# Faculty say the Darndest Things! (When They are students in an Online Class)

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## Introduction

How do faculty react when placed into an online class as a student?

Despite being dedicated to a life of education and learning, it can be easy for faculty to forget what life looks like from the other side of the lectern. This is compounded when considering online education as many faculty have never experienced an online course as a student.

In our successful hybrid Online Teaching Fellows program, we give faculty this exact experience - the opportunity to be an online student with all its joys, frustrations and anxiety. We then harness it as a learning experience that allows them to reflect on their online teaching practice.

This poster session will highlight some of the choicest comments from faculty/students about the online portion of our program. Expanding from these sometimes hilarious comments, we will also highlight the specific techniques we use to elicit these reactions. Finally we'll discuss how this approach impacts teaching practice and prompts deeper reflection on online education in general, and teaching online in particular.

## Context

### Online Teaching Fellows

The Online Teaching Fellows program is a hybrid faculty development program run through the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning to engage faculty in discussion and activities to enhance online teaching and learning. The program is split into two tracks:

- Starter Track: For faculty with little or no experience teaching online
- Advanced Track: For experienced online faculty who are interested in having their courses recognized by Quality Matters[1].

Over the last two years the program has enrolled over fifty faculty members in the two tracks, and has had 15 courses recognized by Quality Matters. Looking to the future, the Center predicts over one hundred faculty will participate in the program over the next five years.

### Structure

As hybrid courses, both tracks have two components: face-to-face and online. While both elements are important to the program goals, one of the major objectives of the online portion is to allow faculty to experience online education from a student's perspective. This is particularly significant considering:

- 71% of faculty nationally have never been a student in an online course[2]
- 73% of our program participants have never been a student in an online course

By exposing faculty to the typical online class experience from a student's perspective, participants construct their own knowledge of best practices in teaching online.

The program approaches this element using the Andragogy assumptions of learning by recognizing that adult learners have certain unique needs including that experience should play a role in all learning[3]. Beyond just experiencing the joys and frustrations of being an online student, the course prompts faculty to reflect on how participating in the course as a student impacted their learning, and how it can shape their teaching practice in the future. This reflection is done by:

- Private online journals
- Face-to-face discussions with peers
- Individual consultations with a course designer

Over the last two years, faculty have consistently reported that this exercise is one of the most valuable offered by the program. This poster displays some of the most common insights faculty have under the themes of navigation, group-work and discussion, and the impact that experience has on their course design and teaching practice.

## Navigation

When working on course design, the importance of clear and simple navigation can be difficult to overstate. On becoming an online student however, faculty quickly begin to understand how easy it is to become confused and lost when organization and design haven't been duly considered.

### "Where do I start?"

On entering their first online course, most faculty experience the same panic as a student. Being faced with a blank homepage or confusing layout, faculty, just like students, flounder on how to begin the course. Following this experience, faculty included elements in their own course to alleviate this panic:

- Welcome message with instructions on how to get started
- 'Start Here' widget with links to the first week's work
- A welcome video to introduce student to the first course assignments

### "I can't find this week's assignment"

Despite the dual advantage of being in a hybrid course where the instructor outlines the weekly assignments, and prior experience with D2L, faculty frequently have difficulty finding and turning in assignments. Some faculty confuse assignments and dropbox assignments, while others feel the course schedule is unclear. On the other hand, some participants share that they constantly feel as though they have forgotten 'something' and need to regularly check the syllabus. Learning from this confusion, most faculty include some of the following in their own courses:

- Checklist with due dates
- Detailed D2L calendars with links to assignments
- Printable course schedule

### "Oooh, How do I do that?"

The online course that faculty enroll in becomes a great showcase for how to integrate some of the advanced features of D2L. Faculty leave the program with strong ideas about which technologies will enhance their teaching style and work with a technologist to implement their vision into their classes.

## Group Work

Group work is growing in popularity as a means of online assessment. It was added to the program, not to dissuade faculty from using it, but to ensure that those that did so understood the work and effort required to successfully work in a group online.

### "Where is everyone?"

Despite the advantage of being in a hybrid course and possibly having prior professional relationships with their team mates, groups of faculty in the online course still face difficulty working with asynchronous discussion boards and finding times for synchronous online meetings. For those faculty who have continued to require online group work in their courses, they make a number of changes to help groups navigate these issues, including:

- Setting interim deadlines to keep groups on task
- Offering online collaboration spaces (synchronous and asynchronous)

### "I've done all the work so far"

Just as with student groups, faculty can face situations where members' levels of participation varies and similarly to students, this inequity can lead to emotions running high (see below). Following this experience, faculty have found that small steps can minimize and alleviates some of the inequity in effort and perception of unfair grading. For example some faculty:

- Allow students to rate/assess their group member's contributions

### "It's time to vote someone off the island"

Never assume when working with faculty that a statement of netiquette or appropriate facilitation of discussion boards is not necessary. Just as with students, tensions can flare when faculty are working in groups. When faculty experience this 'darker' side of online group work, they often begin to include the following in their own course:

- Clear guidelines on professional communication standards
- Resources on group conflict resolution

## Discussion

Online discussions are one of the topics discussed most by faculty during the face-to-face sessions as instructors struggle to balance student engagement, depth of learning and efficient use of their own time. As a result, some of the biggest insights come from the faculty experience as students in online discussions. Again, this exercise is not intended to dissuade faculty from using online discussions, or conversely to convince them to, but rather to prompt them to consider the students' perspective of this type of assessment.

### "How do I edit my post?"

Entering the course as a student allows faculty to identify the limitations imposed on their own students by D2L. One of the first issues they often encounter is the inability to edit discussion posts once submitted (something faculty have permission to do). These small realizations can lead to faculty becoming:

- More understanding/believing of technical issues faced by students
- Less critical of small grammatical or spelling errors

### "Why has no one responded to my post yet?"

Similar to students, faculty personalities play an important part of how they work within and react to online courses. Those faculty members who prefer to complete work early experience frustration when faced with the asynchronous nature of the online environment. Though they may post in the discussion forums early, they often contact the instructor to ensure they submitted correctly when they receive no immediate responses. For many faculty, their own frustration as a student, leads them to:

- Implementing staged deadlines for discussion posts
- Including a category for regular posting in discussion guidelines/rubrics

### "Ugh, 42 unread posts!"

All faculty, but particularly those who prefer to work closer to deadlines experience the same overwhelmed feeling as students when trying to manage large online discussions. Entering a discussion on the day of the deadline to be faced with numerous unread posts helps faculty understand why students may not read all posts, or become disengaged from the discussion. Following this experience faculty with larger online courses will often consider:

- Using smaller discussion groups to make the process more manageable for students

### "Is the instructor even reading this?"

This comment from a participant mirrors the pointlessness and isolation students may feel in a discussion without participation or facilitation by the instructor. Faculty particularly were quick to question the point of a discussion when it seemed like the instructor did not value it enough to participate or at least be present. While this was a calculated exercise by the instructor in the Online Teaching Fellows in order to elicit a response, the experience did allow participants to reflect on their role in online discussions and how they communicate that to their students.

## Conclusion

As outlined in the Context section, this element of the Online Teaching Fellows program is popular with participants and is reported to positively impact teaching practice and course design. As a learning exercise it requires participants to both experience and reflect on learning. The faculty are engaging with the concepts covered in the face-to-face sessions and are constructing their own knowledge and online teaching philosophy. Finally, the experience allows participants to better understand the student perspective in an online course, with all the joys and frustrations that brings.

For more information on the Online Teaching Fellows, visit the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning's website at http://www.uwgb.edu/catl/online/

**References**

1. https://www.qualitymatters.org/

2. Lederman & Jaschik. (2013). "Survey of Faculty Attitudes on Technology". Inside Higher Ed.

3. Knowles, M.S., Elwood, F.H., Swanson, R.A. (2005). The Adult Learner: The definitive classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development. Elsevier.

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