

Teachers Make the Move to the Virtual World

Teaching in an online-only environment takes more than just expertise with technology.

BY KATIE ASH

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When Jim Kinsella began teaching online, little was known about the best way to support students, train teachers, or build an online classroom. It was 2001, and he was asked to teach at the Illinois Virtual High School, now known as the Illinois Virtual School.

The social studies and government teacher had long incorporated digital elements into his classes at University High School, and he was curious about teaching online.

"I wanted to see what the new technology would do, and how much you could bring to the students, and how well they would do with it," Kinsella said.

But making the move from a regular classroom to a virtual setting is about more than the technology, he and other experts on e-learning say. Individualizing instruction,

creating an engaging and supportive online classroom, and learning how to communicate with students who aren't physically present are among the challenges.

Today, Kinsella teaches online courses for the Illinois Virtual School, Northwestern University, and Sevenstar Academy, a private Christian school in Cincinnati.

Curiosity initially attracted Kinsella to online learning, but the relationships he found he could build with online students hooked him. "Online teaching is much more hands-on than face-to-face teaching," he said. "The interactions that I have are one-on-one, so I get to know my students much better and in a much different way."

Communicating with students and building relationships with them are among the hardest, and most important, parts of online teaching.

"One of the big pitfalls of online learning is that high school kids have a tendency to disappear,"

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Kinsella said, especially right before tests or term papers are due.

To help combat that inclination, Kinsella requires students to initiate contact with him by phone or through Skype at least once a week.

Solving Technological Problems

Kinsella was successful transitioning to the online classroom, but it might not be the right move for every teacher, said Evan Abbey, project manager for online learning for the Iowa Area Education Agency. "Just because you can effectively integrate technology in a face-to-face classroom doesn't mean you're ready to teach online," he said.

Of course, some comfort with technology is essential for online teachers, said Barbara Treacy, director of EdTech Leaders Online at Education Development Center.

"An online facilitator or teacher needs to be prepared for technological problems," she said. "They must be willing to be a calming front line of defense with technical issues."

Becoming more comfortable with technology and learning-management systems, such as Blackboard and Moodle, was one reason Matt Lozano began teaching online. After 10 years of face-to-face teaching, Lozano taught his first online course through the Maynard, MA-based Virtual High School Global Consortium (VHS) last year.

"I really wanted to learn how to

use [Blackboard] because in the future, my face-to-face courses will be using something like Blackboard," he said.

Guiding the Students

What Lozano didn't expect was how well he would get to know his students. "At first, my perception was that it was going to be awkward and difficult to get to know them, but the way the course is structured, they're being required to express themselves more than a lot of my kids in the face-to-face classroom would," he explained.

The hardest part about the transition to an online classroom was getting used to allowing students to direct their own learning. "In my face-to-face classroom, I am used to being the star, presenting the material, and in an online environment you can't do that," Lorenzo said. "I wanted to jump into a discussion and take it over, but that's not necessarily helpful for those kids."

Allowing conversations to go off on a tangent and land on topics that the students themselves found interesting was both challenging and rewarding.

"It took some maturity on my part," Lozano said, "to be able to trust them and give them little guiding remarks rather than jumping in with the answer."

Liz Pape, president of VHS, a network of over 660 member districts, said many new online teachers reported a greater emphasis

on higher-order thinking skills in online discussions. The teacher is helping and fostering community, communication, and collaboration," she said. "Problem-solving skills, creativity, innovation, and real-world applications of content knowledge—those are all skills that you want to foster."

Asking open-ended questions that can't be answered by just one student is especially important, said Pape, since the teacher is not there to facilitate the discussion in real time. And teachers who train to teach online often note that those skills helped improve their teaching in a face-to-face classroom as well.

In her first year, Kim Solomon, a 2nd grade teacher at the Chicago Virtual Charter School, a blended-learning environment in which students learn mostly online but have some in-person lessons, noticed that the online classroom required teachers to develop a tailored set of time-management skills, such as setting a daily schedule and sticking to it, keeping track of emails and phone calls, and planning lessons well in advance.

Learning how to evaluate students who are not physically present can be challenging, said Steven Guttentag, executive vice president and chief education officer of Connections Academy, which operates online schools in 21 states.

"[Teachers] in a brick-and-mortar school are used to talking to

kids and watching them to see if they're OK," said Guttentag. Online, teachers have to depend on data and online feedback to evaluate whether their students comprehend the curriculum.

Working With Parents

Online teachers also need to work more closely with parents. In many online-learning programs, parents become learning coaches, and therefore frequent, open communication between teachers and parents is essential. The teacher must establish "good customer relations" to foster productive discussions about student progress without allowing parents to overstep their boundaries, Guttentag said.

Online teaching is not for those looking for an easier alternative to a regular classroom, said Jeff Murphy, the director of instructional support for the Florida Virtual School.

"You have to really care about students and want to go out of your way to help them be successful. That means working long hours and staying on the phone for an hour to get a student to understand an important concept," he said.

And just as in a face-to-face classroom, it takes time for online teachers to feel at ease in their environment. "It takes most teachers at least a year to a year and a half to get comfortable in an online classroom," said Murphy. ■

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