CHAPTER ONE

THE MANY VARIABLES OF ONLINE AND BLENDED TEACHING

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What variables should you consider in your teaching situation?
- How might your teaching situation affect the methods you can or cannot use in your online classroom?
- What factors should you consider when looking at a new job and how does the school's teaching model line up with your teaching philosophy?
- How can you overcome challenges in your teaching situation?
- Which of the following variables do you prefer and why?
  - Self-paced versus cohort approach
  - Full-time versus part-time online students
  - Blended versus fully online courses
  - Create-your-own versus purchased curriculum
  - Teacher as course author and organizer versus teacher as facilitator only
  - Teacher evaluation based on course completion versus traditional evaluation systems

One of the most exciting (and terrifying!) parts of going into online education is that there is so much variety in the types of programs out there. Seemingly hundreds of variables have to be considered in any given teaching situation. Are the students full-time or part-time online students? Will the course work be fully online or will there be some face-to-face component? Will I be writing the course or is the course already created? Do I have permissions to change the course for each group of students I work with? Although you may not always have control over all these variables, it's important to consider the impact they have on the teaching experience and, if a situation is not ideal, think about how you might modify your methods to make the best of it. Consider the following situations. What might the teaching experience be like in each of these?

Situation one: School A is a full-time virtual school. It's a program that is led by a school district. All courses are created by the district's curriculum team and, although online teachers can modify the order of the content, they cannot edit the content itself. All students are full-time online students who are working from their homes. Teachers work under a standard teacher contract, which means that they can never have more than 170 students (secondary) or 40 students (elementary) at one time. The school runs on a traditional semester schedule so students pace together through the course as a cohort.

Situation two: School B is a full-time virtual school run by a for-profit corporation. The school takes students on a rolling enrollment basis so all the students are at different parts of the course at different times. Course content is created by the company so teachers do not have editing privileges in their courses. However, the course content is run through a social networking site built just for the organization so teachers can build a custom class website including announcements, discussion boards, status updates, and so on. Teachers tend to have heavier class loads because they do no course creation work. Most teachers have around 250 students at a time.

Situation three: School C is a state-run virtual school. All students are part-time in the online school and part-time in a brick-and-mortar school. Teachers work part-time, usually moonlighting after working in a traditional school during the day. Courses are created fully by the teacher before the start of the semester and teachers maintain editing privileges for all course content. Because teachers are moonlighting, they generally don't have course loads of more than twenty students at a time. Students generally work as a cohort but the school takes late enrollments, up to six weeks after the start of the course. Therefore, there are always groups of students who are not with the rest of class. Teachers are paid on a per-student basis for any student who passes the course.

As you can see, the variety in these situations is enormous and thus the teaching strategies would have to be modified to be successful in each of these cases. The Innosight Institute, in their report *The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning* (Horn & Staker, 2011), identified additional variables in blended learning including whether or not students meet face-to-face and how often, how much teaching teachers are doing or if they are involved more as a support, whether or not there are **synchronous** components to the course (elements that are happening at the same time), and even whether the course is taught in a computer lab or if students are primarily at home. As professional educators, it is our responsibility to make the best of each teaching situation. Let's consider some of these many variables and how they affect the teacher's role in the learning environment.

SELF-PACED VERSUS COHORT APPROACH

One of the many benefits of online learning is the opportunity for students to have customized learning. In a self-paced approach, everyone is working on different parts of a course at different times. So, Johnny, who has a learning disability, might take nine months to complete a semester-long course whereas Jennifer, who is an advanced student, completes the course in two months. As Susan Patrick, president of iNACOL, says for a learning situation like this, ''Learning is the constant and time is the variable'' (personal e-mail). Florida Virtual School and K12, Inc., are prominent examples of programs that use this model. There are huge benefits to this approach for students who are motivated and can work through the course as their time permits. They can take as much or as little time as needed to learn the course material. However, there are also some challenges involved. If students are not motivated, they may never finish a particular course. They still need a lot of communication with their instructor so that they are motivated to continue. Also, it's difficult to create a sense of community in a course like this because students are rarely on the same content at the same time. As a teacher, you have to be creative about bringing the students together occasionally for those shared learning experiences that are so important to cognitive development.

The alternative to a self-paced approach would be a cohort-based system. Students pace together through a class over the course of a traditional semester, much like a traditional classroom. The teacher assigns due dates to each section of the course and communicates those to students. Synchronous sessions can be developed based on topics that the students are working on at the same time. Classroom discussions and group projects are a regular part of the course content because the course is a shared experience with a shared timeline. On the down

side, the course is less likely to be customized to a student's needs and it's less flexible overall. Although students do have flexibility within some parts of the course (the flexibility of doing their work on the weekend instead of Monday through Friday, for example), for the most part they are limited by a course calendar and due dates. Those due dates can be motivating for students who need deadlines or those who procrastinate. However, the due dates can also be discouraging for students who fall behind or just need more time to complete the course work.

Quality teaching can occur in either of these learning options. Usually the course parameters are set by the school and the teaching program. It's important for administrators to be clear about which model they will be using and how teachers can facilitate within that model.

Keys to Success in a Self-Paced Model

For teachers who are working in a self-paced model, it's crucial to pay attention to developing a classroom community even though your students are working on different content at different times. The classroom community and classroom culture are very motivating for students and can be an important part of the learning experience. That might mean that you maintain a ''cyber cafe'' within your course discussion board where students can chat about off-topic ideas whenever they would like, much as they would between classes in a traditional school. You could also create group projects that students can contribute to as they get to them, such as a wiki that students are adding to as a culminating project on a particular unit. Discussion boards can also be a vital part of the class but they may need to be on more general topics or set up so that students can add to them at flexible times. Refer to chapter 6 for more ideas on how to facilitate these vital elements in your classroom.

Keys to Success in a Cohort-Based Model

In a cohort-based model, it's important to give students flexibility within the structure. Publish your due dates as soon as possible and communicate them to students in several different ways. They should be within the announcements, on a course calendar, in the syllabus, and also sent via e-mail. Just as in face-to-face classrooms where students need everything repeated five times, your online students will benefit from repetition. You'll also need to consider whether or not to charge a late penalty if students don't meet their deadlines and consider how long you will accept late work from a particular unit. These are personal decisions that will depend on your teaching philosophy. The most important thing is that you've clearly communicated those expectations within your course syllabus and you share the rationale with students.

FULL-TIME VERSUS PART-TIME ONLINE STUDENTS

Students who come to online programs do so for a variety of reasons. Some just like computers and want to do more of their work via technology. Others have things going on in their personal lives and need the flexibility of online learning in order to continue their education while working full-time, dealing with an illness, taking care of an infant, pursuing a professional sport, and so on. It's difficult to make generalizations about such a huge variety of needs. However, there are some trends within enrollments that can affect student achievement.

Students who are enrolled full-time in an online school are generally there because something in their traditional schooling wasn't working. Full-time online students tend to be classified as more ''at-risk'' than their traditional school counterparts. In some cases, they've checked out of the school process and are using online school as a final effort to avoid dropping out. These students tend to have lower course completion percentages and tend to be behind on their credits to graduate on time.

Students who are enrolled part-time in an online school are usually looking for something that's lacking in their traditional school. They may want more flexibility or they may want a course that's not offered locally. Unlike full-time online students, they haven't checked out of a traditional model. They still attend a regular brick-and-mortar school for at least one or two classes per day. They're still in the routine of school. They just added online courses for additional challenge or to meet a certain need. The Innosight Institute labels this a ''self-blend'' model of online education, in which students choose which courses to take online and which to take face-to-face based on what better meets their needs (Horn & Staker, 2011).

Keys to Success with Full-Time Online Students

For full-time online students, time management is crucial. They are most often working from their homes. There is no bell schedule and they can get distracted by posting updates on a social network, having lunch, getting texts from friends, and so on. Full-time online students benefit greatly from having a teacher or counselor work with them on time management and goal setting. When students first come to full-time online learning, they may be overwhelmed and have no idea where to start. The idea that you could spend an hour and a half on math and just twenty minutes on English in a particular day is foreign to them and it will take some time to adjust.

Full-time online students also benefit from proactive communication from their teacher. They need to feel like they're not alone. E-mails, text messages,

instant messaging (IM), and even phone calls should be a regular part of their course so that they don't feel isolated and they know there's a caring adult who is there to help at any time. They won't always reach out for help so it's important that you're making the first step as their teacher to let them know that you care about them and you're there for them.

Keys to Success with Part-Time Online Students

Although part-time online students are still in the swing of regular school and tend to be more successful in online courses, they also tend to be overscheduled. I once worked with a part-time online student who attended a face-to-face school six hours a day, worked twenty hours a week, and starred in the school play. Then he wondered why he just could never seem to keep up on his online courses! For these students, it's important to communicate your expectations. Let kids know exactly how long they should plan to work in the course each week and hold them accountable for deadlines. However, also be ready to help them catch up when they inevitably fall behind because they simply have too much going on in their lives. Balancing a workload is a very grown-up skill and it's important to help them develop it early.

Whether you have full-time online students, part-time online students, or a blend of both will depend on your program's model. Any of these students can be successful in online learning as long as they have support that's tailored to their needs. Early in the semester, it's important to survey your students so you know what their needs might be. A question as simple as, ''Is there anything going on in your life that might affect your school performance?'' can reveal a lot about your student's needs and how you can help them be successful.

BLENDED VERSUS FULLY ONLINE COURSES

In recent years, blended learning has absolutely exploded onto the online learning scene. Basically, **blended (or hybrid) learning** seeks to combine elements of face-to-face instruction with elements of online instruction. Students are being given all sorts of options. They can take courses fully online, they can take courses fully face-to-face with some sort of online enrichment, or they can take courses that are a blend of both. Blended courses can have a variety of schedules. Some meet one day a week face-to-face with the rest of the week online. Others meet every other day or only once a month.

As a teaching professional, it's important to understand fully the model that you're working under and begin to think about how to emphasize that model's

Table 1.1   Strengths of Online versus Face-to-Face Teaching

Online Strengths	Face-to-Face Strengths
• Tasks that require multiple sessions	• Complicated, multistep demonstrations
• Tasks that need **web 2.0 tools** (tools students can use on the Internet to create and share content)	• Student presentations requiring a live audience
• Lectures and videos (because they can be paused as needed)	• Organization tasks that require class input
• Tasks in which time may vary among students	• Taking tests and assessments

strengths. For example, in an online lab model in which students work on their courses at least partially in a school computer lab, I know that my students will have the support of a paraprofessional face-to-face at least some of the time they're working on my course. It would be absolutely vital to develop a relationship with that person and communicate with him or her on a regular basis so that students are not getting mixed messages between me, as their teacher, and their paraprofessional, as their supervisor. For more information about blended learning models see chapter 14.

Keys to Success in a Blended Learning Environment

Teachers who are teaching in a blended learning environment truly have the best of both worlds but only if both models and modes of teaching are used thoughtfully. Certain topics and activities are best suited to face-to-face learning, whereas others are best suited to online. The trick is to know the difference. Table 1.1 gives some examples but more information is provided in chapter 14.

Keys to Success in a Fully Online Course

Fully online courses carry with them their own special set of challenges. First, you know that you'll never see your students face-to-face and you'll need to make a special effort to build a relationship with them. It's really important to personalize the course and share pictures with the students so they feel like they know you. You'll also want to provide a space for them to share pictures of themselves and to share their stories. Second, you'll find that some concepts simply must be

demonstrated visually in order to be understood, especially in science and math courses. Videos, screencasts, and **vodcasts** (video versions of a podcast) will be an essential part of the course. You can even experiment with creating your own videos to share ideas. It's important to realize how different a fully online course is from a blended or traditional option.

CREATE-YOUR-OWN VERSUS A PURCHASED CURRICULUM

Curriculum is hands-down one of the most challenging aspects to starting an online program. It is a monumental task to create or obtain all of the core courses and electives needed to start a comprehensive high school, much less a whole K–12 program. Many organizations are forced to purchase curriculum in the beginning in order to start a school quickly. There are some wonderful curriculum providers out there. Many have beautiful, interactive content that is engaging to students. However, the quality of the curriculum varies widely. You may find a course that looks beautiful but, on further analysis, turns out to be simply a textbook and a series of quizzes without any interactive projects or assessments that require critical thinking. Curriculum committees need to consider their overall budget as well as their needs when trying to decide on a quality online learning curriculum because some of the best courses also tend to be the most expensive.

However, some schools decide to bypass the purchase process altogether and create their own curriculum from scratch. This can be a great option for large programs with plenty of resources to pull from. Courses can be created that align perfectly with the school's curriculum guides. Every course can follow a similar model and provide a consistent feel for students. Also, because courses are created in the same learning management system where they will be taught, there are usually far fewer technical issues with the course. (Your **learning management system [LMS]** is the space where you teach your online course. It will have basic tools such as a discussion board, grade book, and a place to share content.) Unfortunately, this is a labor-intensive process. Each course needs a content specialist working very closely with an online learning specialist or IT professional who can help translate the content into an interactive, high-quality course. Even then, the process requires significant oversight.

Teachers don't generally get to share in the decision of whether or not to purchase curriculum. Instead, they are handed a course and asked to modify it for the needs of their students. Consider the following as you look at your courses for the first time and decide how to teach them.

Standards in an Online Classroom

All online courses should clearly align to Common Core State Standards as well as the state standards for the state where a course is being taught. Good curriculum developers will be able to share an alignment with you that clearly indicates which standards are addressed in which lessons. An even stronger method is when the standards are identified in the introduction to each session or lesson in student-friendly language so students can clearly see the goal of the instruction.

Keys to Success with Purchased Curriculum

As mentioned previously, purchased curriculum can vary widely in quality. The most common problem is that the courses are built for use in any model (brick-and-mortar, blended, or completely online). Thus, they rarely include discussions or group projects because those would not fit well in a self-paced model. They also tend to over-rely on autograded quizzes because not all programs will have a teacher intimately involved in assessment and grading. When you first receive a prebuilt course that was purchased from another program, it's important to go through all of the content in detail. You should know the course intimately. Consider the following checklist as you evaluate the preexisting assignments:

- Does each unit include student choice?

- Is the course content well-aligned to your district, state, and national standards?

- Does the course value student-to-student interaction?

- Does the course rely too heavily on quizzes? Where can authentic assessments be included?

- Does the course progress from one skill to another in a way that makes logical sense?

- Is the course visually appealing? Are there images and graphics to support visual learners? Are there videos and **podcasts** (audio broadcasts that can be downloaded to media players to support audio learners)? Are there hands-on activities to support kinesthetic learners?

You may also want to evaluate the course using the iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses. They can be a helpful lens. The complete list of the iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Courses is included in appendix A.

Then, from there, it will be up to you to decide on your priorities. Don't feel like you need to fix the entire course the first time you teach it! However, set a few goals for each unit. For example, you might decide that you want to add more interactive projects and discussions to the prebuilt course. Then you can keep the basic course shell and modify just a few assignments or quizzes in each session to make the course better. After teaching the course for a few years, you'll be amazed to see how much the course has changed to better meet the needs of your program.

Keys to Success with Create-Your-Own Courses

If you find yourself in a program that is creating its own courses, it's wise to get involved as a course author early on. After all, you'll be the one who is spending every day in a class. If it's a class that you created from scratch, you will have fewer edits to make as the year goes on and you'll be happier with the final product.

If you are starting the year with a course that was built by someone within your organization, you will want to follow the same process listed under ''Keys to Success with Purchased Curriculum.'' It's important to know your course inside and out and be able to improve on it each time you teach it.

I should also mention that there are programs out there that expect their teachers to write a course and teach it at the same time. Although it's possible to do that, it is an enormous burden to place on a teacher. If teachers are required to write course content each week in addition to working with students, the level of service to students inevitably suffers. Writing a course is an enormous undertaking. I would anticipate that course writing alone would take twenty to twenty-five hours of every week so the teacher's time to grade assignments, provide feedback, facilitate discussions, and work one-on-one with students would be severely limited. Organizations that attempt this model should limit the teachers' student load significantly for that first year while they are building courses. Writing courses is a creative act and it requires a serious time commitment.

TEACHER AS COURSE AUTHOR AND ORGANIZER VERSUS TEACHER AS FACILITATOR ONLY

In the previous variable, ''Create-Your-Own Versus a Purchased Curriculum,'' I assumed that the teacher had edit and course author privileges within a course.

However, that's not always the case. In some programs, teachers are discouraged or even outright prohibited from making changes in a course. This is an unfortunate practice because it communicates a lack of trust in teachers and also limits a teacher's ability to customize for student needs. However, it's something you may find yourself having to deal with in your teaching situation.

Keys to Success When You Have Course Edit Privileges

When you have edit privileges within a course, it's important that you respect that privilege and follow the mantra, ''Do no harm!'' Any changes that you make should be because they make a significant improvement in the quality of the course for students. Your changes should also align well with your school's curriculum as well as national and state standards. For more information on creating quality assignments and making positive course modifications, see chapter 8.

When you find yourself with course edit privileges, there's also the issue of being able to keep those changes for following years. In an ideal situation, all teachers who are teaching a particular course will collaborate on course changes. Then all teachers start with the same **master course** (the starting copy of a course for any given semester) at the beginning of each year with the new changes incorporated. That way you can maintain the integrity of the course and also allow for modifications. If all teachers make a variety of modifications and never reconcile those changes to the master course, eventually all the teachers will be teaching completely different versions of the class. Collaboration is key throughout.

Keys to Success When You Are a Facilitator Only

You may find yourself in a teaching situation in which you are required to teach a course exactly as written. An initial question to ask might be whether or not you can add content. Sometimes teachers are allowed to add new content but not delete content. In that case, you can add collaborative elements to the class via a course website, wiki, or other interactive tool. If you are not allowed to add content, you can still enrich a student's experience through being the best possible course facilitator. That means reaching out to students, making relationships, and leading students through the course with excellence. Even if you're not allowed to modify content for students, you can still challenge students to excellence through the feedback you provide on assignments and the way you interact with them in e-mails, phone calls, text messages, and so on.

TEACHER PERFORMANCE (AND PERHAPS PAY) BASED ON COURSE COMPLETION VERSUS BASED ON RUBRIC OR EVALUATION SYSTEMS

Another common variable in online learning, because of teacher accountability programs, is that teachers are sometimes paid according to course completion rather than being paid on the basis of a traditional evaluation system. There are benefits to both options. In a system in which teachers are paid according to course completion, teachers are extremely motivated to make sure their students are successful. They are more likely to contact students regularly and go out of their way to help students catch up once they fall behind. However, many times whether or not a student is successful is due to factors outside the teacher's control. Students may enter with below-grade-level skills or they may have factors in their personal lives that make success impossible. In that case, it can feel unfair for a teacher to be penalized.

In a system in which teachers are hired and paid according to a traditional evaluation system, administrators are able to get a greater feel for the teacher's abilities, regardless of student completion percentages. The system as a whole is also far more likely to look at data points beyond completion percentages. Factors such as student engagement, standardized test scores, and teacher professionalism are all important and should be included in a school's improvement plan, regardless of how teachers get paid. However, under traditional evaluation systems, online learning can be difficult to evaluate. Because there is no classroom to observe, administrators have to improvise to evaluate the online teacher. As a result, sometimes those evaluations are invalid or unreliable indicators of student success.

Keys to Success When Teacher Performance Is Evaluated Based on Course Completion

One of the most important things you can do when your performance (or even your pay) is based on student completion is to remember that doing the things that create quality online learning experiences for students will also make more students successful. When you have a strong relationship with students because you have contacted them, provided in-depth feedback, talked with them regularly, and shown them that you care, they are more likely to succeed in your course. When you build a classroom community for students using facilitated discussions, group projects, and shared norms, students are more likely to care about your class. As a result, they are more likely to succeed. Although it can be tempting in an environment in which you are judged solely on course completion statistics to focus only on numbers and finding ways to improve those numbers, the big

picture is still important. If you are a high-quality teacher, your methods will prove themselves over time. Offer your students the best in high-quality online learning and don't let failures (either yours or your students) cloud your focus.

Keys to Success in Traditional Evaluation Systems

When you find yourself being evaluated as an online teacher by a traditional teacher's model, it can be frustrating simply because online teaching so often breaks the mold. In my first evaluation as an online teacher, the administrator was limited to judging me based solely on the quality of my once-a-week synchronous sessions for students (webinars). There was no mechanism to evaluate anything else I was doing, such as communicating with students, providing assessment feedback, building course content, or facilitating discussions, so the administration had to focus on the only thing I did that looked like a traditional teacher: synchronous webinars. Even then, items on the rubric such as ''discipline by proximity'' and ''eye contact'' were not applicable. We made the best we could of the situation. Since then, my program has started to implement some other ways of evaluating online teachers' work. Other programs across the country are beginning that pioneering work also.

As a teacher doing a nontraditional job in a traditional system, your greatest responsibility should be to make the work you do in an online classroom as visible as possible. Invite administrators to tour your online classroom and see what you do. Copy them on e-mails that you send to students (or that they send to you) so that they can see the positive impact you're making. More than anything be an advocate for online teachers. Talk about what you do with people and let them see your passion. That will go a long way toward advancing our field and toward creating positive evaluations.

WHAT KIND OF ONLINE OR BLENDED TEACHING MODEL IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

You can see why the field of online teaching is so complex. These variables and many others make up the enormous variety that you might find in any given online teaching position. The key is, first of all, to consider all the variables before you take an online teaching job. You need to fully understand the complexities of the teaching situation and decide whether or not they can match up with your strengths and teaching philosophy. Second, once you find yourself in a teaching position, you must make the best of your situation. You often won't have any control over a given program's philosophy or structure. What you do have control over is how you work within that structure to create excellent learning opportunities

Table 1.2 Variables in a Digital Classroom

Variable	Option One	Option Two
How students move through course content	Self-paced online program	Cohort-based online program
How students receive the majority of their courses	Full-time online students	Part-time online students
How course content is delivered	Blended delivery of instruction	Fully online delivery of instruction
How course content is created	Course content created by local teachers	Course content purchased from a third-party vendor
How teacher interacts with course content	Teacher has full course edit privileges	Teacher does not have course edit privileges
How teacher is evaluated	Teacher evaluated and paid based on course completion	Teacher evaluated in a traditional evaluation system

for students. Just as in a face-to-face-classroom, a quality teacher makes all the difference.

Table 1.2 provides a matrix illustrating the variables in this chapter. Take a moment and circle the descriptors that fit your current teaching situation or prospective teaching situation. If you have not yet found an online teaching job, you may want to fill it out for what your ideal situation might be. It can be a great way to evaluate a given teaching job and consider your personal philosophies on online learning. Note that although the variables are represented as a dichotomy you may find situations in which the reality is somewhere between the two options.

FOCUS ON BLENDED LEARNING

When considering a blended teaching situation, most of the variables in this chapter will still apply. However, you'll also have a couple of additional variables you'll need to consider.

The first variable is the issue of how much class time is in a classroom and how much is online. You'll need to have a full understanding of how much class time is required for your students. Are students coming in once a week to a classroom?

What if they're coming in to a classroom every day except on Fridays, when they work online? Those distinctions will make a big difference in your teaching situation and in the way you approach the class.

The second variable you'll want to add in a blended teaching situation is whether teachers are working fully from a classroom or if their work time can be spent at least partially at home. In a blended environment, students are spending some time in the classroom and some time working from home or in a computer lab; teachers may also be offered that flexibility. That distinction will make a huge difference in your working environment. It's important to understand the expectations from the beginning.