

PRESTO – Opening statement

'it is straightforward to teach online – if you are a good teacher in the classroom, you can be a good one online too!'

We believe that it is straightforward to teach online – if you are a good teacher in the classroom you can be a good one online too. The characteristics of a good teacher are mostly independent of the medium in which the teacher operates and are a combination of different factors which have been identified consistently by different authors. For example, Bain (2001) identified several characteristics of a good teacher which we agree capture the essential qualities of a 'good' teacher including:

- they should be subject matter expert in their fields and able to relate teaching material to real life, which makes teaching more engaging for the learner.
- they should take preparation of teaching and learning activities seriously as this will assist with the fluid nature of a lecture.
- they capacity to connect with their students whether on a face-to-face basis or online i.e. *connect themselves to their students, their students to each other, and everyone to the subject being studied.* (Palmer, 1999, p. 27)
- they should make themselves available to students for discussion and feedback.
- the ability to listen to their students and adjust their lectures to suit their needs.
- they should challenge students and not fear being challenged themselves on relevant subject matter
- they should create and nurture a natural learning environment using lectures, discussions, group activities,
- they should endeavour to treat students fairly
- they should monitor the progress of students.

From a students' perspective the characteristics and qualities of a good teacher (Darmody et al. 2006) are similar to the traits identified above i.e.

- who enjoys teaching - creates and/or fosters a natural learning environment
- they can talk to - creates and/or fosters a natural learning environment
- who has a good sense of humour - creates and/or fosters a natural learning environment

Other qualities the students value are:

- encourages questions - challenges students, creates and/or fosters a natural learning environment

PRESTO – Opening statement

- gives praise or feedback - monitors progress
- doesn't give out all the time - creates and/or fosters a natural learning environment
- keeps order - creates and/or fosters a natural learning environment, treats students fairly
- relates the subject to life - takes preparation seriously, subject matter expert,

It is important to note that there is a large degree of overlap between the teachers and the students perspective, which speaks to a core set of characteristics of the good teacher.

In our opinion these are characteristics which are common in both face-to-face and online settings. We agree that the relative importance of these characteristics may vary depending on whether the teaching occurs online or face-to-face. Preparation is a good example of this - in a discussion of what makes a particular lecture rated as 'excellent' Smith (2007, *Excellent in College Teaching and Learning*) makes the point that '*although these performances look like they were made with spontaneity close inspection almost always reveals tedious preparation*'. The implication of this statement is that any technology which assists in delivery of a lecture - from an overhead projector to a webinar - and that its not the technology *per se* which makes you a good teacher in the classroom.

We agree with Palloff & Pratt (2001; p20) that "Online teaching necessitates moving beyond traditional pedagogy to adopt new more facilitative practices". McConnell suggests that there is a new paradigm of learning called networked collaborative e-learning which is emerging as a new model for designing e-learning events and courses.

In the attempt to plan and support meaningful intentional learning we need to understand the context in which it develops best. This idea is underpinned by the research of Vygotsky (1962,1978) into the importance of experiential settings and social contexts for the development of understanding. The two ideas that of learning in groups and communities and communicating in networked environments come together in the notion of networked collaborative e-learning. One of the main ideas underpinning networked collaborative e-learning is that the interactions between students are a significant aspect of their meaningful, intentional, planned development (Banks Lally and McConnell 2003). When students interact with each other and available resources they change. Changes occur in their abilities, attitudes, beliefs, capabilities, knowledge and understanding, mental models and skills (Spector 2000).

PRESTO – Opening statement

The online pedagogy model contains elements which can provide a homogeneous feel for learners and instructors alike. This new pedagogical model is the way forward for the future in helping learning achieve its possibilities.

It is important not to forget that the role of technology in the classroom continues to evolve and that for generations teachers have adapted to the technology, consistently delivering good lectures. There was a time when overhead projectors were considered state-of-the-art but they are now just part of the furniture.

Online teaching is only the next step in this evolution and shouldn't be considered some extraordinary barrier. In the following paragraphs we outline the common objections to online teaching and how progress has been made to ameliorate their influence.

Low digital Literacy of students is not a feature that impedes the teacher's performance. With digital literacy abilities growing from strength to strength, highlighted by a recent study where Irish teenagers ranked seventh in a study generated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. This study measured students ability to read, understand and apply digital texts, including e-mails and websites.

Poor accessibility to the internet is barrier that is being overcome. The internet has never been more accessible. A report from the Central Statistics Office shows that 81% of all Irish households had access to a computer last year, while 78% had access to the internet. Smartphone ownership was estimated at three-quarters of a million smartphone owners in Ireland (AMAS, 2011). Irish broadband penetration continues to grow, with the total number of broadband subscriptions for the second quarter of 2011 stood at almost 1.63 million, a healthy annual increase of 8.3%. (Broadband stats, 2011, AMAS Ltd). Many European cities are now installing free WIFI which will give greater access and reach to online learning. Dublin City Manager John Tierney expects this to be rolled out in Dublin next year. Getting online has never been easier! The Academy of Art University, California, suggests that successful e-Learning solutions must consider courses and content that execute well across either low- or high-bandwidth

PRESTO – Opening statement

connections. That allows students to access content reliably and interact with instructors regardless of the computing platform they are on and with little or no investment in technologies. Students access Academy of Art University online courses without the need for special software or plug-ins. By keeping the technology intuitive, the online experience can be simple and straight forward for all.

The student's wont have inferior experiences due to unfamiliarity with the technology. Important advances in technology, and the widespread acceptance by students and faculty, have made it possible to offer online programs that truly parallel traditional classroom experiences, and in certain instances surpass what is possible onsite (Shaeffer, 2008). The rapid expansion of online education and use of education technologies has had quite an impact on staff including designing new curricula for online delivery, new methods of teaching, new technologies etc. Successful ways of supporting this have included Wenger's Model of a community of practice, providing scaffolding that facilitates and supports construction of knowledge, development of enhanced practices of reflection and transformational learning (Juwah, 2006).

The teacher can assist in the adaption from classroom to online. Instructor modelling increases the likelihood of student messages meeting quality and content expectations. (Roisin Donnelly, 2012) Thus, by displaying positive actions, students will model and adapt well to the digital environment. There are many backup plan Bs for when technologies do fail, such as recording the sessions on the VLE. Salmon (2004), makes practical suggestions about inducting online learners. She specifies the need to limit the amount of content specific information and activity early on, and to focus on activities (E-tivities) that promote the formation of an individual's identity online, the rules around online discussions expectations. She recommends the simplification and also limitation of navigation options early on and releasing the content as learners gain mastery with some of the basic skills. This would reduce some of the cognitive overloading that learners experience at this stage.

Technical Assistance is available. All participants need received access to the environment and technical support before and during the class as needed, including live support. Some US universities offer a 24/7 Help Desk. Technical support personnel can use remote software to view a student's desktop, and even take control of a remote computer if necessary. By careful planning of e-Learning solutions and technical

PRESTO – Opening statement

support, the barriers of interactive technology are easily overcome and allow the student to focus on the material and not learning how to use the technology.

Encountering technical barriers can mean just more positive learning for all. Teachers and students working on online courses may encounter technology problems at some stage; this can be made a positive experience. Pre-induction questionnaires establish the participant's levels of expertise with relevant technology, identifying early if students or teachers are feeling out of their comfort zone. It's critical to have all participants install and test the software they need well before the session is due to start. This can be done by remote training where teething problems are resolved early, not to interfere with classes. Giving all involved the opportunity to try the software and be assisted with environment features, such as using status icons or chat and test hardware such as mic and speakers. Another advantage of the virtual classroom is the career benefits it offers to teachers, many teach online do so in addition to other full-time jobs. They may work full-time as a faculty member for another institution, or even work outside of the field of education in a full-time capacity. e-Learning initiatives do more than communicate valuable academic, subject-specific, knowledge. They also strengthen students' and teachers' comfort with technology, and build real-world communication and collaboration skills (Bahr & Bodrero, 2012).

In conclusion

We believe that online teaching is only the next step in the ongoing evolution of teaching. The perception that it is difficult in some ways undermines the preparation which a good lecturer would put into a face-to-face lecture, preparation for which there is often no tangible evidence after the preparation is complete. The characteristics identified for a good teacher in a classroom setting are easily transferred to an online environment. We believe that current pedagogical approaches will evolve and be applied to the new format to maximise the affordances of the new format. We believe we have successfully argued that technical barriers do not prohibit a teacher from functioning to the best of their professional ability. This is due to the infrastructure of an increasingly digitally literate population of learners, the continuing growth of internet coverage, sound planning and correct and organized use of the digital facilities. We feel that the technical barriers are not so difficult to overcome as to render the teacher less able to maximise on their teaching ability. Not only does it not render them less able as teachers, it allows them to develop

PRESTO – Opening statement

themselves as teachers further as they become more equipped in the technological classroom. If a teacher is motivated in terms of their preparation and a willingness to connect with their students, then why should teaching online diminish that motivation.

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PRESTO – Opening statement

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Webography:

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