Chapter V

The Online Teaching Experience: Teaching With Technology

Introduction

The chapter explores how teachers use information technology for their online courses, and the possible variations in the meaning they derive from their online teaching experiences. The interviewed teachers share their online experiences and offer several interesting suggestions.

Technology is ubiquitous in everybody’s life nowadays, and teachers are no exception to this rule. Whether teaching in the traditional classroom only, or online, the greatest majority of instructors include technology in their teaching process. For example, they prepare course materials on the computer, typing up lectures, student assignments, and presentations. They are definitely not afraid to use technology in support of their teaching, and are not avoiding it. However, the online educational environment is fundamentally different in that it poses specific challenges to teachers. Among the issues that concern them are those related to the instructional processes, media richness, technology reliability, uneven access to technology, and the social isolation of the online teacher. The contents of this chapter should help increase teachers’ awareness of what challenges awaits for them in the online classroom.
Background

The available literature researched for this book points to the many facets of the online teaching experience. Blair (2002) indicates that teachers use technology in their teaching whether this takes place in an online or on-ground classroom. Yet resorting solely to using technology in their teaching can be frustrating. Online, teachers lose the energy and sounds of a real classroom: there is no background noise in the online class. Teaching online is not for every educator; it is a different method of teaching, as much as an exciting one.

In another study, Hinn, Leander, and Bruce (2001) reported that the online environment is a simulated world in which social life develops across on- and off-line networks. Teachers are concerned then with the technical characteristics of technology, interfaces, collaborative tools, and hypertext structures. The new modes of communication pose new challenges for understanding collaboration.

With regard to student participation, the lack of face-to-face contact may lead online students to feel less pressure to contribute. Teachers acknowledge uneven participation and the potential for lurking; however, they feel that imposing too much structure is detrimental to a value-free environment, as should be the case online. Some teachers would like to have alternative procedures for dealing with students’ personal problems (e.g., the telephone). Online, new modes of interaction and communication emerge, and monitoring and encouraging participation can be more difficult. Despite this, there is better feedback online in that more time for reflection is available (Nicol, Minty, & Sinclair, 2003).

Vachris (1999) shows that the online technology promotes a more cooperative learning environment. Yet the interaction is more costly in terms of instructor time, in addition to online teachers spending two to three times more time delivering a course online than on-ground.

Information technology (IT) artifacts are widely used in education. Computers are ubiquitous, and many people rely on the Internet for communication, information, or to improve the quality of their lives. However, this increased reliance on technology leads to unexpected consequences: There is a price to pay for living “on the grid.” While the computer age has given us many reasons to rejoice, “and is often compelling, powerful and productive—it is unprecedentedly fast, even frantic; it is relentless. The price of digitization’s information and fun is frustration; it always needs to be rebooted or relearned” (Henninger, 2005, p. A1). Whatever the case, there is no doubt that the Internet is deeply embedded in the social fabric (Hoffman & Novak, 2004). People are comfortable using the Internet as a source of information and as a communication and socializing tool (Stafford & Gonier, 2004).