[Book Review]

The Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips

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In recent years the popularity of online distance education programs at institutes of higher education in North America has increased at a rapid rate (Levine, Guy, Straus & Levine, 2011). In an effort to meet the demand for this method of delivery, some existing universities have scrambled to develop online programs and courses. Faculty members with little experience in this medium have found themselves not only teaching, but also developing online courses, often without adequate support or training. *The Online Teaching Survival Guide* was developed by the administration of the School of Leadership and Professional Advancement at Duquesne University in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania "to provide more active and ongoing support to online faculty to help ensure the quality of the online teaching and learning experience" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010, p. xxi). Written to meet the needs of a specific university department, the authors believe that this guide "can help faculty wherever they might be, on campuses large or small, or in areas remote from their home campuses" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010, p. xxvi) to teach a wide variety of subjects. This guide provides a step-by-step support through the course-planning process, involving theoretical foundations, practical strategies and activities of online teaching and learning.

As of 2011, only 15% of students enrolled in post-secondary education in the United States fit the traditional student profile (Hess, 2011). Some 38% are over the age of 25 (Bell, 2012), and it seems that many others display more than one risk factor predicting failure to graduate, such as being in fulltime employment or parenting a child alone (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Success, 2012; Casselman, 2013). These changes in the demographic profile of students mean that universities must work harder to retain students and help them

to achieve academic success. This could be interpreted this as a move from teacher-centered methods of teaching and learning to more student-centered activities, which Boettcher and Conrad define as revolving around "doing and creating" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010, p. 18). As such, the book is "grounded in constructivism" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010, p. 12). Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), pioneered this theory of learning wherein learners generate meaning and understanding for themselves by making connections between experience and ideas, rather than acquiring it from information sources.

In Chapter One, the authors outline 'Ten Core Learning Principles', the first of which states that "every structured learning experience has four elements with the learner at the center" (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010, p. 20). The other three elements are the teacher ('faculty-mentor'), content knowledge and the learning context. The learner is at the center of the process because a strong correlation has been observed between levels of student participation and mastery of course content: Krish and Wong (2009), whilst collecting data about Malaysian students studying English, confirmed the importance of active learning in technology-based learning. Yang (2011), in her work with college level Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students found that behavioral engagement led to class participation and task completion, which is "a key element in successful language learning" (Yang, 2011, p.182). In line with such research, *The Online Teaching Survival Guide* leads course planners towards creating activities that encourage learners to be active participants, both in their own learning and in the course itself. Similarly, the role of 'teacher' has been renamed 'faculty-mentor', a consistent reminder throughout the text that faculty moving into online education must also realign their teaching styles appropriately to the online medium.

The Online Teaching Survival Guide is divided into three parts. Part One is an overview of the theories and principles of online teaching and learning. Part Two is a practical step-by-step guide to actually conduct an online course. Part Three provides opportunities for reflections after the planned course is completed.

The three chapters of Part One are dedicated to core principles and best practices of online teaching and learning. "Teaching Online - The Big Picture" (Chapter One) includes tables outlining the four phases of online courses: Course Beginnings, Early Middle, Late Middle, and Closing Weeks. These tables describe the responsibilities and activities of the learner and faculty-mentor as well as important information about content knowledge and the learning environment in each phase.

Part Two comprises eight chapters, two for each phase of the planned online course. The first chapter for each phase outlines what should be happening and the themes and relevant learning tools for that phase. For example, the major theme of Phase Three, the Late Middle, is student empowerment. In Chapter Eight, faculty-mentors are asked to provide opportunities for learners to apply what they have learned to simulated real-life challenges. The second chapter of each phase then shows how pedagogy and theory can be practically applied in the virtual classroom. In Chapter Nine, therefore, faculty-mentors are shown how to empower learners by using social networking to create a learning community. They are advised to create a personal blog or discussion board for students so that they can update one another about their progress, and receive and respond to comments and suggestions. The authors specifically suggest that *Voice Thread*, an asynchronous web-based learning tool, be used to facilitate peer assessment, thereby facilitating collaborative learning and meaningful interaction among learners. This illustrates how Vygotsky's Theory of Social Development, which posits that social interaction is central to the development in cognitive function, can be

practically applied. There are detailed explanations of tools and activities related to the theme of each phase, and clear connections are drawn between suggested activities and the educational theories explained in Part One of the book.

One strength of *The Online Teaching Survival Guide* lies in its accessibility and flexibility. It is easy to use. The tables and figures that summarize main points and facilitate understanding of difficult concepts are particularly useful, and provide quick, effective access to information. One such example is Figure 7.1(Boettcher & Conrad, 2010, p. 115). The authors introduce the Course Management System (CMS) 'Blackboard' in the preceding pages, then discuss how and why CMSs should be used. Figure 7.1 is a screen shot of the technology actually in use, which lets readers understand clearly the paragraphs that precede and follow it. A web address for a video walk-through of how to use this CMS is also provided, giving readers a thorough introduction to the software.

Despite the clarity and usefulness of this guide, there is room for improvement. Considering the fact that it was written as a survival manual for those new to online teaching, the authors assume a level of computer skill and Internet knowledge that may alarm some prospective faculty-mentors. For example, while Chapter Four provides descriptions of the tools mentioned throughout the text, it would be difficult to grasp how to use them, or even to choose which to explore, based solely on the descriptions provided. While the authors do not directly address the issue of computer skill required, they seem to assume that prospective faculty-mentors have a robust knowledge of both how to use the Internet and the computer with which to access it. For users without such knowledge, this book will not provide clear instructions.

One advantage of distance education is its potential to reach students throughout the world who might not otherwise have access to education. For this reason it is important for faculty-mentors to acknowledge not only the possibility of cultural differences, but also to be sensitive to the possible needs of such students. While technology tools, especially those that encourage students to share and communicate, can "serve to unite learners into tight-knit communities" (Liu & Jernigan, 2013, p. 10), they can also cause students without the requisite digital skills to withdraw, as noted by Migliorino (2011).Writing about immigrant communities in Australia, Migliorino notes the need not only for English language literacy, but also digital literacy if new arrived refugees and skilled migrants are to be successful. Faculty-mentors should, therefore, make sure that the learners enrolled in their courses are competent and confident users of the technology tools to be employed. Unfortunately, the authors do not address this issue, instead focusing on preparing prospective faculty-mentors to teach online successfully.

There is also a lack of attention given to the kind of students often present in the online classroom. Many non-traditional students opt to work towards accreditation online, meaning that more students enrolled are likely to display risk factors than in a standard face-to-face classroom (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Success, 2012). Faculty-mentors must be aware of these challenges, yet the authors fail to address this issue in any way.

General clarity is compromised in some sections of this book. The frequent interchange of the terms 'phase,' 'stage,' 'section' and 'unit' can potentially lead to confusion for the reader. Greater consistency would aid clarity of meaning. Inadequate attention to the details of successful proofreading also detracts from the quality of this book (see page 26 lines 20-23.)

The transition to teaching online requires an Herculean effort; adapting to any new medium is a daunting task for many faculty members. Concentrating on the theory of distance education can be helpful, but a purely academic study of the content material without the practical experience offered by Boettcher and Conrad will not benefit the reader. *The Online Survival Guide* provides prospective faculty-mentors with step-by-step instructions on how to construct and conduct an online course. The authors clearly connect suggested tools and activities to the educational concepts and theories that they also introduce. In this way, readers are not only provided with the necessary theoretical knowledge but also practical suggestions that can help them to make a confident start as online educators or moderators.

More detailed explanations accompanied by screenshots and links to support the use of technology tools mentioned in this book, would make this text more useful for novice learners and practitioners. Even in its current form, however, *The Online Teaching Survival Guide* is a valuable resource for faculty members making the transition to online teaching. For experienced online educators, it works as a reference for suggested tools, activities and best practices. We feel that this text is an essential addition to the bookshelf, or e-book library, of anyone presently teaching courses online or planning to do so.

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