to-face or online? Choosing the medium in blended training. *Performance Improvement*, 45(3), 22-26.

Appendix A.

Civility in Online Communication Survey

Note: This Study was approved by Chicago State University Institutional Review Board on April 11, 2002

The following survey deals with issues in online communication that you and your Web course students have experienced. It should only take five to ten minutes to complete.

Your Experience in Online Teaching:

Total number of semesters you've taught online: _____

Number of *different* online courses you've taught: _____

Your online students are (please check one response below):

_____ Graduate

_____ Undergraduate

_____ Both

My online students and I use the following to communicate (please check all that apply):

_____ E-mail between individual student and instructor

_____ E-mail among students

_____ Class-wide listserv

_____ Virtual Conference Center (VCC)

_____ Subscriptions to existing Internet listserv(s)

_____ Other (please specify): _____

Attitudes and Behaviors in Online Communication

Directions: For each of the following items, please check *only one* response:

1. It is more challenging to express emotions via the written word than in face-to-face communication.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

2. It is easier to misinterpret written communication than face-to-face communication.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

3. I felt adequately prepared for online communication prior to teaching my first course on the Web.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

4. Standards of courteous communication are identical for all courses regardless of format: online, face-to-face, or interactive television-based.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

5. New online students need help in learning how to communicate courteously in the Web classroom.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

6. My students have typed in all caps in their written communications.

___ Always

___ Frequently

___ Sometimes

___ Never

___ Don't Know

7. My students express disagreement in online communications by focusing on issues rather than attacking personalities.

___ Always

___ Frequently

___ Sometimes

___ Never

___ Don't Know

8. My students have deleted e-mail from their instructor before reading.

___ Always

___ Frequently

___ Sometimes

___ Never

___ Don't Know

9. My students have deleted e-mail from one another before reading.

___ Always

___ Frequently

___ Sometimes

___ Never

___ Don't Know

10. I have had to intervene to stop flame wars (angry exchanges) among my students in their online communications.

___ Always

___ Frequently

___ Sometimes

___ Never

11. My students use emoticons (smiley faces and other Internet shorthand to express emotions) appropriately in their online communications.

___ Always

___ Frequently

___ Sometimes

___ Never

___ Don't Know

12. Online communication makes it easier for shy students to withdraw.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

13. It is easier for students to misinterpret class directions in the online environment than in traditional face-to-face classes.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

14. It is harder to express enthusiasm via written online communication than in the traditional face-to-face environment.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

15. My students are comfortable in sharing private communication with me via e-mail.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

16. My online students have shared with me that they miss the face-to-face communication of the traditional classroom.

___ Always

___ Frequently

___ Sometimes

___ Never

17. The lack of visual cues in the online teaching/learning environment makes it difficult for me to get a 'read' of my students.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

18. It is more tempting to respond with anger to an online message than in the traditional face-to-face mode of communication.

___ Strongly Disagree

___ Moderately Disagree

___ Moderately Agree

___ Strongly Agree

19. The online communication format makes it too inhibiting to express candid opinions.

____ Strongly Disagree

____ Moderately Disagree

____ Moderately Agree

____ Strongly Agree

20. There are some subject areas for which the online classroom is not an adequate substitute for face-to-face communication.

____ Strongly Disagree

____ Moderately Disagree

____ Moderately Agree

____ Strongly Agree

Three things my students and I do especially well in our online communications are:

Three areas where my students and I could use improvement in online communications are:

Thank you very much for taking the time to share your thoughts on online communication with us!