chapter
ONE

What Are the Characteristics of Excellent Online Teaching?

There is a myth that has existed in the world of online teaching since it began. The myth asserts that it is easy to teach online—all one needs to do is to move exactly what was being done in the face-to-face classroom into the online classroom. Technologies such as lecture capture video and PowerPoint have made it easy for an instructor to lecture online, and simply writing up and posting assignments by copying and pasting into the course management system in use is not difficult. But can this be considered good instruction online?

There are a significant number of instructors who are sincerely interested in online education and its possibilities. Early enthusiasts explored alternative ways of teaching in this environment and became champions for this form of teaching and learning, encouraging others to join them in new and exciting ways of delivering courses. However, some instructors have been told that they *must* develop and teach online classes. They are being given no choice in the matter and are reluctantly entering the online environment. Many feel lost, not even sure where to begin. Others have heard and believe the myth that the key to success is content; simply migrate the content that has been taught in the face-to-face classroom into the online classroom, and all will be well. Others learn how to use the software that is designed to teach the course and think that this is all they need to know to move successfully to the online environment. Yet others simply set up a course and then virtually "walk away," leaving students to fend

for themselves with little guidance or direction. In many cases, instructors receive little to no guidance in how to teach online and are thus put in a position of fending for themselves, requiring them to learn not only the course management system in use but also how to facilitate an online course on their own. In yet other situations, a faculty member who may have some technological knowledge or expertise may be put in charge of the university's faculty development effort in addition to continuing with his or her own course load—often these faculty members have little to no knowledge of how to conduct good faculty development and consequently have an additional teaching and self-training burden added to their load.

The result of these false assumptions is often the development of courses that are poorly conceived and lack interactivity, taught by faculty who are frustrated by their inability to get students involved. A likely outcome is low enrollment or attrition from online courses and programs. Akridge, DeMay, Braunlich, Collura, and Sheahan (2002) suggest that student retention online is dependent on three factors: selecting the right students for the right program; using a highly learner-focused delivery model; and engaging learners at a personal level. Hebert (2006) discovered that the responsiveness of faculty to perceived student needs helps increase persistence in online courses and creates a greater degree of satisfaction with the learning process. In other words, good instructors and instruction are the strongest marketing tools an online program can have. Because research evidence suggests that a good instructor is the key to student persistence in online courses, the hiring, training, and evaluation of good online instructors should be high priority for most online institutions. With scale, however, comes the need to recruit and hire faculty who may not have the experience or skills coming into an online course or program that they need. Consequently, providing good training and also providing incentives for keeping good faculty have become critical concerns. Difficult economic times, however, have taken their toll on faculty training—when budgets need to be cut, faculty development is the first to go, leaving more and more online instructors in a position to either go without training or find a way to train themselves.

These are essential components of what it takes to teach online, and yet if faculty are only receiving technical training before they embark on teaching their first online course, how would they know how to do this? What makes a successful online instructor and how can excellent instructors be trained? This is the central question that will be explored and addressed in this book. All is not lost in terms

of online faculty development and the potential emergence of excellent online instructors, despite the obstacles facing them. There are many resources now available to the online instructor left to his or her own devices to receive good training or for the faculty member who has been tapped to provide training to his or her peers. This book is designed to be one of those resources. By exploring what makes an excellent online instructor, how to conduct effective training, and how to do it for oneself if the institution is not, we believe that faculty can strive for and achieve excellence in their online teaching.

WHAT DOES THE EXCELLENT ONLINE INSTRUCTOR LOOK LIKE?

The growing popularity of online instruction has brought with it increasing recognition that teaching online differs from face-to-face teaching. As a result, more attention is being paid to what constitutes positive educational experiences online and the characteristics of good online instructors and courses. Organizations such as Quality Matters have emerged that are designed to evaluate online course design, and faculty at many institutions are being trained as Quality Matters evaluators so as to determine the quality of courses being designed by their peers and to offer suggestions for improvement. In addition, other institutions, such as California State University–Chico (Rubric for Online Instruction) and the Illinois Online Network (Quality Online Course Initiative Rubric) have published course design rubrics that are available online for anyone who wants to evaluate his or her own course. These can also be used as components of the evaluation of good course design and online teaching practice. Like the Quality Matters rubric, the CSU-Chico rubric focuses primarily on good design elements. The Illinois Online Network QOCI, however, does look at elements that promote collaboration between students and interaction between student and instructor.

In one of our previous books (Palloff & Pratt, 2003), we noted that much of the literature on best practices in online teaching was limited to the effective use of various technologies. Since that time, however, more attention has been paid to what constitutes best practice in online instruction. This aligns closely with our discussion of Graham, Kursat, Byung-Ro, Craner, and Duffy's (2001) article linking the Chickering and Gamson (1987) Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education to online teaching. Graham et al. note the following seven lessons for online instruction: Instructors should provide clear guidelines for interaction with students; provide well-designed discussion assignments to

promote cooperation among students; encourage students to present course projects to one another; provide prompt feedback of two types—information and acknowledgment; provide assignment deadlines; provide challenging tasks, sample cases, and praise for high-quality work to reinforce high expectations; and allow students to choose project topics.

Based on Weimer's (2002) work on learner-focused teaching, in order to achieve all of this, we note that several things need to happen:

- The balance of power needs to change—The instructor online acts as a learning facilitator, allowing students to take charge of their own learning process.
- The function of content needs to change—As noted by Carr-Chellman and Duchastel (2001), good online course design makes learning resources and instructional activities available to students rather than providing instruction in the form of a lecture or other means.
- The role of the instructor needs to change—by establishing active and strong online presence, a topic we will return to in more depth, the instructor demonstrates his or her expertise and guides the students in their learning process.
- The responsibility for learning needs to change—with the instructor acting as guide, resource, and facilitator, students need to take more responsibility for their own learning process.
- The purpose and process of assessment and evaluation need to change—traditional means of assessment, such as tests and quizzes, do not always meet the mark when it comes to this form of learning. Consequently, other forms of assessment, such as self-assessment and application activities, should be incorporated to assess student learning and evaluate areas for potential course improvement (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

What we have been discussing here is what good facilitation looks like in an online course. But how does this translate into the characteristics of the excellent online instructor? And are the same characteristics required regardless of the level at which the online course is offered: K–12 through graduate level? An issue-oriented white paper that was published following a conference on virtual pedagogy (Kircher, 2001) offered the following characteristics: organized; highly motivated and enthusiastic; committed to teaching; supports

student-centered learning; open to suggestions; creative; takes risks; manages time well; responsive to learner needs; disciplined; and is interested in online delivery without expectation of other rewards. Savery (2005) offers the VOCAL acronym to describe the effective online instructor. In other words, the effective online instructor is Visible, Organized, Compassionate, Analytical, and a Leader by example. The Illinois Online Network (2007) adds to the list by noting that good online instructors have a broad base of life experience in addition to their teaching credentials; demonstrate openness, concern, flexibility, and sincerity (characteristics we have consistently equated with online excellence); feel comfortable communicating in writing (a characteristic also stressed by Kearsley, n.d.); accept that the facilitated model of teaching is equally powerful to traditional teaching methods; value critical thinking; and is experienced and well-trained in online teaching. Kearsley (n.d.) also notes that having experienced online instruction as a student also helps, something that we support wholeheartedly. Clearly, it is this last component—well trained in online instruction—that we will be emphasizing in this book and we contend that regardless of the educational level of the student enrolled in the online class, this is the key to excellence. Before we embark on that exploration, however, we want to delve further into a few areas that we feel are significant in the emergence of excellence online—the ability to establish presence, create and maintain a learning community, and effectively develop and facilitate online courses.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ESTABLISHING PRESENCE

Establishing presence is the first order of business in an online class, and the ability of the instructor to do so effectively, as well as to be able to encourage its development among the students, is one measure of instructor excellence online. Establishing presence is the process of demonstrating to others who we are in the online environment, as well as making social connections with others who share that environment with us. It is the concept of visibility as described by Savery (2005) and is critical to students in perceiving that the instructor is paying attention to them and to their learning needs. In addition, Savery notes that when students are able to establish their own sense of presence, instructors are assured that they are attending to the learning tasks that are part of the course.

Establishing presence is something we rarely consider when teaching face-to-face. In that setting, students can see and hear us, as well as see and hear one another. To some degree, they will establish a sense of who their instructor and colleagues are simply by being in the same physical space, although Picciano (2002) warns that this doesn't always happen without effort. Online, however, an effort to establish presence is always needed. "Online there is greater possibility for a sense of loss among learners—loss of contact, loss of connection, and a resultant sense of isolation. Consequently, attention should be paid to the intentional development of presence" (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 31).

Savery (2005) discusses means by which presence can be established online, including the instructor's development and maintenance of a website that outlines both personal and professional information, responses in discussion forums that indicate that posts are being read, e-mail messages to the class on various topics, as well as announcements and banners on the homepage of the course, keeping a shared calendar, and possible use of audio and video clips. We add to this list the use of synchronous media, such as Skype (an application that allows for online conference calling along with chat, a whiteboard, etc.) or virtual classroom technologies (such as WebEx, Elluminate, or Adobe Connect that provide online classroom spaces to be accessed in real time), so that students can hear the instructor and each other, instructor blogs (or Web Logs, allowing the instructor or students to keep online journals), and the use of social networking technologies such as Facebook and Twitter to share updates of both personal and professional nature. Although we are not currently teaching in Second Life (a virtual world that allows for simulation), many instructors feel that this, too, adds to a sense of presence, even with the use of avatars that may or may not represent the participants outside of the virtual world.

The intent is to create a sense of connection with learners who are otherwise separated by time and space. In so doing, the level of interaction in the online course increases—when social presence is low, interaction also is low and vice versa (Stein & Wanstreet, 2003). Presence is associated with effective instruction online (Gunawardena, 1995), greater depth of learning (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai & Barnum, 2003), and learner satisfaction with the online learning process (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Rovai & Barnum, 2003). The ability to create presence as a marker of instructor excellence and how to incorporate this into faculty development is a topic we return to in Chapter Two and later in the book.

ENGAGING LEARNERS AND CREATING COMMUNITY

The ability to establish presence is closely connected to the ability of the instructor to create a sense of community among the learners in an online course. Picciano (2002) notes that a sense of social presence correlates to a sense of belonging to a learning community, and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003), as we do, identify it as a precursor to the development of community. Wenger (1999) notes that the social aspects of education are the most important and need attention before delving into the exploration of content. In the online environment, attention to the social aspects of engagement become more difficult. As we have noted in our extensive discussions of the creation of community, the establishment of that community satisfies a need to belong, reduces learner isolation, enhances learning outcomes, and creates a shared goal for learning. Brook and Oliver (2003) concluded after an extensive review of the existing literature on the online learning community, "There is strong support for the supposition that the social phenomenon of community may be put to good use in the support of online learning. This is well supported by theories of learning that highlight the role of social interaction in the construction of knowledge" (p. 150). Charalambos, Michalinos, and Chamberlain (2004) describe what they believe to be the common characteristics of the learning community, which include a common sense of responsibility among participants toward assigned tasks and their peers; joint vision and control of the community equally shared among members; a safe environment where opinions can be freely shared and questions asked without fear of retribution; structural dependence that establishes the need to interact and share resources; and mutual support among members and subgroups.

The learning community, then, becomes the vehicle through which the course is effectively conducted (Palloff & Pratt, 2005, 2007). "By learning together in a learning community, students have the opportunity to extend and deepen their learning experience, test out new ideas by sharing them with a supportive group, and receive critical and constructive feedback" (Palloff & Pratt, 2005, p. 8). Measurable outcomes of community formation include active interaction regarding course content and on a personal level, attempts at collaborative learning evidenced by increasing learner-to-learner interaction, socially constructed meaning evidenced by questioning and agreement on issues of content and meaning, active sharing of resources among learners, expressions of support and encouragement between learners along with a willingness to constructively critique the work of others (Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

This discussion begs the question: How does this correlate with instructor excellence when the focus is on the connection between learners? An excellent online instructor will know how to get the process started, facilitate it effectively, and then get out of the way and observe the results, jumping in as a resource to share expertise when necessary and to guide the process. Instructors who are new to the online environment may struggle with the transition from the central figure in the learning process to a facilitator or guide of that process. Making that transition is a topic we discuss in more depth in Chapter Two when we talk about the process of faculty development for online instruction and again in Chapter Three when we discuss training techniques. For the purpose of this discussion, however, it is important to note that a sign of instructor excellence online is evidence of the elements that we feel are essential to the creation of the online learning community—the willingness to give up control of the process to the learners and empower them to take charge of the learning process, demonstration of presence through responsiveness and respectful clear communication using various means, and the development and delivery of an instructional design that allows all of this to happen. It is to this last topic that we now turn our attention.

EXCELLENCE IN COURSE DEVELOPMENT

How do we evaluate effective online courses and how can this become an indicator of excellence in online teaching? One important response to this question has been the development and application of the Quality Matters Rubric. Based on extensive and continuous review of the literature on the topic of effective online course design, Quality Matters, developed by the University of Maryland, uses a peer evaluation approach to the determination of effectiveness and to offer suggestions for quality improvement in courses. The focus is on course development rather than the delivery and facilitation of the course based on the important precept that good design is critical to good delivery. The rubric used by Quality Matters looks at eight categories, including the course overview and introduction, learning objectives, how outcomes are assessed and measured, the resources and materials used, activities that promote learner engagement, the technology in use and specifically whether the technology supports the stated learning objectives, the provision of links to learner support, and the accessibility of the course for disabled learners. Access to the Quality Matters Rubric and course evaluations based on the rubric occur through subscription.

If an institution is not connected to Quality Matters, how can an instructor determine if his or her course is effectively designed? Luckily, a growing body of literature is addressing this topic. Our own review of the literature (Palloff & Pratt, 2009) allowed us to establish the following categories of evaluation for an online course: student perception of the overall online course experience; orientation to the course and course materials; quantity and quality of material presented and the manner in which it is approached; activities that promote discussion and interaction student-to-student and student-to-instructor; learner self-assessment of participation and performance in the course, as well as the degree of contribution to the learning of others; ease of use of the course management system and its ability to support learning; access to technical support resources; and access to resources important to student learning. We return to these topics in more detail in Chapter Eight when we discuss the link between faculty and course evaluation and faculty development. Suffice it to say that design excellence will bring high marks in the outlined categories—learners seek clarity and variety in assignments (Chaney, Eddy, Dorman, Glessner, Green, & Lara-Alecio, 2007; Gaytan & McEwen, 2007), engagement both collectively and individually through discussion, reflection, and scholarly inquiry (Gunawardena, Ortegano-Layne, Carabajal, Frechette, Lindemann, & Jennings, 2006; Hawkes, 2006), relevant materials that align with the level of the learners in the course (Lynch & Dembo, 2004), a learning interface that supports interaction (Aycock, Garnham, & Kaleta, 2002; Beldarrain, 2006; Liao, 2006), and access to support (Chaney et al., 2007).

PROVIDING EFFECTIVE FACILITATION WHEN TEACHING COURSES DEVELOPED BY OTHERS

Not all instructors have the ability to design the courses they deliver. As institutions seek the ability to align course design with the growth of their online programs, the response is often to have one member of the faculty design a course that is delivered by many or that same faculty member may work with a course development team, again with the goal of creating a course that can be taught by any faculty member. In this case, effective facilitation and knowing how to adapt or modify a course written by another instructor are key indicators of excellence. An administrator we worked with noted that a good instructor can teach just about anything if he or she is well prepared. Thus, a well-trained online instructor

should be able to effectively evaluate a course and determine how it should best be delivered.

The first question the instructor should ask in this situation is, How much can I customize this course? Customization should involve evaluation of what materials can and should be used or should be deleted, the addition of collaborative activities or additional discussion questions, and the ability to promote interactivity and create community. The goal should be to do all of this without sacrificing the learning objectives outlined in the course and staying true to the goals the course is attempting to achieve. We are both called upon to teach courses we did not write. Our first response is to modify by doing such things as creating banners to create visual appeal, adding discussion forums that promote community building, adding a blog site or a wiki assignment housed outside of the course management system, all in service of establishing presence, promoting collaboration, and creating community.

At times, institutions will ask instructors to teach a course exactly as it was written, limiting the ability to customize. In these cases, instructors still have the ability to enhance interactivity and increase access to content and course resources, if this is lacking, through the use of wikis, blogs, social networking sites, Internet search activities, and e-mail. One of the key criteria of instructor excellence is the ability to promote interaction. Consequently, every effort should be made to do so, whether it exists in the course or not.

GOOD FACILITATION ONLINE: WHAT IS INVOLVED?

Our emphasis, as we explore the topic of faculty excellence and faculty development, is on the importance of good facilitation skills. Skillful facilitation allows students to interact with one another and the instructor at a high level. Good facilitators monitor the discussion, asking probing questions to extend it, post announcements, and provide prompt feedback to students. Indicators that effective facilitation is occurring in an online course include the use of ice breaker activities at the start of the course and possibly at intervals throughout so that students can get to know one another and have fun doing so. A social space or café is included in the course and students are encouraged to use it. Clear participation expectations along with expectations for assignment completion are posted at the start of the course and students are invited to comment on them. In addition, discussion is a clear and regular part of the course and the instructor's input into

that discussion is visible—asking questions to deepen the level of discourse and providing feedback on postings and assignments. Feedback is timely and timelines are explained at the start of the course. The instructor and other students offer additional information and content for students to explore and consider. The instructor may not act as the sole facilitator for the course—this responsibility may be shared with students; however, the instructor models good facilitation so as to promote these skills in learners.

Given the differences between face-to-face instruction and the facilitated approach that works best online, it is unrealistic to expect that instructors new to this form of education will simply know what to do. Skill in teaching online develops over time and with good training. What is the process a faculty member might go through in his or her development into an excellent online instructor? What forms of and approaches to faculty training are most likely to achieve success in this effort? Should faculty be encouraged to begin with hybrid instruction that combines face-to-face with online delivery and then gradually move to a fully online class? These are the questions we explore in Chapter Two. In addition, we explore the topic of faculty readiness to teach online—who should teach and how will we know if they are ready to take on this task?

KEY POINTS THAT DEFINE THE EXCELLENT ONLINE INSTRUCTOR

Based on our discussion thus far, some of the key elements that define excellence in online teaching are

- The excellent online instructor understands the differences between face-to-face and online teaching and can effectively implement them into development and facilitation of online classes.
- The excellent online instructor is committed to this form of teaching and uses the online environment to his or her advantage in delivering an online class.
- The excellent online instructor is able to establish presence early in the course and encourages students to do the same.
- The excellent online instructor is highly motivated and in turn is a good motivator for students.
- The excellent online instructor understands the importance of community building and devotes time at the start of the class to that function.

- The excellent online instructor promotes interactivity between students through development of good discussion questions that engage them and encourage them to seek out response material on their own.
- The excellent online instructor incorporates collaborative work into the design and delivery of an online class.
- The excellent online instructor respects students as partners in the learning process.
- The excellent online instructor is active and engaged throughout the course, providing timely, constructive feedback throughout.
- The excellent online instructor is open, flexible, compassionate, responsive, and leads by example.

This list might apply to any excellent instructor, whether teaching face-to-face or online. The main difference here is that the excellent *online* instructor accomplishes all of this through the use of technology and, in many cases, without ever meeting his or her students in person. The ability to accomplish all of this through the use of technology is what sets the excellent online instructor apart.

BECOMING YOUR OWN FACULTY DEVELOPER

Hara and Kling (2000) note that students need clear instruction for course expectations and assignments, reassurance that their ideas are on track, a reasonable load in terms of the amount of reading, posting, and elements such as e-mail, prompt and unambiguous feedback, and technical support. The Illinois Online Network (2007) provides a list of what the participants of the online experience can expect from the facilitator–instructor. This list includes creating assignments that incorporate students' life and educational experiences, that easily allow the student to translate theory into practice, and that involve minimal to no lecturing.

Developing ability or skill in an area involves taking an inventory of the skills you possess first so that you know the areas on which you need to focus. As you begin your journey toward excellence, think about, complete, and respond to the following self-assessment tasks and questions:

- Write an introductory letter to your students that describes who you are, how you teach or facilitate, and what you expect from your learners. Give that letter to your students and ask for feedback—what questions did it leave unanswered? How can it be improved?

- Assess your own ability to establish presence and create community in your online course. How do you accomplish this currently? How might you change or improve your approach?
- Focus on one unit of your online course—how can you increase interactivity in that unit? How might you redesign it in order to empower learners to take on the bulk of responsibility for the learning process? How might you assess the learning outcomes without the use of a test or quiz?
- How often are you currently logging into your online course? How often do you think you should log in? Does your class need more attention from you?
- How many of the characteristics of the excellent online instructor do you currently possess? How might you make progress in developing the characteristics you might not have?