

My Experience with Teaching Online: Confessions and Observations of a Survivor

David J. St. Clair

Department of Economics
California State University, East Bay
Hayward, CA 94542 USA
david.stclair@csueastbay.edu

Abstract

This paper describes a journey to create two online economics courses for business students. Initial expectations and preconceptions about the goal of online classes, required online technologies, online student characteristics, and prevalent concerns over online student shirking are discussed. Student surveys were conducted to solicit student views on what worked and did not work in the courses. The results suggest that initial expectations and concerns were wrong. In most cases, online students are looking for an alternative to - rather than a replication of - traditional classes. Student responses are used to create a more accurate picture of who online students are and what they are looking for in online courses. Commonly-held views about online technology requirements are not universally valid for all online classes. Online class organization and university policies toward online class instruction need to change to better meet the needs of online students and instructors.

Keywords: Expectations, preconceptions about online instruction, online class structure, online technology, online student characteristics, student surveys, online student needs, policy support for online instruction

Introduction

This is a chronicle my experiences with teaching three upper division economics classes online at California State University in 2007-08. In particular, I describe how my preconceptions and expectations were altered by these experiences. I also present the results of student surveys administered in each class. In addition, I use the survey results and student feedback to re-think who our online students are and how online classes might best serve their needs.

I do not claim that my experience was either definitive or universal; in fact, my goal is to question the notion of a universally applicable online format. In addition, since this is based on my own experiences, I offer no footnotes or corroborating evidence. Nonetheless, I think that I address issues of interest to those contemplating a foray into online teaching and to those seeking to promote online teaching. Further, I offer suggestions for how university policies could better promote online instruction.

My Road to Online Teaching

Instructors teach online for many reasons. Some prefer online to traditional classes; others are drawn to the technology of online instruction. I fell into neither category and have little technical background and am not particularly drawn to online technology. In addition, I have always enjoyed and even excelled in traditional classes. A full description of my teaching style and abilities would be too cumbersome for the task at hand. Suffice it here to note that I was the guy who relished large 8:00 a.m. lecture classes – and I routinely overfilled the 180-seat auditorium. I did not use any microphones in the belief that one had to be able to rattle the back seats with a little nineteenth-century oratory in order to get the attention of the class. On the whole, my approach worked well and my student evaluations were very good.

My journey into online teaching technologies actually grew out of a need to develop alternative and complementary technologies for my traditional classes. I found myself in a rather difficult care-giver situation and sought flexibility through online activities. To my surprise, I found that some online activities, such as online assignments and quizzes, were not merely adequate substitutes for traditional class lectures - they were often superior techniques in their own right. I readily incorporated these online activities into most of my traditional classes. My full transition to online instruction came when the University sought to expand online class offerings. I received release time and assistance from the University's Online and Hybrid Support Center to develop an online macroeconomics class (actually, a hybrid class with all instruction online, but in-class exams). After teaching two sections of macroeconomics, I developed an online managerial economics class.

About the Two Online Classes

Macroeconomics for Business is an upper division intermediate macroeconomics theory course primarily geared toward business students. Managerial Economics and Strategy is an upper division intermediate microeconomics course geared to business students. Currently, Managerial Economics and Strategy is a Business Core course required of all business students. Macroeconomics for Business is currently a paired-option (i.e., choose one from a short list) in the Business Core. I have taught both courses for more than 30 years. Macroeconomics for Business was taught as an online hybrid for the first time in Fall 2007 quarter and offered online again in the Winter 2008 quarter. Managerial Economics was taught as an online hybrid in the Spring 2008 quarter.

My Initial Expectations

Before entering the online arena, I had formed some rather strong preconceptions and expectations about online students and about what was expected in an online class. In retrospect, I have tried to identify the sources of these expectations. My expectations for online teaching were primarily influenced by: 1) the Economics Department's brief but disastrous encounter with online teaching in the mid-1990s; 2) university and college policies on online teaching; 3) conversations with business faculty members about their experiences with online teaching; and 4) my own rather uniformed preconceptions.

A brief look at these influences can reveal the source of my preconceptions; more importantly, it may shed light on commonly-held preconceptions and expectations about online teaching in the university at large.

An Early Disaster with Online Instruction in the Economics Department

Two of my colleagues jointly offered a lower division Principles of Macroeconomics as an online hybrid in the mid-1990s. The class was largely organized around PowerPoint presentations delivered through WebCT. The instructors were both technically-oriented and were far more familiar with online technology than I was at the time. The class experienced numerous problems and both instructors rated the experience as a disaster. The workload was horrendous and they experienced numerous technical problems. Worse, students had problems staying involved and the class never really came together in any meaningful way. While it was apparent that the class had not worked, there was very little understanding of what had gone wrong – it remained an unexplained disaster. In retrospect, it seems that the technical problems certainly contributed to the lack of success, but so did the lack of a cohesive and engaging format – technology alone and the simple act of posting a class online did not ensure success.

While this was a very limited online experience, it left a lasting impression. This episode soured the department on online teaching - we had no online offerings until my classes were offered more than a decade later. Indeed, when my proposal for an online class was discussed at our department meeting, I encountered no opposition – the only question from my colleagues was why I would want to do such a thing?

University and College Guidelines

My notions about what an online class should be were also influenced by University and College of Business and Economics (CBE) guidelines for online classes. The following excerpt is from the CBE Guidelines:

"The onus is on the chair/instructor to demonstrate that the online/hybrid experience is comparable to the classroom-based experience and that the course meets the criteria stated in relevant CBE and University policies. (emphasis in original)

The course:

1. Conforms to CBE and University rules for faculty office hours.
2. Meets all course objectives covered in classroom-based sections of the same course.
3. Contains content comparable to that in classroom-based sections of the same course.
4. Engages all students in whole-class discussions."

I took this policy to mean that online classes were expected to re-create the actual classroom experience of traditional classes. While #3 seems to only require that online classes be "comparable," #4 goes further in calling for online classes to create "whole-class discussions," (i.e., to replicate traditional classroom discussions). As for office hours, CBE policies require faculty members to adhere to posted weekly in-office office hours. Consequently, #1 effectively requires online instructors to adhere to the same office hours policies as traditional classes. I interpreted "onus" to mean that online faculty had to prove that they were not using online instruction to circumvent work requirements.

Advice from Colleagues

Two of my colleagues in business departments - one in accounting and the other in management - graciously shared their online experiences with me and offered invaluable advice. While their classes shared many similar features, I was struck by how different they were in other areas. One used recorded video lecturers while the other used only audio. One required participation in discussion boards while the other actually set up separate discussion boards for each student in the class (i.e., only the student and the instructor had access). This created a unique opportunity for individual assessment and was particularly suited to a problems-based accounting class. Both featured PowerPoint presentations and each administered exams in-class.

Both colleagues also suggested that the nature of the class was paramount in choosing a format and class technologies. In addition, each cautioned me to keep the technology as simple as possible the first time taught in a completely online environment.

My Preconceptions about Online Classes

All of the above influenced my expectations about teaching online, but I think I also brought a considerable amount of personal preconceptions. While I am not sure where some of these originated, I am sure that my preconceptions were not too far from the norm among newcomers to the field.

Aside from the inevitable worry about how I was going to become acclimated to translating everything into an online format, my expectations centered on two main concerns. First, I assumed that the class would be a running battle with shirking students. Every instructor has experienced the slackers and goof-offs who congregate (or try to congregate) in the back of the room. Would online teaching attract more than my fair share of these students looking to fill the huge back rows of a cyber class?

Second, I was concerned about how to re-create in virtual space the traditional classroom experience. I thought about the activities that I used in a traditional class and how I would have to replicate the exact same thing online. For example, since I stood in front of a traditional class and lectured, the online class would require me to stand in front of a camera and lecture. Since I wrote on a blackboard or overhead in a traditional class, the online equivalent would be a PowerPoint presentation. Since I asked students questions in a traditional class and expected them to answer, I would have to re-create this online with mandatory participation in discussion boards.

With the clarity of hindsight, I realize now that much of this was a gut-level, one-size-fits-all presumption on my part rather than a reasoned conclusion. I must say that university guidelines and the assistance provided by the Online and Hybrid Support Center (with their understandable emphasis on online technologies) fed my presumption. However, it was me who brought the beast to the table.

In summary, I was preoccupied with the shirking problem and I felt compelled to structure the class in a conventional manner and to use standard online technologies such as audio/video and PowerPoint.

While these were my expectations, I ended up doing something quite different; in the process, I changed my views about online students. I also became convinced that dumping the notion of a universal format for online teaching could be very liberating for new online instructors.

What I Did - My Online Class Format

My decision to deviate from convention was based on a number of considerations. First, I quickly encountered technical hurdles prior to the start of my online class when I discovered that personal copies of software for audio and visual had to be ordered through regular requisition channels – this created a time problem. The Online and Hybrid Support Center had the software and facilities, but only at their campus center and this posed a scheduling problem. I have never been one to use “canned” lectures or presentations. I have always used notes in class, but I always keep them as minimal as possible in order to maintain spontaneity and freshness. With this in mind, the thought of pre-recording a quarter’s worth of lectures was not appealing.

Second, I took the advice of my business colleagues to keep the technology as simple as possible for my first course. I was also sure that no good would come from a rushed production.

Third, although I felt that I was more or less required to go with the standard format described above, I still had a strong dislike for parts of it. For example, while I have always encouraged class discussions, I have always found talking for the sake of talking to be a waste of time. I found little in the online format to convince me to make an exception in the matter of forced participation on discussion boards. In addition, I have never cared for PowerPoint, even in live presentations, and I was doubtful that it would improve for being online.

With this in mind, I decided to structure my first class quite differently. I opted out of audio/video media and I chose not to use PowerPoint. I also chose to make discussion boards a central feature of the class, but to not require class participation. In addition, I allowed anonymous posting on discussion boards in order to overcome the reluctance of some students to ask questions and to get involved.

My macroeconomics courses were readings-based courses that used my own online textbook (previously written for my traditional macroeconomics courses). My managerial economics course was also readings-based, but it utilized a standard text. After comparing the two, I think a customized text in macroeconomics made for a much tighter and unified class. I am currently seeking remedies to this problem in managerial economics.

Text readings were supplemented by a weekly commentary posted on Blackboard. The commentary was written in an informal style and was meant to simulate a lecture experience. The commentary also sought to draw attention to important points in the text, to elaborate on the text, and to explain some text topics from a different perspective.

The weekly commentary was accompanied by 40 to 50 study questions posted on Blackboard. These questions were drawn primarily from the text and commentary (or were applications of text or commentary topics). All questions required short written answers.

At the end of the week, I posted an assignment that was completed online through Blackboard. The assignments featured a random draw of 20 – 25 questions from the posted study questions. The assignments were graded and constituted a significant portion of the course grade. In addition, I made it clear that the midterm questions would all be drawn from the topics covered in the study questions; however, the test format would be entirely multiple-choice questions. The assignments were therefore graded projects in their own right, but also excellent preparation for the exams.

Students were given three opportunities to complete the assignment, however, only the last was graded. Also, the random draw of questions would vary with each attempt. My initial policy was for one and only one attempt. However, a disastrous first assignment - beset with technical problems, panicking students, and me constantly re-setting Blackboard for another attempt – prompted the change.

As the class evolved, an established routine emerged: the commentaries and study questions were posted on Monday morning; the assignment was posted Thursday morning, and the assignment was due by 10:00 p.m. on Saturday night. The assignment was usually graded by Monday and a new week began. The deadline for the assignment - 10:00 p.m. Saturday night - was not a deliberate choice. I had originally set a more conventional deadline at 6:00 p.m. on Friday. However, technical problems pushed the first deadline back and, having established the new deadline, I kept it. In retrospect, this was a very good decision because an established routine in an online class is invaluable.

Having made the decision to structure the class in this manner, I was still very concerned that the lack of audio/video, PowerPoint, and mandatory discussions might fail to engage students. With this concern in mind, I informed students at the start of the class about the reasons for my choices and I told them that I would seek their feedback in the form of a survey at the end of the quarter.

Results from Student Surveys

In essence, my quest for feedback was driven by guilt and a desire to see how much damage I had incurred from not using PowerPoint and audio/video, or from not requiring participation in discussion boards. My survey questions focused on these features and what I discovered was quite unexpected.

I present here a numerical summary of four questions that I asked in the two sections of Macroeconomics for Business, and a slightly different version of one of these questions that I asked in my Managerial Economics and Strategy class. The numerical results are followed by a brief description of student written comments.

Note: All questions required verbal responses. To generate numerical results, I grouped them into simple categories. In some cases, a very small number of responses were entirely off-topic, or did not address the question being asked. These responses were deleted from the number of respondents (i.e., deleted from "N") and were excluded from the percent calculations. I did not test these results for statistical significance – this was not my interest or intent. The results are of primary interest as they relate to my preconceptions as well as to common preconceptions about online classes.

It should be further noted that these questions were asked separately from the formal university evaluation of the class and the instructor (i.e., no questions can be added or deleted from the formal university evaluation). In addition, I made it very clear that these questions did not pertain to me as an instructor and that there were no right or wrong answers; this was only a matter of what worked and did not work in the class.

Survey Results: Do Students Prefer PowerPoint Presentations?

The following question was asked in both sections of Macroeconomics for Business:

Question: This course did not use PowerPoint Presentations. Would PowerPoint have been better than the Commentaries?

- **No** (Commentaries Better) = 84.1%
- **Yes** (PowerPoint Better) = 15.9%

Note: The total number of respondents was 63.

Written comments from students opposing PowerPoint often noted that PowerPoint was more of an outline tool that, while appropriate for live presentations, was not very useful for online presentations. Many noted that it merely squeezed a small amount of information into a very large space. Some called it cumbersome, a waste of space, hard to print, or worthless. A few proponents of PowerPoint indicated that they felt that PowerPoint did a better job of highlighting important concepts. However, one student indicated that PowerPoint should be used simply because it was used in all of her other online classes.

Survey Results: Do Students Prefer Mandatory Participation in Discussion Boards?

The following question was asked in both sections of Macroeconomics for Business:

Question: I don't force participation in Discussion Boards. I have always felt that you shouldn't talk or

write unless you have something to say. Do you agree?

- **No** (Participation should be required) = 3.1%
- **Yes** (Participation should not be required) = 96.9%

Note: The total number of respondents was 65.

Written comments from students on this question often noted that forced participation resulted in comments that were of little value – students posted simply to comply with the requirement. Others went further and called it a waste of time. Some felt that forced participation was insulting and that it trivialized the class. Other students indicated that they had taken other classes where they found forced participation beneficial (e.g., one student described a very favorable experience with forced participation in a poetry class). However, most of these students indicated that it was not be appropriate for this type of class.

While students overwhelmingly rejected forced participation in discussion boards, about a third of students favored extra points for postings. This may represent little more than a universal student interest in any extra credit. In any case, none of these responders addressed what might be a rather narrow philosophical and practical distinction between being penalized for non-participation versus not getting extra credit due to non-participation.

The no-forced-participation policy for Discussion Board participation did lead to a rather interesting parallel between traditional classes and online classes. Discussion Boards tended to feature participation from the same small group of students. These were supplemented by sporadic participation from students seeking answers to specific questions (or from the instructor). However, the spontaneous exchange of ideas and questions among students was certainly limited to a pool of active students. This is remarkably similar to what I have found in traditional classes – a small cadre of students dominating active participation in class discussions and questions. While we often try to replicate the traditional classroom experience online, replicating limited participation in cyberspace is not an accomplishment. However, I think my reservations and reluctance at requiring participation in a traditional class are equally valid online.

Survey Results: Do Online Students Find Traditional Office Hours Beneficial?

The following question was asked in both sections of Macroeconomics for Business:

Question: I usually moved my one-hour-per-week office hours to group them together around the time of the midterms. This required considerable effort in order to comply with CBE policy regarding office hours. Was this re-scheduling appropriate?

- **No** (Office hours should not be changed) = 0%
- **Yes** (Office hours should be changed) = 100%

Note: The total number of respondents was 59.

Students overwhelmingly rejected traditional office hours and their written comments indicated that they felt that this was a rather silly non-issue. Many volunteered that they had no interest in ever using in-office hours - they expected to handle all questions online. Many found the policy to be inconsistent – instruction could be online, but office hours had to be in-office. Some went further, noting that it was even more inconsistent to allow exams online, but to require that office hours be held in-office at inflexible times.

Survey Results: Do Students Prefer Audio and/or visual Media Presentations?

The following question was asked in both sections of Macroeconomic for Business:

Question: This course did not use any recorded audio or visual lectures. Instead, I opted for written Commentaries on the week's readings and assignments. Should audio and/or video be used in this course in the future?

- **No** (Should not use Audio/Visual) = 79%
- **Yes** (Should use Audio/Visual) = 21%

Note: The total number of respondents was 62.

A related – but slightly different – question was asked in Managerial Economics and Strategy. I changed this question to clarify what I was asking regarding audio/video. I hoped that this would better focus student responses.

Question: When I started doing online classes, incorporating audio and visual media in the course was a high priority. However, in polling earlier classes, I found that the vast majority of students found audio and visual to be more of a nuisance and a distraction. When I looked at the responses that were in favor of using these media, I usually found responses that suggested that some students might benefit, but very few who indicated that they themselves would benefit. Should audio and/or video lectures be used in this class? Please answer from your perspective rather than what you think others might benefit from.

- **No** (Should not use Audio/Visual) = 83.8%
- **Yes** (Should use Audio/Visual) = 16.2%

Note: The total number of respondents was 37.

With clearer wording, opposition to audio/video was more pronounced. In addition, written responses to all of the questions pertaining to audio/video evoked the most out-spoken and passionate written comments from students. The most passionate of these responses came from students who had considerable previous experience in online classes. Comments such as: “I hate it!” “A waste of time!” “Dry and boring!” were common. Some students complained about constant technical problems, especially with video. Others noted that video was very difficult to use, especially when they were on the go or only had short study intervals. Many students indicated that they often ignored video that had been assigned in their previous classes. There were also numerous complaints about the content and quality of video presentations. (Such comments are probably not surprising from a generation raised with MTV and YouTube.)

While the poll was rather lopsided against audio/video, there were some written comments that made a valid point in favor of video. Some students indicated that they favored the use of video because they considered themselves to be visual learners. I think this point has merit and I intend to incorporate some video in my future online classes. However, I think the surveys clearly indicate a serious limitation with video that must be considered in online course design.

Who are Online Students and what do they want?

One of the principles for running a successful business is to know your customers. Do we know our online student customers? The surveys and my online experience led me to re-think this question.

For example, I was wrong in thinking that my online classes would be clogged with shirking students. I quickly discovered that online classes do not have any back-of-the-class. On the contrary, a student's participation is more visible online than in a traditional class. In my traditional classes, the first midterm was usually the wake-up call for shirkers as this was their first real exposure to a major graded assignment. In this regard, online courses have two advantages: 1) online classes offer an earlier opportunity for graded assignments; and 2) shirkers are rapidly identified and they generally drop the class quickly. I also found that my online students were more comfortable with what to expect on the midterms.

If students are not primarily looking for an easy place to shirk, why do they take online classes? Who are they and what do they want in an online class? I must confess that as long as I was preoccupied with shirking, these questions were pushed into the background; more importantly, I suspect that this is a typical omission.

Based on my experience, I think a different appraisal of online students is in order. I argue that online students are more likely to exhibit the following characteristics:

- They work
- They have very different and often inflexible schedules
- They are often on the go
- They want predictability and reliability in an online class (a common complaint with video)
- They are often more comfortable online than in a traditional class
- Most are not looking for an online version of a traditional class

Exam time presented an opportunity to meet students and see who was on the other end of the line. Demographically, my online students did not seem any different from students in my traditional classes; they seemed to be comparable in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, etc. In addition, I had about the same number of students using disabled student testing resources. There were no demographic differences; however, I think the reader can readily see the online student profile sketched above in the survey responses. Rather than dwelling on interpreting the survey responses, I propose to move directly to a discussion of online class features that I think best serve these students. I argue that online classes need to pursue the following:

Ease of Use and Flexibility - Online students with challenging schedules require a class format and technologies that are easy to use, especially while on the go. In terms of format, long windows of opportunity for doing assignments and non-traditional deadlines are advantageous. While I never intended it, I soon found myself routinely exchanging e-mails and participating in discussion boards late at night and early in the morning. Students appreciated this flexibility. In contrast, they found rigid in-class office hours to be largely useless.

The same consideration applies to online technologies. For example, I received numerous complaints from students about how difficult and inconvenient it was to use audio/video, especially remotely or during short study breaks. Many indicated that they went as far as routinely skip video because it was too awkward to use. While I believe there is a place for audio/video in online classes, I think the merits of audio/video media need to be weighed against its inflexibility (especially while on the go).

Reliability – Online students are most interested in trouble-free technologies. Again, students were quick to complain about the problems that they encountered with audio/video. No student – online or traditional – likes technical problems. However, while this may be more of an inconvenience for traditional students, for online students, the entire class crashes. Add an inflexible schedule to the mix and one has a prescription for disaster. Like ease of use, reliability must be a high priority in choosing technologies for online classes.

Online is an alternative – not a substitute - for traditional classes – I found remarkably little interest among online students in replicating the traditional class online. In responses to survey questions about PowerPoint, video lectures, and discussion boards, I routinely encountered the following: “If I had wanted a discussion or a lecture, I would have signed up for a traditional class.”

More importantly, their actions matched their words. For example, in traditional classes, I have always felt strongly that students need to get graded exams back as soon as possible. I also return the entire exam because I think students need more than a percent score and a letter grade – they need to see what they did and how it was graded. With this in mind, I arranged for my first midterm in macroeconomics to be graded and returned to students 30 minutes after the end of the exam for any students who wanted to wait. The quick turnaround was certainly a candidate for the record books. But to my surprise, only a handful of students bothered to wait. In my first survey, I asked about how important this kind of exam feedback was to students (this question was not included in the survey results above). The most common student response basically said that while this was a good policy for traditional classes, they did not expect such feedback from online classes and felt it unnecessary. I no longer routinely return exams in online classes.

Online students want a predictable routine – While students do not seem to want a traditional class, they do want to know what is expected and when. It is critical to develop and maintain a routine. With long windows for assignments, students will adapt to the routine.

I have already described how I stumbled upon this in my first macroeconomics class. For better or worse, I ended up with a Saturday, 10:00 pm. deadline for the assignments. I stuck with it and it worked fine; on the occasions where I have deviated from the routine, even for the best of reasons, it has never

worked well.

Policy Recommendations

I find that, in the university as a whole, there is little appreciation of the student profile offered above and that university and college policies sometimes impede online classes. The offending practices range from scheduling issues to enrollment practices to the university's basic attitude toward online teaching. I recommend the following changes:

1. Add periods and Open University registration policies are often incompatible with online classes. For example, it often takes two weeks for students to successfully add a class. With ten-week quarters, this is a problem. Traditional class can compensate by allowing waiting students to "sit-in" in the interim, but this is not possible in online classes (e.g., Blackboard access requires enrollment in the class). As a consequence, newly-admitted student entering at the end of the add period will have effectively missed twenty percent of the course. The instructor might be able to mitigate this by delaying assignments. However, a real strength of online classes is their ability to quickly engage students in graded assignments. This advantage is lost if the entire class has to wait for registration issues to be fully resolved.
2. Class scheduling needs to consider an online instructors mix of traditional and online classes. I taught my macroeconomics classes alone without any simultaneous traditional class sections, but my managerial economics course was taught while simultaneously teaching other traditional classes. I found the mixed format very difficult. The schedule and rhythm of online classes are very different from traditional classes. While I enjoy both formats, I do not like mixing them in the same quarter. I recognize that others may feel differently, but I think scheduling needs to take this into account for instructors who would rather not mix the two.
3. University scheduling is also a problem when it comes to time slots for online classes. In an earlier day, online classes were assigned specific class times for registration purposes. However, this often resulted in phantom conflicts with other classes scheduled for the same time slot. We seem to have resolved this issue, but hybrid classes still do not have any designated times in which to schedule exams. Scheduling exams for online classes on Mondays through Thursdays invariably creates scheduling conflicts. While Friday afternoons entail few conflicts, this time slot is not popular with students and is often burdensome for working students. As online class offerings increase, the university will need to address this issue.
4. The university's technical support for online classes is often inadequate. Blackboard experiences numerous problems, shut-downs, slow-downs, and quirks that frustrate online students. They frustrate instructors as well. Worse, there seems to be no real back-up to Blackboard. The development of an alternative or back-up to Blackboard would be most welcome. Barring this development, better help with technical problems is needed. I was usually left to handle most real-time Blackboard problems on my own because Blackboard support was generally only available during traditional university hours. Worse, some help channels were virtually useless. For example, I was instructed to feature the University's "Help Desk" in my online syllabi and to make sure that students knew how to contact the Help Desk with technical problems. However, it soon became apparent that the Help Desk took up to 48 hours to respond, and when they did respond, it was usually only to tell the student that the Help Desk only handled Blackboard log-on problems – students with all other problems were instructed to contact their instructor. Needless to say, my current syllabus does little more than warn students against contacting the Help Desk.
5. University and college policies that require posted weekly office hours for online classes should be changed. Rigid requirements for in-office office hours usually do little more than force instructors to sit idly in their offices for online students who are not coming. This policy also restricts the ability of instructors to move office hours to times more advantageous to students (i.e., to group office hours around exam time, etc.). I am not suggesting that the number of in-office office hours be curtailed or even reduced – what is needed is flexibility. A policy of clearing office hour procedures for online classes with the department prior to the start of the quarter might insure flexibility while preventing abuses.

6. My final recommendation seeks a fundamental clarification or refinement in the university's attitude toward online classes. I think that, like me, university policies worry too much about online classes becoming havens for shirking students. And if truth be told, the university also worries too much about shirking online instructors. Of course, this attitude is not explicitly stated, but I think it is easy to see it in university policies and guidelines (such as the CBE policy cited above). Online classes are hard work and instructors who think that online means "on vacation" get a quick reality check. For its part, the university needs to acknowledge the value of these long hours and heavy work loads. There should be no "onus" placed on online classes to conform to policies that have little relevance to online instruction.

Concluding Remarks

While my online teaching experience often turned out to be different from what I had expected, it was, on the whole, very rewarding and successful. I had expected a horrendous work load the first time out and I was not disappointed on that score. However, I am very happy to report that much of this was a fixed cost. Like new preps in traditional classes, online classes incur heavy fixed costs that give way to lighter loads the second time around - my second macroeconomics class was much easier. I also expect the learning curve to be equally applicable to future online classes.

I was also very satisfied with the academic performance of each of my online classes. Grades were generally higher than what I would have expected in a traditional class. In addition, I think the online classes afforded me a better opportunity to gauge students - my online students wrote more and undertook more graded assignments.

As for online technologies, I have not become a Luddite poster boy. I am not anti-technology; instead, I am pro-selective technology. My future schedule calls for additional online sections of both macroeconomics and managerial economics and I intend to augment my current format with short audio/visual clips. At this juncture, I am much more comfortable with online teaching. Part of this, of course, is simply a matter of experience and getting your feet wet. However, part of it also stems from the fact that I no longer worry about conforming to some mandated universal online format or fretting over the bells and whistles - it really is about the basics first. It has been a liberating experience, and one that I hope can be shared with other would-be online instructors.

Manuscript received 6 Jan 2009; revision received 23 Feb 2009.



This work is licensed under a
[Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)