Teaching & Learning Online: Musts, Myths & Mothballs

A few “myths” (common misconceptions) about online learning:

- **The person doing the work in the online class may not be the same as the registered student.** True but unlikely. If assessment in the online class is based on work that builds on each assignment and on participatory class discussions, each student will need to be involved throughout the course to earn a good grade – a significant task for a “substitute” student. Do we check the IDs of on-campus students to ensure that they are truly who is registered?

- **Exams are compromised in an online class.** Many on-campus classes have take-home exams which could also be completed by substitute students. We don’t worry much about this because we know how much work would be involved for a substitute student to complete such an exam (as a student, I dreaded take-home exams because they are so much work!). For online classes, analogous exams will have comparable safeguards. However, this means more work if replacing multiple-choice type exams with essay/research type midterms and finals.

- **Online classes are isolating and are missing rich communication.** It is true that, without face-to-face interaction, we lose a great deal. With online discussion rooms, however, we gain something as well. Online discussion often helps shy students to participate. Asynchronous online discussions allow students to think through their ideas and responses which can lead to a deeper conversation than possible within the confines of a 50-minute class period.

- **Technological factors interfere with the learning process.** This can be true for some students which is why the DL Office tries to address every student question or concern early on during each quarter. We have found that generally students learn the technical steps, they are set to go and have no problems throughout the quarter. Even though a “common look and feel” to all online classes might initially help students feel comfortable, once the real work begins the look-and-feel is not a significant factor in the learning process as long as it works for the instructor and student.

- **Online learning is an easy (and inferior) way to go.** An online learning environment is not for every student … or every instructor! Students need self-motivation and discipline to stay on track (having regular assignments due every few days will help!). Instructors must stay connected with the class constantly (but must also be sure to make students aware that they are not immediately available 24/7!). The idea of an instructor or student sitting on the beach with their laptop, doing their work, is truly a myth! I know…I tried! And, for any on-campus or online class, a good instructor designs and delivers a good learning experience. The modality is secondary in importance.

- **Students can hide in an online course.** It is more difficult to hide in an online course designed for ongoing interaction. Students can be quiet in an on-campus class (occasionally someone slept in the back during my 7 AM classes!) but online students must post messages to receive credit in most online courses. They are “forced” to participate because participation is fully recorded. Note that instructors might also be more fairly evaluated in online classes because activity throughout the quarter is archived and a peer-evaluation does not need to be based simply on one visit to a classroom.