

Teaching Roles of Librarians: New Variations Or Everything I Needed to Know I Learned when Teaching Kindergarten!

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Introduction

Many people think that anyone can teach. But not all of us are able to teach well. Teaching kindergarten taught me my limitations and taught me what abilities I needed to learn to become a good teacher.

With the advent of distance learning, many of us have ventured into teaching on the Web. We may have been great teachers in the classroom. But suddenly we're finding that teaching online is a whole different ballgame. Why don't things work the same online as they do in person?

Today we'll talk about:

- how to become better teachers
 - understand how teaching online differs from teaching in person in a classroom, and
 - learn what different skills we need to develop when teaching online in order to teach more effectively
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What Qualifies Me?

- I have a bachelor's degree in elementary education from a college and program that earned a reputation as being one of the top of its kind in the state of Minnesota—Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota.
- For 10 years, I have taught about 30 workshops and 28 courses at three different library schools. I have also co-taught a course with the Dean of the School of Computer Science at Carnegie Mellon University. Since Fall 2003, I have been teaching online courses only, specifically for Drexel.

- My favorite experience was teaching kindergarten but it was also the most *difficult*. The experience was one of several student teaching experiences I was required to do for my degree. When teaching kindergarten, I worked with students with various learning disabilities as well as one emotionally disturbed boy.
 - One of the most enlightening experiences for any teacher is to work with children with such challenges. Your goal as the teacher is to help students learn. But the challenge is finding the BEST means to *enable* them to learn. This kindergarten experience is what helped me to learn those skills.
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Becoming a Great Teacher

- I am a product of my college's education program:

we envision our graduates as realizing themselves as learners—still growing and changing, still acquiring new knowledge, still developing new questions

- I have a big concern about teaching, *especially* teaching done by librarians. I have observed a mindset or attitude amongst many people that "*anyone* can teach." I could not disagree more!
 - This is similar to people saying that "anyone can write." Well, the art of writing is difficult to learn and takes *years* to develop. Not all of us become good writers, even as adults.
 - Good teaching takes a great deal of effort, if we truly care and if we're to do it well.
 - Teaching kindergarten was the defining experience that taught me my *limitations* and taught me what abilities I possessed and what I lacked. It also taught me what I needed to learn to become a better teacher.
 - First, acknowledge to your students (and most of all, to *yourself*) that you DO NOT know everything.
 - Then, we need to acknowledge that each person may NOT learn the same way.
 - Good teachers strive to cover topics using more than one approach, whenever possible.
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- Think of ways to approach the problem from a NEW point of view when you explain it again.

- If a student challenges you, why not consider it as an opportunity to rethink or reconsider your own understanding of an idea.
 - Respect your students.
 - Never patronize or talk down to your students.
 - Be sensitive to the needs of your students.
 - Handle questions or confusions delicately. This is especially a challenge in the online environment. It's much easier to ***misunderstand*** one another in writing than in-person where we rely on body language and the tone of a person's voice. We simply cannot convey all of that as easily by email. Make SURE to handle the situation politely and diplomatically.
 - Provide positive reinforcement. I really believe that too many of us think that adult students do not need reinforcement. ***I need it*** so I'm confident that students appreciate it as much as I would if I were the student.
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How Does Teaching Online Differ from Teaching In-Person?

- From the teacher's perspective, I think that online courses are considerably ***more*** work than traditional in-person classes. That is, if you want to do an ***excellent*** job teaching the course.
- Good communication is even ***more*** important in the online setting, it's vital. You, the teacher, need to realize that you will be spending ***much*** more time using email to communicate adequately with your students. You should also invest significant time reading course discussion boards and participating whenever possible.
- State expectations up-front that students should be checking their email accounts ***daily*** or at least every ***other*** day. They should also be visiting the discussion boards several times a week and NOT postpone reading the boards until the weekends.
- In online courses, students have to assume even ***more*** responsibility for their learning as well as a greater level of self-discipline. Make students aware at the very start of the course so they can learn to plan their time accordingly.
- Also, I find that lots of students have preconceived ideas about what the time commitment may be for online courses. Regardless of age, I notice that about 1/3 of students tend to think that they can wait to do their coursework solely on the weekends, or turn in assignments late and still get credit, or try to do the bare minimum to get by.

- So I work hard for the first couple of weeks to make sure that they understand what kind of a commitment will be involved for BOTH them and me!!! If they are not willing (or able) to make that commitment, then this kind of a program may not be for them.
 - For some students, especially those new to the program or who are right out of college, they initially have some problems getting things in on time. Some students tend to slack off a bit when taking online courses—thinking courses are easier online or require less time. That’s why I make certain statements in my course description about how to set-up a schedule for themselves each week.
 - What’s interesting is that I have had some students who start out this way, then they take a course with me the next term. By that second term, they have their act together and better understand what to expect from courses and the program as a whole.
 - I set-up weekly discussion boards that students are required to post to at least once per week. I treat them like a regular in-person class.
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- I sit and “listen” to the students discuss amongst themselves. Sometimes students will ask questions. If they specifically direct the question to me, I answer it there on the boards. If they ask a question directed to the whole class, at first I wait a day or two to see how others respond. Sometimes it’s very interesting to see the contributions offered by students, especially those working in libraries already.
- But if I notice that the answers being provided may not be *quite* on target, I jump in right away and find a polite way to answer the original question. I do *not* try to say—*no*, so-and-so was mistaken or *no*, your library is doing that wrong. You get the idea.
- If I notice any discussions getting *way* off target, I may occasionally decide to jump in. I suggest we may have gotten off onto too many tangents and need to re-focus our discussions back to the original topic for the week. But I have only had to do this rarely. I work hard at not allowing myself to dominate the conversations.
- On some occasions, the topic of the week may become a bit contentious. As an example, when we discuss the Patriot Act or privacy issues. On a couple of occasions, I have had to jump in to make a statement about respecting each other’s opinions, whether we all agree or not.
- If I feel that a student is getting out of hand (that is, being rude or disrespectful to fellow students), I email them privately and try to have a polite discussion with. That has usually resolved any problems.
- I have done chat sessions with some courses. I found it to be really difficult to manage. If there’s under 10 chatters online, it’s manageable. But most courses are usually in the neighborhood of 20+. My first one was more than 40 students for the University of Pittsburgh.

- People talk “over” each other and when the questions are mostly all directed at the instructor, it’s tough to keep up.
 - You have to be able to type really fast. It’s important that **before** the chat sessions begin, you need to lay groundwork on rules of politeness to ensure people do not get cut off. That is, to allow time for the instructor to answer person #1’s question before proceeding to answer person #2.
 - Then, I usually try to limit the chat sessions to only an hour. But inevitably, people start talking and don’t want to stop. So I’ve had many chat sessions turn into 2-3 hours!
 - Overall, I have found it really tough to manage and have avoided using chat for the courses I teach at Drexel. I have found the discussion boards to work MUCH better.
 - But I think that it’s important that there be a new discussion board created for **each** week, to ensure the board doesn’t get too unwieldy.
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Skills and Techniques for Teaching Online

- Good organization is key. Set-up your course in BlackBoard or WebCT with **clear** categories that make sense to the students.
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- Provide your lectures, handouts and assignments on a **weekly** basis rather than in one huge chunk at the start.
 - Provide clear and detailed instructions for course assignments, projects, examinations, online discussions, and other activities for completion and submission. I suggest providing even **more** details than you may normally do for an in-person class.
 - Set clear and consistent due dates for assignments and projects, including bulletin board postings. I usually set deadlines to be at midnight on Sunday evenings, Eastern time. Then students develop a routine for submitting assignments and meeting deadlines.
 - When I establish a due date that’s out of the norm, e.g., a final project—I make sure to send out a couple of reminders at particular intervals.
 - The key is that I make sure the week’s new lecture and assignment are posted on Sunday evening—no matter what. In other words, I make sure **I am the one** who is consistent and reliable. That’s the beauty of Blackboard or WebCT. You can set-up various folders (which include all of the folder’s contents) to only be visible to students on a certain date and time. That’s really handy when you know for sure you won’t be able to post things in real time on Sunday nights.

- Another key to a successful online course is immediate feedback. Distance learning students feel isolated from both the instructor and other students due to the lack of face-to-face contact. When questions or problems arise, students *want* and *need* fast answers.
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- Since the social contact is limited, teachers need to make an increased effort to enhance communication *between* students and the instructor.
- Encourage students to share ideas with each other. The use of email, discussion boards, and chats are some strategies that can help students and you, the teacher, to get connected.
- I require student assignments to be submitted in Blackboard's Digital Dropbox. This helps to ensure that there are no confusions over whether or not I received their assignments by email—*especially* in this day where some emails land in a spam folder or are blocked by a spam filter.
- I do something else that I consider to be an *important* courtesy. To prevent any confusions, I send an email confirmation to *each* student when I have downloaded their assignment from the dropbox. I try to do this 24-48 hours after the due date. That way each student can rest assured that I have received their assignment. Yes, it means extra work on my part. But Blackboard makes it easy to send these kinds of emails (e.g., I can email 12 students all at the same time with a generic confirmation).
- But then I also see who has NOT submitted an assignment and I email them to find out why it's late. Lots of students complain about faculty who do not let them know when assignments are received. Several weeks go by and only THEN they find out that a faculty member never found an assignment in the digital dropbox or perhaps lost the assignment. This email trail prevents such problems.
- Provide more handouts than you may do in a traditional course. Students don't have you easily at hand when questions arise. So anticipate their questions by providing detailed and helpful handouts. Handouts are *especially* vital if you're teaching students a set of *tasks*. Provide supplements to what's found in a textbook, especially if that textbook does a poor job of explaining some of the more complicated or difficult concepts.

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- Provide more than just a syllabus. I provide other things such as a welcome document, telling students a bit about myself. I provide my vita as well.
 - Provide students with links to tutorials and other materials to help them learn more details on their own.
 - Strive to make yourself accessible to students outside of class. Some teachers prefer to use the model of set office hours. But I find that online students seem to appreciate *best* the

fact that they can email me at anytime rather than waiting for set office hours. I have developed a good reputation of being pretty good about responding in a short amount of time—not several days or weeks later.

- If you're a **good** teacher, you should encourage your students to contact you.
 - Encourage them to NOT be afraid to come forward with questions, especially about topics they may find difficult or confusing.
 - NEVER ignore a student's email or leave them hanging with unanswered questions.
 - Provide praise for students when it's appropriate. They may be adults but we all need praise, not just children.
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For Successful Online Courses, Students Ask...

- Students continually remark to me that many teachers in online classes do **NOT** do the following:
 - try to grade things in a **short** turnaround time and return the items with **comments**
 - post expectations for the course clearly and from the first day of class
 - provide **lots** of feedback whenever possible, and
 - probably **most** important, keep communication lines open **and** keep on top of students you do not hear from **regularly** as expected
- In a normal face-to-face course, we may not focus so much on the last item. But in my view, in the online setting with students spread around the globe, they can feel isolated from their fellow students and the instructor. So I consider it important that we take steps to show them that they are at the forefront of our minds throughout the entire term.
- Granted, some students are simply not good about communicating back to us instructors. We can only do so much for them. If they're not willing to invest the kind of time and effort that **we** invest, we can't make them. But then they won't reap the kinds of benefits that others will in the long run. Time and time again students comment to me about all of these things at the end of a term or once they've moved onto other courses.
- Some recent comments I received from students...
 - They tell me that they appreciated the **tone** of the class—one of exploration and plenty of willing help.

- They appreciated the efforts made to make it a good learning experience.
 - They appreciated that at the end of the course, I state that I my responsibility to them does **not** end with the end of the term. I am willing to be available to them for questions and/or advice down the road, whenever they need help.
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Backbone of My Teaching Philosophy

Concordia's Guiding Principles

- “We believe teachers have a moral obligation to act in the best interests of the students they serve.”
- They teach that teachers should possess such qualities as:
 - intellectual curiosity
 - open-mindedness
 - judgment
 - imagination, and
 - self-discipline—
 - in addition to such virtues as
 - empathy
 - fairness
 - respect for others,
 - and patience
- They strongly encourage us to be able and to be willing to *reflect* on our teaching
- to engage with others in questioning and discussing the activities of teaching
- the place and value of teaching
- the processes of inquiry, and
- to evaluate current trends and time-worn practices in education.

So hopefully some of these comments and tips will help you as you teach, whether it be a library instruction session, a full course taught in person, or a course taught online. In my opinion, most, if not all, of these suggestions will help you to develop into a better teacher.

Additional Information

Teaching Best Practices (Carnegie Mellon University)
<http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/resources/index.html>

A Berkeley Compendium of Suggestions for Teaching with Excellence
<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/compendium/>

Designing Principles for Online Instruction

<http://www.fgcu.edu/onlinedesign/index.html>

Department of Education Mission Statement (Concordia College)

<http://wwwfac.cord.edu/education/dept/mission.htm>