Online education horror stories worthy of Halloween: A short list of problems and solutions in online instruction

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Abstract

This article examines many surprising problems that arise in the process of distance education using the Internet and describes ways in which instructors and administrators can solve these problems. The information in the article is based largely on the experience of educators at Utah State University who have been exploring distance education for the past six years by teaching a wide range of online courses via the Internet. As a result of this varied online teaching, we have encountered a broad spectrum of challenges to which we have tried to respond and from which we have tried to learn. The solutions described are generalizable to other programs using online delivery for instruction.

Keywords: Adult learning; Computers and writing education; Computer-mediated communication; Distance learning; Online education

1. Introduction

Distance education classes taught via the Internet, also called "online" classes, are revolutionizing education. When done right, distance education over the Internet can be extremely effective (Hailey & Hailey, 1997, 2000, 2001; Wallace & Mutooni, 1997; Griffioen, Seales & Lumpp, 1999). It becomes possible to bring education to people who have never before had access, and to improve education for students who have had only limited access in the past. In teaching online classes at Utah State University for six years, we have used Internet-based classrooms that employ a variety of tools (e.g., asynchronous discussion forums and online chat rooms). These tools have allowed students access to our classes at any
time from the comfort of their homes or wherever they have a computer with Internet access. By replacing traditional face-to-face class meetings with electronic discussion forums, we have been able to teach students located as remotely as Thailand, Israel, and Uzbekistan. Perhaps more importantly, we have taught bed-bound, paraplegic, hearing-impaired, and blind students in our online classes. Our experience has been that online classes are sufficiently different from traditional (face-to-face) classes and sufficiently accessible that students who would do badly in traditional classes or who could not take them at all typically thrive in online classes (Hult & Hailey, 2000).

Now comes the bad news. The very features of online classes that make them so accessible to students—the freedom to participate in class at any time, from any place, without ever having to meet or speak to the teacher or other students in person—can also make such classes difficult and dangerous for unwary or underprepared faculty. Online classes can be unpredictable and potentially explosive. A few troublesome students may stage vitriolic and embarrassing online attacks that can sometimes threaten a teacher’s career. This article addresses some problems that may arise in online classes and proposes solutions to some of those problems. The most dangerous problems stem from volatility in the online classroom.

2. Problems with volatility in the online classroom

A 1994 survey conducted by the state of Utah indicated that there were more students in kindergarten classes than in all of the state’s postsecondary educational institutions. As a result, the state expects college enrollments to double in the next fifteen years. To attend to this growing population, the state funded development of an online educational component in critical areas, including first-year English. During the 1995–1996 academic year, the Utah State University English Department established an online first-year English program. A year later, we began establishing an online graduate program in technical writing and an online undergraduate program in linguistics. Within these programs, we presently teach approximately 50 graduate students and more than 200 undergraduate students in online classes each semester. Most of these students are a pleasure to teach. However, at times a few messages from volatile students have unpredictably exploded into flame wars or have contained strongly worded complaints about the teacher, administrators, or others in positions of authority.

2.1. Inappropriate behavior

Frequently, student “explosions” happen with no obvious trigger, as can be seen in the following example, which, like all the examples in this article, is a composite based on the authors’ actual experiences with actual students. The examples have been modified and the names changed to provide anonymity to the students involved. As they negotiated their roles and tasks, one student (“Carl”) posted a comment requesting that he be given a specific portion of a group project. The project was an intranet site, and the student wanted to create a page containing the company history. When the group failed to respond, the student repeated his request. A few hours later, a different student (“Amy”) volunteered to create the
site's home page. Not only was her post amicable, but she was clearly prepared to negotiate her request with the other students. However, the friendly nature of the class exchange shifted quite suddenly with Carl's reply. He had apparently been confused by the Web site structure, assuming that the corporate history was the same as the home page. In a sharply worded post, he accused Amy of "stealing" his part of the project. He went on to complain that Amy was doing it because she thought she knew HTML better than he did. The caustic level of his comments offended Amy, and she replied in kind.

Subsequently, several students in the class attempted to explain to Carl that he was mistaken, that Amy was not stealing his project. Unfortunately, these responses only served to inflame the situation more. Carl took offense at every comment. In reality, the problem had nothing to do with Amy stealing anything from Carl; it had to do with the fact that Carl was already frustrated because he was struggling with material he did not understand. Furthermore, he did not understand the project itself, and he lost control when he thought Amy had slighted him. Matters only became worse when he realized that he had made a fool of himself in front of peers.

2.2. Symptoms preceding inappropriate behavior

At first glance, flame wars between students previously civil to each other as well as vicious written attacks by students toward teachers may seem to occur without warning. Over the years, however, we have identified signs that indicate which students are most likely to become inappropriately volatile and disruptive. We have noticed that volatile students manifest clear symptoms: (a) a low frustration threshold, (b) a sense that they are victims of technology or other peoples' lack of understanding and (c) a tendency to overstate problems, overreact to them, and lash out. Once these students run into a significant problem, their rhetoric tends to become harsh. A posting from such a student will often express significant frustration while at the same time claiming that the problem comes from the text, another student, or the class itself. In short, we have learned to watch out for students who are not doing as well in class as they think they should, who are frustrated, and who believe they are the victims of other students, poor technology, or poor teaching.

2.3. Inappropriate collaboration

Many online classes seem to have a "Carl"—a student who lashes out suddenly at fellow students or the teacher. However, two or more such students working together to complain about the teacher can create a much more dangerous situation. Enlisting even one ally can greatly increase the credibility of a student's complaints if they are directed outside the class. This was the case in one online graduate class, where a student found a confederate and both wrote not only to the teacher but also to the department head and the state governor. In most cases, frustrated students attempt to ally themselves with others in the class by appealing to them with such phrases as "fellow students who are frustrated with HTML Help," or "others in the same situation as me." They may then begin a private dialogue outside the class with any sympathetic students who respond, combining and feeding their mutual frustration. In
the following example from an online graduate class, the student searched for confederates while suggesting ways the teacher could improve the class:

Dear fellow students who are as frustrated with this project as I am, I found these updates on the Internet. But I am still running into more problems. I am going step by step in the book, but the contents are all messed up. A class for students beginning HTML shouldn’t be this difficult. By the way, I am using version 1.22—not the book’s 1.1, if that makes a difference.

Consider the student’s assumption that some students are equally frustrated. Typically, in a complicated class, some students will struggle early in the class, but more often than not, they will work through their problems without complaining, or they will ask civilly for clarification or assistance. If a few students are struggling with an assignment, but only one is complaining, a teacher could keep a close eye on the complaining student. Such a complaint may be simply a minor disturbance in the flow of the class; however, a statement such as the previous one may also represent the beginning of a serious and growing problem. Such students see their problems as stemming from outside themselves: other students, the teacher, the nature of the class, or the text. They often do not recognize or admit to their inability to deal with the work. Ironically, we have even experienced students actually beginning a complaint by insisting that they have been carefully doing the work, then ending the complaint by clearly demonstrating that they have not.

Although collaboration may sometimes be inappropriate, serving only to aggravate frustrations among students who feel similarly helpless, having students help each other can sometimes be the best way to solve frustrations over technical difficulties. For example, David Hailey always establishes a “troubleshooting” discussion forum in his online classes. This forum allows students to bring problems to the attention of the other students (and to freely express their frustrations as a group). Hailey requires that the class together—and not the teacher alone—solve the problems. In this manner, students having technical difficulties are helped, a sense of community is fostered, and the students who provide the help are able to learn twice—once when they solve the problems for themselves and once as they help their peers solve the problems.

2.4. Unteachable moments

In a traditional instructional environment, student complaints are bound to arise, especially when a new teacher is learning how to control a class or when the teacher uses a heuristic model that the students find uncomfortable. Arguably, this hostility in the classroom can lead to teachable moments—opportunities for the teacher to turn emotional conflict into fruitful discussion that can result in learning for the whole class. However, we have found it is much easier to manage these controlled burns and keep them from becoming destructive in a face-to-face class (where everyone has access to tone of voice and body language to help them “read” each other and respond appropriately) than in an online class. As technology that allows students to see and hear each other in real time becomes more available for online classes, it may become easier to handle emotional outbursts online; however, in the strictly written medium of the online classes we have been teaching, tone is hard to read and create, and the invisible, inaudible teacher has a less moderating presence in the class. Emotional
outbursts can easily disrupt learning for the other students. For these reasons, we advise trying to put fires out or, better yet, prevent them from flaring up at all. Welcoming online flare-ups as teaching opportunities can be like playing with fire.

2.5. Inappropriate channels for complaint

Furthermore, our experience has been that complaints in traditional, face-to-face classes are more likely to stay within the class or department bounds, where it is easier for the teacher to control and make a virtue of them. Disgruntled students are likely to complain in person, first to the teacher and then, if necessary, to the teacher’s supervisor. Traditionally, this process is slow enough to allow emotions to cool, to filter out trivial complaints, and to allow resolution to be reached through reasonable discussion. Relatively few complaints are taken beyond the department to higher administrative levels.

By contrast, fires in an online class can spread quickly and uncontrollably. In an online class the teacher may be seen as only one of several authority figures to whom complaints can just as easily be sent. Rather than working out their frustrations with each other or with the teacher, students may, in a few heated minutes, fire off copies a complaint up and down the entire university hierarchy, emailing advisors, department heads, college deans, university presidents and provosts, local newspapers, and even state politicians. Multiple and strongly worded complaint messages from more than one student can blow a minor problem out of proportion and can damage a teacher’s career before the teacher even knows that he or she is in trouble—especially if the addressees include powerful political figures such as a state governor who has a particularly strong interest in online education. In one case, a student who was auditing a class wrote more than thirty vitriolic letters in a single, two-week period. To prevent complaints that can and should be resolved between teachers and students from being broadcast prematurely, it may be advisable to identify the appropriate avenues for complaint on the course syllabus.

3. Some possible explanations for flame wars

Flame wars in the online classroom, then, can pose a serious problem for the teacher. Although we are not entirely sure why online classes that use asynchronous discussion seem more combustible than face-to-face classes, we have developed some theories through our experiences with students and with the online environment.

Assuming that anger often stems from some fear, it may help explain volatility if we look at some factors that can increase anxiety, discomfort, stress, or insecurity in online students. Some of the most volatile students in our classes have been returning to school after a few years’ absence, and they seem particularly anxious about measuring up to their peers and to the instructor's expectations as they become students once again. Furthermore, some are new to the online environment and don’t know how to cope with the different learning style it demands. According to Jeffrey Young (1999) in a recent Chronicle of Higher Education article, Penn State University officials, struck with this fact, even decided to “create[d] a free on-line course about how to take on-line courses” (online).
Students may also be worried about their ability to make the software and hardware work for them. The equipment, after all, is not just a set of tools used by students in the class; it is the classroom itself. If it breaks down in the student’s home, the student may have to troubleshoot the problem alone and will not be able to participate in class until it is fixed. For some students, this does not present a problem. For others, used to traditional classes and already feeling physically isolated by the online medium, technical problems raise the fear of further isolation from the class and can understandably cause them to panic and overreact. They may shift some responsibility for these problems to the teacher, in much the same way that customers irate over products or services tend to vent frustration on the first company employees they encounter—regardless of where responsibility lies.

The online medium itself may add to students’ anxiety. Although audio-visual technology is becoming more available, most email correspondence and asynchronous electronic discussion still lacks the sensory cues of face-to-face discussion. If participants can’t see each other’s body language or hear the tone of each other’s voices, they are more likely to misinterpret remarks. Irvin Peckham (1997) stated that many researchers have documented the potential for miscommunication with email:

> The most common problem stems from its hybrid nature: De Long (1995), Sims (1996), Sproull and Kiesler (1991) have all noted that email writers tend to violate written conventions, leading to miscommunication and, worse, “ruffled feathers” (Stein & Yates, p. 102). (p. 344)

And, once students are aware of the potential ambiguity in online messages, they may try to compensate to the point of overkill, making liberal use of HARSHP LANGUAGE, ALL CAPS, AND EXCLAMATION MARKS!!! Strings of exclamation marks, looking rather like rows of matches waiting to be struck, can ignite a flame war.

Frustration among students can also result if a teacher assumes that teaching practices that have worked well in traditional classes will transfer to an online class—a case in point being the responses’ timing. If a student sends a paper letter through the postal service, the student does not expect an answer for several days or weeks. If the student asks a question in a traditional class and the teacher says, “I’ll have to get back with you on that,” the student does not expect an answer at least until he or she next sees the teacher—perhaps in the next class. On the other hand, if a student sends an online teacher an email request for information, the student tends to expect an immediate answer. We commonly have had students write email messages to a teacher and then send follow-up messages within the hour if they have not received a response.

In traditional classes, the “rule” is that teachers are only available at certain times of the week, an arrangement that lets teachers manage their time efficiently. They can set aside uninterrupted blocks of time for research and think about their classes only on certain days. However, an online teacher can’t afford to teach on a Tuesday–Thursday schedule and leave student posts unanswered between Thursday and Tuesday. If a student writes a request for help on Friday and does not receive a response before the weekend, he or she begins to feel abandoned. By Monday afternoon, a student with a low frustration level may already be furious. Whether we like it or not, the “24/7” accessibility of an online environment fosters the expectation that teachers are always available, and that being inaccessible is a dereliction of duty. To some extent, we can counteract this perception by reminding students that we
have other commitments or by posting “online office hours,” but we can’t entirely overcome the expectation of rapid response to student questions.

Delayed responses can cause problems not only in email exchanges, but also in asynchronous class discussion, where a student can see whether his or her posted message has been read, and if so, by how many people. It is debatable which is worse—to see that hardly anyone has bothered to read your post, or to see that the whole class has read it but that nobody has felt moved to respond. Either way, students already unsure of themselves in the online environment are likely to feel stressed if they see their messages have been ignored. (One way to overcome this problem is to assign responses, so that no one’s posts are overlooked.)

Finally, the combined effects of not having to look the audience in the eye, yet being able to compose and deliver an informal message to them within minutes or even seconds, may explain people’s tendency to suspend politeness and flame each other in online discussions. It is much easier to be rude in writing to someone you can’t see than to be verbally abusive to someone standing before you. Call it the “cruise missile syndrome”—the seductive ability to deliver a blow while remaining detached from the effects.

4. Solutions for volatility in online classrooms

In a poorly run, neglected online class, any student can become a problem. On the other hand, the students most likely to cause trouble are easy to spot and simple to handle, and with the right strategies and proper departmental support, a teacher can teach effective and generally trouble-free online classes. Others have also observed that online courses require new pedagogies, (see, for example, Dan Carnevale’s 2000 interview with Professor Rob Kline of Indiana University). In short, it is relatively easy to have trouble-free online classes, but the techniques used in traditional, face-to-face classes frequently fail. Online teachers should be prepared to make pedagogical adjustments.

Typically, the most problematic students will begin complaining early in the class, though the complaints may seem trivial. The student might write email to the teacher about a seemingly unimportant topic, but with an overly emotional title. Such students will often send a subsequent plea within an hour or two, again with a plaintive title: “HTML heeeeeeellllllllllpp!!!!” The teacher should not let the fact that the problem seems trivial affect the response. The title says it all; this student considers this problem important. The request for help should be addressed immediately. At this point, writing complicated instructions to students will only frustrate them even more. More effective is a telephone call. The sound of a sympathetic teacher’s voice is much more valuable than all the instructions the teacher can write. Furthermore, when the student is totally mired in the technology, it typically takes more explaining than teacher and student can communicate in writing. Although many online students live in distant locations, some live just a few miles away. If they can drive to campus, we find that inviting them for a face-to-face tutorial will also go a long way toward calming their anxiety. While the student uses the teacher’s equipment, the teacher can suggest improvements and provide moral support.

Finally, a well-timed, unsolicited, friendly email to students will go a long way toward improving their attitude:
I'm just checking in to see how you are doing. I noticed that you think you may have a problem running your software on your version of Word. Has that worked out? If you like, and don't have the right version of Word, you could bring what you have already done by here and we can finish it up together. If you have a dozen or so topics completed, we can put together a finished project and get it posted on the system here so that you can be polishing it. Also, I don't know if you have an FTP engine or know how to use one. I can give you one and show you how it works (if necessary). Amy came by a couple of weeks ago, and we were able to pretty much get her completed. Best regards, your teacher

They may take only seconds to write, but messages such as the previous one will invariably prompt a positive response from frustrated students. In short, by paying careful attention to students—especially those who exhibit the warning signs of volatility—and by proactively sending emails designed to defuse student frustration, a teacher can avoid most angry student outbreaks.

5. Suggestions for administrators

Teachers who elect to teach online may inadvertently be putting themselves and their careers at risk. Administrators who empower their teachers to teach online should remember that to “empower” means to allow the teacher to make mistakes—and teachers going online for the first time will almost certainly make them. The best administrators will support their teachers as they step into virtual traps that online education can set.

Administrators should also establish a policy of not tolerating disruptive behavior, and the department, not the teacher, should take responsibility for removing a disruptive student. If a teacher removes a student from class, the student may be moved to go on a public, personal tirade against the teacher. In fact, this is exactly what happened with a student who wrote more than thirty attack emails. The teacher, finding the student disruptive in class, had blocked the student from participating. Ironically, the student was not officially registered but was merely informally auditing the class. If the department had taken responsibility for removing the student, the teacher would have been protected. By the same token, the department can also be responsible for preventing ineffective online teachers from teaching in this environment. Just as there are students whose temperaments are not suited to online instruction, there may also be teachers who remain unwilling or unable to adapt their teaching methods to the online environment.

6. Suggestions for teachers

In our experience, online classes require more of the teacher’s time than face-to-face classes, but this time investment is not necessarily noticed and appreciated by online students unless the teacher works to create the appearance of being present at all times. This may seem like an impossible task, but in reality it isn’t difficult. If we can assume that an online teacher is as caring and engaged as a face-to-face teacher, and works at least as hard for the class, we are really only looking for techniques that demonstrate that effort. The lessons we have learned that demonstrate engagement can perhaps be distilled into five important points.
6.1. Visit the class often

A smoothly operating class can become chaotic in a matter of moments. We have had teachers check in on a class in the morning and find the class progressing nicely, then check in that afternoon to find a fully erupted flame war in progress. Imagine how much chaos such a war could generate in a class if the teacher were absent for several days. Also, if students are dissatisfied with the teacher, hints will begin to spring up as suggestions to the teacher and as attempts to recruit other students, first into agreement and then, sometimes, into rebellion. A good suggestion when monitoring online classes is “early and often.”

6.2. Learn to recognize warning signs and respond to them

Here again are the danger signs to look for in online students: (a) low frustration threshold, (b) a sense that they are victims of technology or of other peoples’ lack of understanding, and (c) a tendency to overstate problems, overreact to them, and lash out.

6.3. Post messages often

This is how you achieve critical “face time.” Even if you have nothing crucial to say, you can make your presence known to students by attaching short remarks to student comments and by posting instructional messages where the students can see them as they enter the online classroom. Although this actually takes little time, it creates the illusion of constant presence. You might even take a few moments on Friday to wish the students a good weekend—an effective way of saying, “I’ll be gone until Monday.” Also, initiate encouraging email messages to students who may be at risk of becoming volatile.

6.4. Respond immediately to relevant posts and to all student email

Don’t wait for a convenient time to reply to students. Because you can respond immediately to student messages, students tend to believe you should. Typically, they do not email trivialities to the teacher, so if a student has sent an email, it probably means he or she has exhausted every other possibility and will be unable to progress with the class until the teacher provides key information. We have learned to take student pleas seriously.

6.5. Use the telephone to solve difficult problems and to reinforce support for frustrated students

Remember that the telephone is both an online tool and an excellent fire extinguisher. Trying to put out a flame war by emailing a rebuke to the student who started it is more likely to fan the flames towards you. Instead, call the student, calm the situation, and remove the student’s post from the discussion as quickly as possible. If the post is directed at another student, call that student as well and divert any angry responses. A simple phone call can be highly effective in mending—or better yet, preventing—the kinds of communication breakdown we discussed previously.
We hope that, in bringing these problems to the readers’ attention, we have not been unnecessarily discouraging. On the contrary, we have found online teaching to be some of the most professionally rewarding work that we do. However, we also believe that everyone should approach endeavor of online teaching with eyes wide open, understanding that whenever we begin teaching and learning with new technologies, inevitable growing pains will occur. If appropriate precautions are taken, online courses may not become as scary as Halloween.

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