



Teaching Online: A Guide to Theory, Research, and Practice

Major, Claire Howell
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Book Review

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Some higher education faculty might still be ambivalent about the long term impact on educational culture by the technological takeover, especially that this shift has taken place in a relatively short period of time. Few though would doubt the fact that we are in the midst of an innovative, technology driven, instructional change. *Teaching Online*'s main goal is to help us navigate this change. Based on ample research, the book argues that the change has reached a tipping point and is expanding. This is hardly surprising news. Taking some courses online during their program has become a common expectation of the current generation of students at seminaries and graduate schools of theology, not to mention the large increase in distance learning programs and enrollment.

In addition to offering a comprehensive guide to the theory and practice of online teaching, *Teaching Online* also includes substantial chapters on developments in the theories and philosophy of education. This, in addition to situating teaching online within a long trajectory of change to instructional culture are among the key contributions of the book. Faculty views on learning change when they teach online, argues the chapter on "Views of Learning." Higher education systems are facing new and significant challenges. "For hundreds of years, educators labored under the assumption that learning happened by way of an individual's consumption of information and ideas." Many philosophers of education, long before the time of online learning, starting with Paulo Freire in the 1960s, have challenged this view. However, the recent and widespread experience in online learning, which has now become mainstream, has clearly moved education beyond the traditional static concept. The difference is that this time the move to learner-centered educational systems is caused by technology. Online learning is offering the possibility of constructing ecosystems "in which each person is

spreading his or her understanding among the pieces of information available in that ecosystem.” Students are becoming active agents in what one contributor to the book calls a “rhizomatic” learning process that has no fixed beginning or end, and is rather an ongoing experimentation and transformation (65-67). This is a great metaphor for theological education! Equally challenged by the spread of online learning are not only traditional philosophy and pedagogies, but also academic institutions themselves that might be losing control of the learning process (257). *Teaching Online* helps teachers tackle these changes and challenges. Furthermore, the chapters of *Teaching Online* offer valuable practical help in several key areas such as course structure and planning, the teacher’s persona in the online course, communication, student engagement and community of learning, and much more.

One minor annoyance in the book is the format of the chapters. Most chapters include five or six page-long testimonies of professors sharing their experience on the topic of the chapter. While these are somewhat interesting and add information and liveliness to the book, because of the way they are inserted, they can be distracting and interrupt the flow of the chapter. One feels lost at times in trying to follow the flow of the chapter; perhaps the book is trying to implement the rhizomatic approach mentioned above!

I was attracted to this book mainly because I am preparing to teach a totally online course for the first time, in the next academic year. I am glad I read it, and I strongly recommend it.

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