

Those Who Can, Teach

Becoming a Teacher

My first teaching opportunity came when I was still in high school. I was a math tutor, working with junior high students struggling with algebra. In a one-on-one setting, often lounging with my students on their bedroom floors, I explained polynomial functions and abstract numbers. I also answered questions about life beyond eighth grade graduation. From the lofty distance of three years, I could reflect on how I had risen to the challenge of high school. My willingness to talk and to respond to their questions helped several of them express and then ease their fears about moving into the next stage of their education.

From that first experience in that most intimate setting, I've expanded my teaching to classrooms, virtual and traditional. I've taught a few hundred students of varying skills and interests, covering topics including college composition, Web-based business research techniques, nonprofit marketing and branding, creative writing, and more. My writing and composition students in particular seem to thrive under my watch. Together we untangle the mysteries of English grammar while shaping ideas through the power of written words.

I never see most of my students and only rarely speak to any of them on the telephone. We communicate primarily through asynchronous discussion, e-mail, and the occasional instant messenger session; they send assignments via Web depository or e-mail, and I respond digitally with detailed feedback. Yet I find that in many ways the relationships we have are not altogether different from those I had as a math tutor. I am doing much more than serving as a conduit to the mastery of a specific subject or skill. Rather, I am changing the way they think about themselves and interact with their entire world. I am helping them build confidence, agree to take risks, and believe in themselves and their ability to perform in a quickly changing world.

When I am teaching, whether face to face or on opposite sides of the world, I am engaged in one of the most rewarding, challenging, and connected roles I take on in my busy life.

Why Write This Book?

I came to distance learning initially with some skepticism. Despite earning my own master's degree in creative writing through a low-residency program (a hybrid form of distance education involving brief on-campus periods followed by six-month stretches of work through the mail with a mentor), I wasn't convinced that distance methods could adequately serve the needs of a dynamic classroom. From my comic-book-reading days, I remembered the "Draw me!" ads offering to train me to be an artist although I could barely draw a 3-D cube with any degree of accuracy. Was it really possible to deliver high-quality learning experiences if I couldn't see and immediately respond to my students?

When I first explored the possibilities of distance learning early in 2002, my experience included teaching in a live classroom as well as years of experience (naturally) on the other side of the gradebook. I was comfortable with traditional classrooms, and so I took them as the norm against which distance learning would have to be measured. When teaching in front of a class, I knew (more or less) what to expect and how to prepare. I knew how to read expressions, think on my feet, adapt, take a little more time with a challenging topic, or allow an unexpectedly profound discussion to run long. How could an online classroom ever compare?

Since then, I've taught dozens of courses through a variety of distance-learning formats. I've learned how to adapt both what I teach and how I teach so that I maximize the features and benefits of different learning environments. I've learned more about learning styles, as well as my own strengths and weaknesses as an instructor. Most important, I've become more conscious of what I need to do to deliver an engaging, educational course—a development that has had a deep, positive impact on all my teaching, no matter what the venue.

My Experiences with Distance Learning

In 1996, I graduated with a master's degree in creative writing with the inaugural class of the Bennington Writing Seminars (BWS) at Bennington College in Vermont. As mentioned earlier, BWS is based on a low-residency format: four semesters of one-on-one work through the mail with writing mentors, interspersed with “residencies” in January and June, when we participated in workshops, lectures, and graduation for the outgoing class. At the time, there were only half a dozen low-residency master's programs in writing in the country; today there are more than 30, with new ones being established each year.

Following graduation, I began teaching occasionally in traditional classrooms, primarily through the adult enrichment program at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. A couple of years later, I started my research and communications business, which enabled me to start developing and conducting customized training programs for clients in business research, public relations basics, audience-focused communication, and more. When I couldn't travel to a client site, we would naturally move to a teleconference format. I began to become more interested in finding other ways to reach geographically remote audiences.

In 1999, I joined an online writer's group for BWS alumni. Although I've never met the majority of the writers in the group, our exchanges of both writing and the woes of the artistic struggle have allowed us to develop very close relationships. One of my dear colleagues in this group is William Males, a lecturer at the University of Gävle in Sweden, where he lives. Before we ever met face to face, William invited me to become a co-teacher in his Creative Writing in English course, taught online under the auspices of his university.

Late in 2001 and early in 2002, my business (and many others) was in a slow mode. Seeking additional income sources, I responded to an online faculty recruitment advertisement from the University of Phoenix Online. I was accepted into the intensive one-month training program, and I successfully taught my first class—Essentials of College Writing—at the University of Phoenix in August 2002.

By the middle of 2003, I was eagerly looking for more ways to incorporate distance-learning principles into my consulting practice. I found the perfect opportunity in my relationship with a national nonprofit, Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal (STAR). STAR provides training, education, and capacity building for synagogues and their leaders

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through its programs. As STAR's communications consultant, I've been charged with the exciting and challenging task of creating and reviewing distance-learning opportunities for rabbis, synagogue professionals, and volunteers in a variety of key areas—including synagogue marketing, which I not only develop but teach as well.

There are other elements of my professional and personal life that make distance learning a perfect arena in which to play, but these primary touch points in my history will help you understand the basis for my approach to distance instruction.

Teaching through distance learning is just as rewarding as teaching in a traditional classroom setting (or even more so). I teach through distance learning in part because flexible formats enable me to work with students I wouldn't otherwise be able to reach and to add classes to an already busy schedule. The students I encounter through distance learning have widely diverse backgrounds, abilities, and needs, bringing a new richness to my own experiences as an instructor.

Still, these benefits weren't achieved simply through migrating to a distance-learning platform. Making distance learning such a positive experience for my students and me has taken focus, attention, training, and a willingness to experiment. Taking advantage of distance learning has made me take a critical look at every element of my formal and informal teaching and to think differently about exactly what I'm offering students.

When I was first invited to teach a seminar in a traditional classroom setting, I had only one decision to make: What was I going to present, based on the requested topic and the knowledge level of the students? Now that I'm developing distance-learning offerings, I have an entire host of additional decisions to make, including which platform to use, how to format materials, which ways to integrate technology to enhance the learning experience, and how to manage and guide a student's "classroom" experience.

The biggest surprise for me in the shift from classroom to distance has been the relationships I have with my distance students. From the moment I conceive an idea for a possible distance-learning program, the students are present. As I craft objectives, activities, lesson plans, the arc of a learning experience, the integration of technology, and even the content of assignments, I am in silent dialogue with the students who live in my head—asking questions, pointing out inconsistencies in the classroom experience,

giving me the deer-in-the-headlights stare because I've failed to provide the background information they need to complete an assignment.

In distance learning, ironically, the students are *always* present.

I love that connection with students and the potential for creating meaningful change (in them) and exchange (between us). So many talented instructors and potential instructors dismiss the idea of distance learning because the traditional classroom is their norm, as it was for me before I started teaching at a distance. They assume, as I did, that it's too difficult or even impossible to craft those connections without being in a face-to-face environment. My hope is that this book will help you expand your ideas about creative possibilities in distance learning and give you the practical knowledge you need to make it happen at the same time.

But What Exactly *Is* Distance Learning?

Does distance learning mean Web-based education? Correspondence courses? Self-paced activities? Virtual teams? Teleconferences? Satellite courses? Interactive video? Short, easy answer: Any and all of the above. Distance learning is more visible today than ever before because of the way the Internet has become embedded in corporate, academic, and consumer life. But it has existed longer than the Web, and if, as some doom-and-gloomers predict, the Web one day collapses under the monstrous weight of its unsupportable growth, distance learning will continue to be a viable option for education of all kinds.

But it's true that Web-based education dominates the current development in the field because of its many advantages for instructors, developers, and students. Even within the category of Web-based classrooms, we can find plenty of variation in learning platforms and instructional approaches. A "Webinar" usually refers to a real-time Web-based presentation, with or without viewer interaction. Web-based classrooms can be synchronous (e.g., real-time chat rooms) or asynchronous (e.g., threaded discussions in a dedicated space or forum). Instructional models have even been built around downloadable e-books, with interaction provided through e-mail.

In other words, you have options. By uncoupling instruction from the traditional classroom restrictions of time and place, you have an opportunity to focus on the following questions:

- What information and knowledge do you want to share with students?
- What outcomes do you want your students to achieve (what should they be able to say, think, or do as a result of the learning experience)?
- What is the best combination of instructor resources, student resources, materials, technology, and expense to achieve a successful outcome?

This book will help you answer these questions and develop the materials, resources, tools, and processes you need to act on your answers. And unlike other resources on distance education, this book does not assume you will choose a Web-based platform, or even a technology-driven platform, on which to teach. You may find that printed materials and snail mail work just as well to accomplish your goals and create a satisfying experience for you and your students.

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is written by an instructor for instructors. It is intended primarily for those who are interested in enhancing their teaching skills, broadening their student pool, or challenging their own assumptions about what goes into a functional classroom, and for those who are just plain intrigued by the possibilities of distance learning but want a guided approach to make it work for them.

The pressure on institutions and instructors to find ways to develop and deliver effective distance learning is intensifying. Hardly a university exists that isn't asking instructors to incorporate an online component into their courses, as well as create online-only offerings to maximize the reach of the institution. Consultants, trainers, and topic experts are exploring distance learning as a way to expand their reach (and potential revenue sources) while minimizing airport time. Associations, facing increasing competition for their members' time, dues, and loyalty, are turning to distance learning

as a way to add value to their memberships; they can offer training, professional development, and networking opportunities that members can access at their convenience, without the expense and hassle of attending an on-site meeting or conference. And all of these institutions need instructors who are creative, confident in their choice of distance-learning tools, and ready to meet the needs of a wide range of students.

Different Types of Readers: How to Use This Book

This information will help you understand how to incorporate this book into your planning and development, based on your particular situation and needs.

If you are

- Teaching at a college or university

Then you probably

- Are required to use a specific platform (e.g., WebCT, Blackboard, proprietary, or other)
- Have access to instructional design support
- Have access to technical support
- Have experience teaching in traditional classrooms

And you can use this book to

- Learn to adapt your teaching style to a distance format
- Learn what questions to ask and how to present your ideas and “wish list” to design and technical specialists
- Get fresh ideas on teaching and how to best help students of all kinds

If you are

- Part of a small or midsize business

Then you probably

- Have a limited budget
- Do not have access to a high-cost, feature-rich platform
- Are also responsible at some level for marketing your courses

And you can use this book to

- Understand how to apply the concepts of distance learning in course design
- Identify, select, and implement low-cost and low-tech options effectively
- Gain perspective on audiences and learners and understand how to deliver (and market) something they want and need

If you are

- An independent consultant, freelance instructor, or other solo practitioner

Then you probably

- Have a minuscule budget
- Have deep topic expertise but limited (if any) access to other kinds of expertise
- Need to market your course to survive

And you can use this book to

- Learn how to package your knowledge in course content
- Learn how to instruct students rather than simply talk about what you know
- Get a sense of what your market might look like and need in an instructional setting

- Understand the partnerships you may need to teach a course effectively
- Identify low-cost options for launching and testing a course “product”
- Make decisions about which tools and methods to use to deliver distance education

If you are

- Supporting instructors in their distance education endeavors (e.g., you are a training company or department, college dean, technical expert, instructional designer, student support services provider, or platform provider)

Then you probably

- Work with others who will be instructing students
- Need to convince instructors at times to move out of their comfort zone and think differently about instruction
- Mentor or coach instructors to be successful in new areas and with new skill sets

And you can use this book to

- Create shared knowledge with your instructors about scope of work, creative possibilities, content development, audience, and more
- Provide instructors with step-by-step guidance in moving to a distance-learning environment
- Help instructors develop better skills in working with students, organizing their courses, and being effective teachers

If you are

- A decision maker for an association, business, organization, or other entity

Then you probably

- Need to find effective ways to enhance the value of your entity to your audiences (members, employees, beneficiaries, etc.)

And you can use this book to

- Understand the ways distance education offerings may enhance your overall structure by offering high-quality, high-touch, user-focused experiences on more flexible and cost-effective terms than traditional classrooms, conferences, publications, or other methods can

How This Book Is Organized

This book is not designed to be a “soup to nuts” compendium of steps in implementing a distance-learning program. You will not learn how to develop Web pages, install or troubleshoot software, provide student support services, or fulfill other critical needs in developing and delivering an effective distance-learning program. There are many other books and resources you can turn to for that kind of assistance (although in my opinion, you have enough to do to teach without needing to learn to create a Web page, too). The supplementary reading list in Appendix A provides sources of additional practical guidance beyond the scope of planning and instruction, and other resources can be found at the companion Web site for this book: www.electric-muse.com/tbyr.asp. But go only as deeply as you feel compelled to go in these other areas. Learn enough to be a good partner to those who have the passion for software or support services that you have for instruction.

One of the underlying themes of this book is that distance learning is best created in collaboration with others. I do not believe it is even possible

to excel at performing all of the roles that go into a successful distance-learning program. So you need to know going into it that this book focuses strictly on the requirements for instruction and points out where you need to partner with others to create the best possible educational environment for you and your students.

Content Overview: It's All About Interaction

The core of learning is interaction.

In traditional classrooms, interaction takes place primarily in a face-to-face setting—a classroom usually, or perhaps team meetings or instructor conferences. It's what most of us are used to and, at some unconscious level, expect.

In distance learning, interaction is still the beating heart of the educational experience. The interaction, however, occurs at a temporal and spatial disconnect. Learners, instructor, content, and social community are no longer contained within the same four walls at the same time. Yet learning occurs. The job of the instructor is to create the right conditions for interaction with the instructor, content, and learning peers, regardless of the distance between the elements.

Ultimately, the instructor does not create learning (whew!); the instructor can create only the environment, distant or not, in which learning can be *co-created* through the *interaction with content, peers, and instructor* (see Figure I.1).

The tools of distance learning are the media through which these interactions are enabled. Chapter 1 discusses the tools available for distance learning and suggests how they may be used, individually and in concert with one another.

Best practices in instruction focus on the learner rather than on the content. Chapter 2 describes what the distance population looks like and how it behaves. By focusing on adult students, this chapter lays out different learning styles, generational differences, and attitudes toward education that can make a difference in how students enter your class, work with you and the material, and communicate their educational goals.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on creating content for distance learning that encourages interaction while achieving learning objectives. Chapter 3 guides you through the questions and processes that will help you create

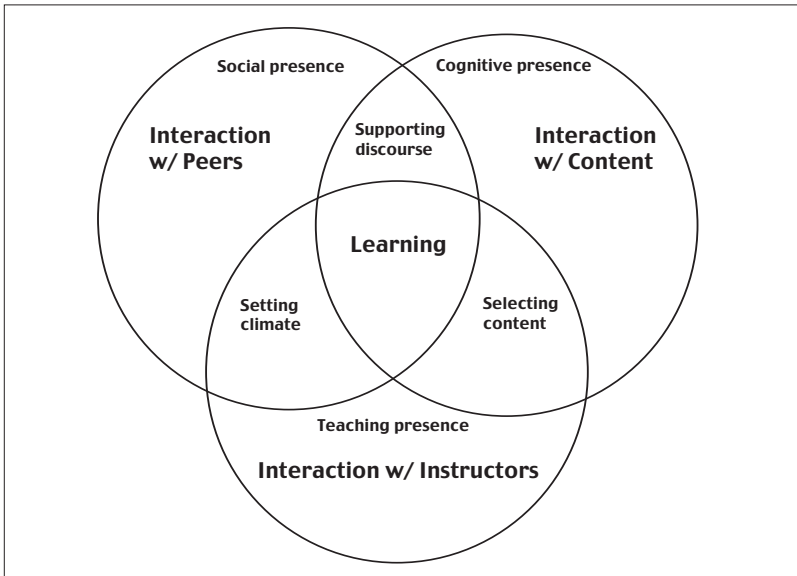


Figure I.1 Interaction with content, instructor, and peers. The three kinds of interaction are what co-create an effective learning experience. (Used with permission from Swan, Karen. (2003). *“Learning Effectiveness: What the Research Tells Us,”* in *Elements of Quality Online Education: Practice and Direction*. Sloan-C: Needham, MA. Additional information is available at www.sloan-c.org.)

the overall course design, while Chapter 4 offers detailed information on the actual craft and implementation of course content elements such as lectures, presentations, assignments, and so on.

The role of the instructor in a distance-learning environment can be neither “sage on the stage” nor “guide on the side.” Depending on the degree of comfort your students have with distance learning, your own pedagogical style, the tools you have at hand, and the objectives of the course, you may find yourself taking on any combination of many different roles: mentor, coach, instructor, facilitator, referee, trainer, and even shoulder to cry on.

In a traditional classroom, expectations of the instructor are fairly clear, particularly if all participants have been raised in similar cultures. Everyone agrees what the words “instructor,” “student,” “classroom,” “performance,” and “you are on the verge of failing” mean. Move into a

distance-learning environment, though, and expectations become much more amorphous. Often, instructors who are new to distance learning are surprised to find that their interactions with learners are quite a bit more intense and intimate than they might be in a traditional classroom and that they lead to close and rewarding relationships of mutual development. As exhilarating as such an experience can be for an instructor, this degree of intimacy with students can require skill development in areas not previously considered to be part of your pedagogy—for instance, in motivational skills or boundary setting.

On the other hand, instructors are sometimes surprised at how much effort they have to make just to hear a peep out of some of their students. The primacy of interaction in a successful distance-learning environment requires that instructors prepare students to interact. This is harder than it sounds. Years of conditioning through everything from lecture-hall classes to television viewing have not prepared students for active engagement with instructors, materials, or each other. Motivation and creative use of interactive tools will be essential to helping students succeed. Satisfied distance-learning students are those who have had appropriate expectations raised, are trained to get the most out of the experience, and are encouraged, coached, prodded, and urged to be as active as possible in their own education.

Chapter 5 provides insight and ideas for managing the distance-learning “classroom” and helping your students interact effectively with you to maximize their learning. You will also find tips and wisdom from the field about what to expect and how to foster the kinds of interaction that make great learning possible. Chapter 6 provides guidance on getting to know your students as individual learners, working with their strengths and weaknesses, and motivating them to their peak performance through mentoring and feedback.

We humans are social creatures. The importance of collaborative work in creating an effective distance-learning environment has been documented in study after study. Foster positive group interaction and your students will reap the benefits, even if they grumble about the additional challenges that participating in a community may create.

Fostering positive group interaction is also harder than it may first seem. The mandate to create community seems nonsensical in the face of the physical distances separating the learners and their limited means of getting to know one another on a personal level. Distance programs

tend to attract a diverse group of students, which makes it even more challenging—yet vital—to establish common ground for group bonding. More subtly, the dominant culture of education is one of competition rather than collaboration; distance-learning instructors have to shift student expectations from eyeing one another suspiciously to treating each other as a valued part of the process.

Of all the kinds of interactions that distance instruction threw at me, building a community of learners was one of the hardest to handle. At first I didn't see the value of collaborative work, in part because in my experience as a learner, interaction with peers has never been my preference. Throughout my schooling, I dreaded participating in group projects and invariably wanted to go into my corner and work on my own. I've found, however, that the work I put into helping the students develop teams and mutually supportive relationships brings rich rewards to everyone. Distance-learning classes are usually diverse in terms of learner experience, background, skills, and perspective. The work we do together, as a collaborative community, adds to the education of everyone ... including the instructor.

Of course, chemistry is always a bit uncertain, but an instructor can find ways to improve the odds of creating a bit of interpersonal magic. Chapter 7 introduces the keys for creating effective learning communities at a distance.

Distance learning is fundamentally a collaborative enterprise. You can be an outstanding instructor, but without assistance and support from knowledgeable partners, it's difficult to offer high-quality distance education. This book is also a useful tool to help decision makers (including administrators, deans, executive directors, and others) and supporting experts (Web designers, technical support folks, instructional designers, and even marketing staff) understand what you are trying to create and how they can best contribute to the process.

To create a successful team, first it is important to create a shared understanding of the place, purpose, and objectives of a distance-learning program. Chapter 8 is designed to serve as a stand-alone "state of the environment" review of the challenges, potential, and collaborative roles involved in distance learning. For individual instructors, this chapter ties the details of the book into the broader context of the practical world of business education, personal enrichment, and academia. You will also find this chapter helpful as preliminary reading for the entire team

involved in distance learning—including students. Use the worksheet and discussion guide at the end of Chapter 8 to establish a shared understanding of your particular situation within the cultural, social, academic, professional, and technical context of distance learning.

Those Who Can, Teach ... Beyond Their Reach

Not every expert can teach. We've all had classes and lectures in which the sage on the stage clearly knew her "stuff" but just as clearly didn't have a clue about how to communicate—let alone teach—competence in said stuff. Teaching is a skill that is too often overlooked or underestimated.

Connection, communication, motivation, response: All these are required for effective instruction, above and beyond knowledge of the specific subject to be taught. In fact, I've found that I can cram to gain subject knowledge when necessary, but I cannot fake the core skills that allow me to create connections with students, communicate with them, and motivate them to succeed.

Because distance instruction takes us out of a comfortable environment and throws us into an unfamiliar one, it gives us the opportunity to challenge every expectation we may have about why, to whom, and how to teach. The concepts and processes covered in this book will help you create and deliver effective distance-learning programs. They likely will also help you become a more effective instructor in traditional environments. If most of your own education has been in competitive environments that focus on finding errors, teaching to the test, and mastering skills rather than building knowledge, you will discover a new model in these pages. Learner-centric teaching, on which successful distance-learning programs are based, puts the learner's needs, skills, and strengths at the heart of the classroom experience. It recognizes the learner's need to receive positive reinforcement even while accepting correction. At its best, it creates a safe place for people to try out new ideas and new skills, make unique human connections, and discover their own potential.

So explore the possibilities of distance education to teach management strategy, technical topics, poetry, higher math, computer programming, graphic design, parenting skills, foreign language, Web

development, literature, music history—even how to create and deliver effective distance-learning courses.

Whatever your expertise, and whatever your passion for instruction and connecting with students, open your arms and your creative sense of what's possible. Find the distance venues and methods that work for you, and teach beyond your reach.