Online Distance Education: Surviving the Tsunami

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"Online classes are hitting us like a tsunami."

So said my colleague during a conversation we had about course offerings in our English Department at MSU-Moorhead.

He's right. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of K-12 students enrolled in technology-based distance education courses grew by 65% between 2002-2005 (xi). Picciano and Seaman, authors of *K-12 Online Learning: A Survey of U.S. School District Administrators,* found nearly three million K–12 students took online courses during 2005-06 (17).

We need to remind ourselves that students today are no longer digital immigrants, but digital natives, and as such they not only expect, but are in need of teaching methods that differ from those used to educate previous generations. Last year, at a Consortium for School Networking webinar, Don Tapscott, author of *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World,* said, "The nation is at a turning point, and many institutions that have served us well for decades or even centuries--including education--have come to the end of their life cycle and must be 'rebooted' or reinvented for a new age" (Devaney). In his research, Tapscott noticed that students used the Web primarily for discussion or communication. "This is the true meaning of the Internet, " he said, "…it's not about presenting content or managing knowledge, it's a new platform for communication and collaboration, for building communities" (Devaney). Former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and the MnSCU Board of Trustees Chair David Olson, concur. In a press release issued November 20, 2008, they announced the following goal: by the year 2015, 25 percent of MnSCU system credits will be earned via online courses.

The question should be asked, however, whether or not there is research that supports the pedagogy of teaching online. More specifically, does teaching students online and/or providing other technology-based instruction really improve students' reading and writing skills? Beach, Anson, Breuch, and Swiss concluded in their book, *Teaching Writing Using Blogs, Wikis, and Other Digital Tools,* that instructors who help students understand the purposes of digital writing tools find that students "move from teacher-initiated writing to self-initiated writing because they want to write to communicate to their audiences" (viii). They also found that students who use e-portfolios "perceive relationships between their texts and growth over time in their uses of tools" (ix). In addition to improving their writing skills, "the depth of the students' thinking and development of ideas" grew as well (x).

Other studies exist that corroborate the conclusions of Beach, Anson, Breuch and Swiss. In *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies,* the U.S. Department of Education found in the meta-analysis of 51 studies the following:

- *Students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction.*
- *Instruction combining online and face-to-face elements had a larger advantage relative to purely face-to-face instruction than did purely online instruction.*

- *Studies in which learners in the online condition spent more time on task than students in the face-to-face condition found a greater benefit for online learning.* (xiv-xv)

Because there is strong evidence to support teaching students online and because educators find themselves on the leading edge of this distance education tsunami, we need to ask how we can ride the wave rather than be drowned under it. In other words, how should our traditional land-based English instructors redefine their teaching methods in this Age of Technology?

The first step to survival is to stay informed about online tools and software. For example, Minnesota public schools, colleges, and universities primarily use two Learning Management Systems (LMS):

Types of Online Courses
Online Course: Class is conducted entirely online.
Hybrid Course: Part of the class is conducted land-based and part of it is online.
Blended Course: Class is conducted land-based, but it is supplemented with online interaction outside of the class periods.

- Desire2Learn (D2L) <http://www.desire2learn.com/>
- Moodle <http://www.moodle.org>

Other popular LMSs include Blackboard, WebCT, Angel, and eCollege. Each of these LMSs provides the basic tools an instructor needs to conduct a class, such as a content area, a discussion board, a chat room, quizzes, dropboxes, and a gradebook. An LMS can be integrated with online, hybrid, or blended courses. To learn how to use an LMS, instructors might receive in-house training through the IT Department of their school or university. If that isn't available, they could take an online class or attend a reputable land-based workshop.

A good IT Department will also keep instructors current with software programs that enhance the school's LMS. For example:

- Horizon Wimba <http://www.wimba.com> is a synchronous conferencing tool that permits instructors to convene an entire class or a small group for a PowerPoint lecture and/or online discussion. For example, an English instructor can present a PowerPoint lecture about writing similes and metaphors. Then the instructor can immediately check students' comprehension of what was taught by asking them to write their own similes and metaphors in the chat room tool available in Horizon Wimba. Students can also ask questions. I've used Horizon Wimba primarily in two ways: to introduce a writing assignment and to teach mini-lessons on skills that students demonstrate they need help with in their writing (i.e.: punctuation, point of view consistency, in-text documentation, works cited entries, etc.). My students preferred using the chat room versus asking their questions aloud. Using the chat room avoided the problem of more than one student talking at a time or me missing them raise their electronic hand, another feature that's in Horizon Wimba.

- Camtasia Studio <http://www.techsmith.com/camtasia.asp> is a multi-media presentation software that enables instructors to create audio PowerPoint lectures

(podcasts) that incorporate videos, photos, text, clipart, etc. Camtasia Studio is for online English instructors who meet at asynchronous times with their students. Camtasia allows the instructor to have a "film-like" feature of content, so that students do not have to learn everything by reading text. I found this software addresses the different learning styles of students in the class. The auditory learner appreciated the Camtasia file the most. Students said they downloaded the lectures to their iTouch or iPhone and listened while they exercised or did other things.

- Softchalk <http://www.softchalk.com> helps instructors create interactive web pages that include learning aids such as pop-up text annotations, self-assessment quizzes, and other interactive games. For example, an English instructor can build a unit in Softchalk in such a way that each time a new literary or writing term is introduced, an annotation that defines that term will automatically pop up when a student places the computer cursor directly on the term. URL links can be linked to additional readings or videos on the Web. Periodic quiz questions can also be spread throughout the unit to help students check their comprehension of the material. Interactive flashcard games at the end of the unit can help students review for a unit test. A website/unit built in SoftChalk will work in any LMS. So let's suppose the MnSCU decided to not use D2L anymore or that a Minnesota public school no longer wanted to use Moodle. If a class is built in Softchalk, it's easily uploaded to a new LMS. An instructor does not have to start over building a new website when a school or campus switches to a new LMS.

- Respondus <http://www.respondus.com> is a program that closes down Web browsers during online tests. This reduces the possibility of cheating. For instance, students are unable to do Google or Yahoo searches for answers.
  In addition to being knowledgeable about LMSs and the software programs   that work with them, today's writing instructors need to learn how to use digital tools such as blogs, wikis, eFolio, and Facebook.

- For those who want to publicly share their thoughts with the world, Google offers Blogger <http://www.blogger.com>, a tool that makes creating a personal blog page easy and accessible. A class blog invites discussion from an audience of readers beyond the four-walls of a classroom. Instead of keeping a writing journal or a reading log that only the English instructor reads, students have the opportunity to write for each other and a worldwide audience. Students can also receive feedback on their posts. At the end of the semester, students often tell me, "Even though class is ending, I'm going to continue to post on my blog."

- Wikis are workspaces where cooperative groups can do collaborative writing. A popular free wiki site is PBWorks <http://www.pbworks.com>. Research-based projects work well for collaborative writing groups. For example, an English instructor can divide a class into cooperative teams, assigning each team the task of creating a multi-page website that defines a particular poet's writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, and publishing. Students who have done collaborative

writing in wikis enjoy the creativity and ownership of building a website. Their writing is detailed, well-organized, and audience-focused.

- eFolio <http://www.efoliominnesota.com/>, provided by MnSCU, is an electronic, digital portfolio. I use eFolio in Technical Report Writing. My students create an electronic web portfolio that presents their education and employment credentials to prospective employers. They can update this site throughout their career. This eFolio website is an assignment that becomes a life-long, practical tool.

- Facebook <http://www.facebook.com>, which probably doesn't need an introduction, is the most popular social networking website in use. Instructors can create a Facebook Community Group (previously called a Fan Club) where discussions about literary or writing topics can take place both within and beyond the four walls of a classroom. MSU-Moorhead's English Department uses its Facebook page to announce department events on campus and literary events in the community. The next time I teach English Composition and Literature online, I'll be using Facebook for an open discussion of stories and poems. Not only will students participate in the discussion, so will anyone else who joins the group.

For those who are insecure about new, technology-driven teaching methods, this list of information or article may itself feel like a small tsunami. Just remember, if the first step to surviving the wave is to be informed about online tools and software, the second step is to start slow. Choose *one* tool for *one* lesson for *one* class. For example, learning to post grades and course handouts in an LMS is a great place to start. When instructors find success in one class, they grow to the next level by using the same online method in the other classes they teach. Then this success spurs instructors to try other online tools for other units, such as how to build and add Camtasia files. Starting small and moving systematically and progressively into the use of online tools and software is more successful than trying to do too much all at once.

The final piece of advice for surviving the online tsunami is to find a colleague who is experienced using online tools. A mentor can show how it is done and be the "go-to person" who can answer questions or help solve problems if they arise. The mentor knows the best practices from research and experience. This mentor might be a colleague whose classroom or office is just down the hall. At MSU-Moorhead, I serve as the "go-to person" in the English Dept. We also have IT Dept. technology experts and instructional design educators on campus who are skilled at providing in-depth training.

Although the growing surge of online classes and digital writing tools is inexorable, it doesn't have to feel like a tsunami. Instructors can successfully ride the crest if they are informed, make changes systematically and progressively, and find a mentor who will partner with them in the process. Remember, it's about the students and what they need to become self-initiated writers in today's class and tomorrow's world.

Works Cited

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