Topic: The challenges of teaching online

Fiona Joseph gives advice and guidance about teaching online.

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The last seven years has seen a major explosion in interest in online learning. This has been driven by technological developments, not only in the delivery of course content (text, audio and video) but also in tools for communication that allow teachers and learners to interact with each other. (These tools range from email, discussion boards and lists, through to chat, audio and video conferencing, and webcasts). Each of these has the potential - if used wisely and imaginatively - to take language learning way beyond the confines of the traditional classroom.

There are many contexts where today's teachers might find themselves involved in online learning. It could be through using a Virtual Learning Environment (such as Blackboard or WebCT) within a college or university, either to enhance face-to-face teaching (termed 'blended learning') or deliver entire courses at a distance. A business language trainer may be able to use video-conferencing for tutorials instead of - or as well as - telephone or one-to-one sessions on site. There is also a growing number of purely online providers such as Netlanguages and NetLearnLanguages (which links tutors to students using Microsoft's Netmeeting tool). Given the growing market in online learning this has implications for how teachers are equipped with the necessary skills needed to teach online.

Let's look briefly at some of the differences between traditional classroom-based learning and online learning over the web.

The first difference is obvious. Much of online teaching takes place without seeing the learners. If you are teaching in real time (called synchronous learning) you will not be able to gauge student reaction so easily as you would in the classroom, where you can pick up on the visual cues - fidgeting, yawning, nods of approval - that help you pace the lesson. Then there are the issues of technical competence and confidence that are so crucial for teaching online. The traditional classroom environment requires a teacher to use the board effectively, operate a tape or CD player and overhead projector. Teaching online requires the mastery of a new set of communication tools from email and discussion boards at the lowest level of difficulty, through to real time communication using chat (text-based 'conversation') or conferencing tools. This can be daunting for the best of teachers. There is also the selection and presentation of learning materials (content). Alas there is not the option of opening the coursebook or dashing off a couple

of photocopies five minutes before the beginning of class (we've all done that!). Teaching online can involve: the ability to choose and then direct learners to appropriate web pages; the bringing of web-based material within a VLE; or even the authoring and publishing to a web page of teacher-produced material, which requires knowledge of web publishing. In a nutshell, online teaching pedagogy needs to do more than try and replicate face-to-face teaching.

What advice is there for someone who is keen to try teaching online? It might be worth taking a short course (e.g. LETTOL, a certificate in online tutoring skills). Remember that if you have had experience of teaching at a distance (traditional distance learning through correspondence courses, for example) you will have an advantage over someone who is used only to the classroom context: Distance learning tutors will be already used to the skill of building a good rapport over a distance as well as the importance of giving meaningful (written) feedback.

However, if you find yourself being thrown in at the deep end here are some points to bear in mind.

1. Preparation time
Be aware that if you are teaching online that the content has to be prepared thoroughly beforehand. When teaching a course for the first time this will mean a considerable investment of time and effort.
2. Managing online discussion
You should establish ground rules about standards of netiquette (i.e. behaviour towards you and other learners) and how much participation you require (or are you tolerant of 'lurkers', i.e. people who stay in the background?). Also try not to slip into lecture mode - think of yourself as a facilitator of discussion.
3. Conducting tutorials
Most online tutors are expected to make themselves available online to deal with student problems. Set times for your availability and be strict about time allocated to each student. Ask your students to prepare the topics they want to cover beforehand and insist on dealing with specific questions rather than general chit-chat. If you are dealing with students from a different country you may be required to work strange hours, (although this can be a bonus for those who prefer to work flexibly).
4. Dealing with student needs/building a rapport
Not all learners are suited to online study. If you can, try to screen course participants at the outset. One strategy would be to ask potential course members to send in a piece of work using the software features. It's worth remembering also that some students become reticent in an online environment and this can hinder their ability to communicate and learn effectively. (Some course providers do something as simple as asking each student for a photograph that can either be kept on file by the teacher or uploaded to a web page for other students. This is a simple way to 'humanise' the learning process.) The most successful online teachers tend to be those that foster an environment of mutual peer

support. Groups that bond well from the outset make life easier for the teacher.

5. Technical back-up

Make sure that you know who is available for technical support if the technology lets you down. (It will, almost inevitably.)

Although teaching online may seem frightening it has the advantages of flexibility, creativity and the chance to learn a new set of skills to take your career forward. If you get the chance why not give it a try.

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