

## What the Best Online Teachers Should Do

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### Abstract

As a core project, a university eLearning Pedagogy Faculty Learning Community (FLC) chose to apply recommendations for the “art” of good teaching to the online realm. There is relatively little discussion of this issue in the literature. In this paper, we use Bain’s (2004) book *What the Best College Teachers Do* to discuss some of the major ways that the practices of effective teaching in general can be applied to online teaching in particular. Specifically, we explore methods of fostering student engagement, stimulating intellectual development, and building rapport with students when teaching online. This analysis provides a much-needed “art of teaching” set of recommendations that complements the “science of teaching” best practices approach to online pedagogy.

**Keywords:** best practices; online pedagogy; Ken Bain; effective teaching

In his well-known book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain (2004) identified a set of core characteristics of exemplary college teachers. Bain generated his recommendations by interviewing, assessing, and observing over 60 outstanding teachers across many disciplines and kinds of higher education institutions. These teachers were identified through the awards they had received and their reputations for high quality teaching.

According to Bain (2004), excellent teachers produce “important educational results” (p.5), such as high achievement on standardized and professional tests and satisfied, inspired students. These teachers changed the way students “think, act or feel” (p. 7). The students of the best teachers not only learn, but also learn to love learning, which in turn provides a sustained and significant impact on the students’ lives. In these teachers’ classes, understanding is more important than remembering, arguments and evidence are more important than facts and figures. In Bain’s view, excellent teaching has little to do with implementing a set of teaching tips or best practices. Rather, excellent teaching focuses on unusual and remarkable results like sustained and deep understanding, a fundamental change in the student’s world view and mental models, a desire to learn more, and the effective communication of the teachers’ attitudes toward their profession, discipline, and students.

Given the differences between teaching face-to-face and teaching online, how can faculty members capture the best parts of “what works” in their courses across different delivery modes? How can they demonstrate in online course delivery the characteristics of the most effective teachers identified by Bain? How can online faculty members best “make a difference” with their online students?

Despite Bain’s observations and recommendations, most of the literature on online pedagogy focuses on “best practices” (e.g., Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Since the early days of online learning, there have been suggestions about how technologies can be used to enhance collaborative learning opportunities (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996). More recently, reviewers have identified several best practice principles related to Bain’s work including communicating clear goals and expectations; incorporating multiple active learning opportunities; providing frequent, prompt, and constructive feedback; and creating teacher support resources (e.g., Berge, 2002; Grandzol & Grandzol, 2006; Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009).

All of these best practice suggestions make good sense and are useful for online teaching. One question is whether the best online teachers actually follow these recommendations. There is some research that supports this possibility. For example, in an exploratory study of the practices of exemplary online

teachers, Lewis and Abdul-Hamid (2006) found several common themes. These included efforts to provide constructive and individualized feedback to students; facilitating student interaction, involvement and learning; and paying attention to how a course is organized and how teacher presence is enhanced. In all of these efforts, exemplary teachers also strove to convey accurately their expectations for the students.

Whereas best practices are clearly necessary for good teaching, we do not think that they are sufficient for excellent teaching. If becoming an outstanding teacher merely entails implementing recommended best practices, then there would be many more outstanding teachers than there currently are. Clearly, there are good and bad (or more and less effective) ways to implement these practices. There seem to be things that cannot simply be borrowed, copied, or plugged into courses. These are the less tangible attributes that Bain (2004) discussed as the essential characteristics of the best teachers.

In summary, although there has been much discussion on best practices in online teaching and learning, most of this discussion focuses on the use of specific tools or techniques. Very little attention has been paid to the ways that online teachers can create the kinds of learning environments and experiences that Bain talks about as characterizing the best teachers. That is, most of the literature deals with the “science” of online teaching rather than the “art” of online teaching. In this paper, we attempt to remedy this state of affairs.

### **An eLearning Pedagogy Faculty Learning Community**

A Faculty Learning Community (FLC) is a group of interdisciplinary faculty who engage in an active, collaborative, year-long program (Cox, 2004). The program typically includes a curriculum about enhancing teaching and learning with regularly-scheduled meetings and activities that provide participants with opportunities pertaining to the FLC’s major focus. An important component of an FLC is an emphasis on the scholarship of teaching and learning (Richlin & Cox, 2004).

The eLearning Pedagogy FLC, initiated at our university in 2009, focused on hybrid and online teaching and the integration of instructional technologies. Its general goal was to increase faculty interest in learning and teaching with instructional technologies. It provided opportunities and support for a select group of faculty members to investigate, assess, and implement a variety of e-learning methods specific to their disciplines and interests. The FLC began with 6 faculty members, including the facilitator. The faculty came from a diverse set of disciplines including Psychology, University Studies, Agribusiness and Agriscience, Leadership Studies, and Electronic Media Communication. The FLC was supported by funds provided by the Academic Affairs Division, and its members received a stipend of \$500 for their participation.

The eLearning Pedagogy FLC was a collaborative program designed to learn and implement best practices in hybrid and online teaching and learning. Once the FLC began, participants attended monthly meetings that included teaching and learning activities, development and training opportunities, and community building. In addition to developing or enhancing their own hybrid or online courses, participants read the literature on the scholarship of teaching and designed individual projects that allowed the assessment and evaluation of their instructional changes, suitable for presentation or publication in a professional journal.

In addition to the individual projects, the FLC used Bain’s (2004) book as the catalyst for our discussions about what the best online teachers should do. During the course of our year-long meetings, the members frequently examined what worked well in their face-to-face classes, what they did not want to lose when they moved a course to online delivery, and how they could overcome some of the barriers to effective teaching inherent to a context where they never met with their students in person. Throughout this process, Bain’s book continued to anchor the members and serve as a touchstone to guide our discussions.

The FLC members’ approach to this project involved several steps: (1) At the start of our FLC, we read Bain’s book, with the goal of discussing it in terms of its implications for teaching online; (2) during these discussions, each FLC member listed out the major and most interesting points from Bain’s book; (3) we summarized the major categories of behaviors shown by Bain’s best teachers that are most applicable to online teaching and learning; and (4) we analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of what the best teachers studied by Bain did in terms of online teaching.

## Bain's Major Observations and Recommendations

*What the Best College Teachers Do* is an award-winning and critically acclaimed book. Reviewers have praised the book's systematic and comprehensive identification of the characteristics of outstanding teachers as well as how it encourages readers to examine their own teaching assumptions and practices (e.g., Alstete, 2005; Altstaedter, 2007; Theall, 2005). In our case, a year-long, intensive examination of Bain's book led us to look within and reflect on our teaching approaches and philosophies. We found the book encouraging, refreshing, energizing, and invigorating. However, as we examined our approaches to online teaching and learning, our impulse was to identify, discuss, and apply the methods and techniques that characterize exemplary teachers. When we got bogged down with best practice considerations, we found that we were losing sight of what is best for student learning. With the help of the FLC facilitator, we resisted this impulse and focused instead on the more general attributes of the outstanding teachers Bain describes.

One of the most important factors discussed by Bain is *fostering student engagement* or creating effective student interactions with faculty, peers, and content. A second major category is *stimulating intellectual development* or "confronting intriguing, beautiful or important problems, authentic tasks that will challenge [students] to grapple with ideas, rethink assumptions and examine mental models of reality" (Bain, 2004, p. 18). Bain calls this creating a "natural critical learning environment" (p. 18). A third essential characteristic of the best teachers is *building rapport with students*, which includes behaviors such as demonstrating and encouraging trust and potential in students, flexibility, self-directed learning, communicating learning and success intentions to students, and conveying realistic goals and expectations. We discuss these categories in more detail in the following sections.

Other than one face-to-face teacher who used online discussion boards, teacher characteristics of effective online teaching or learning were absent from Bain's book. Nearly all his examples were taken from the traditional classroom. There is nothing in Bain's treatise that suggests that the activities of the best teachers cannot be transferred to the online (or hybrid) domain. In fact, it is likely that Bain would argue that what the best teachers do should not depend on the mode of course delivery. However, course delivery mode does have implications for how to demonstrate the characteristics shown by the best teachers. There are likely to be advantages and disadvantages to online teaching when it comes to being an outstanding teacher.

Based on our reading of Bain's book, we examined these three broad categories of what the best teachers do as they might or should apply to online teaching. Although these categories differ somewhat from the categories identified by other reviewers of the book (e.g., Altstaedter, 2007), they worked well for purposes of this paper. Within each category, specific examples and behaviors are provided that either make effective use of the online format or that are barriers that need to be overcome when teaching online. We also focus on the less tangible qualities that are the hallmark of good teaching as described by Bain.

### *Fostering Student Engagement*

Bain (2004) asserts that the best college teachers foster engagement through effective student interactions with faculty, peers, and content. They see the potential in every student, demonstrate a strong trust in their students, encourage them to be reflective and candid, and foster intrinsic motivation moving students toward learning goals. The best teachers want students to learn, regularly assess their efforts and make adjustments as needed, and accommodate diversity with sensitivity to student needs and issues. Peers are viewed as important in the learning process by creating an environment where "students can reason together and challenge each other" (p. 53) and grapple with the content together while building a sense of community. Class content – through its design, lectures, discussions, and assignments – supports the student learning objectives. Accordingly, the best teachers use meaningful examples, stimulating assignments, and thought provoking questions to motivate students to know more about their discipline. In these ways, the best teachers get their students to connect with the course, its content, and its teacher.

In a review of best practices for online teaching, Grandzol and Grandzol (2006) argued that the most essential factor to a successful online education experience is creating a community of learners where the quantity and quality of interactions with peers and faculty foster student engagement. Student-to-

faculty interaction is considered paramount in fostering student engagement. Likewise, student-to-student interaction is equally important as the quality and quantity of exchanges are predictors of success. The bottom line is that students should “feel a personal and emotional connection to the subject, their professor, and their peers” (p. 7). This kind of engagement is particularly important given the need for more self-discipline from students in online compared to traditional classes (Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008).

In the online environment, lecture need not and should not be the primary teaching strategy because it leads to learner isolation and attrition. The most important role of the teacher is to ensure a high level of interaction and participation (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). This is achieved by means of greater student-to-faculty contact, participation in class discussions, and a more reflective learning style (Rabe-Hemp, Woolen, & Humiston, 2009). These elements support Bain’s premise that it is imperative that students be active, not passive, to create a true learning environment.

There are many ways to foster student engagement with faculty, peers, and content in an online environment. For example, by the judicious and strategic use of humor, instructors can make course content more interesting and engaging and can be seen as more approachable by their online students (LoSchiavo & Shatz, 2005). Videos or podcasts can help students connect with and understand content in a way that print (or slides) alone may not be able to achieve. Videos, blogs, wikis, and discussion forums can also personalize the discipline and allow students to get to know the teacher as an individual who cares about student learning and success. It is one thing for a student to read a syllabus (or any document) about course requirements and expectations, but quite another for a teacher on video to talk about opportunities for learning and his or her teaching philosophy, just as Bain argues the best teachers do in the traditional classroom.

Online messaging boards, discussion forums, chats, and blogs are all tools designed to foster student engagement with peers and course content (e.g., Grandzol & Grandzol, 2006). We have found that rather than framing these exercises as course requirements, faculty should emphasize them as opportunities for students to build a community where they can learn from each other, help one another in tackling challenging course content, and provide a support system for each other. Furthermore, just as traditional classroom discussion can be enhanced by breaking students up into small groups, online discussions can also be set up in small groups. Likewise, team projects can be assigned in traditional classrooms and a host of software is available to facilitate virtual team collaboration.

A recent pedagogical tool, the use of web logs (blogs) has become increasingly popular as a means to engage students by facilitating reflective thinking, collaborative learning, and knowledge construction to contextualize real-world experiences (Nackerud & Scaletta, 2008). Blogs are essentially online journals that are made public to the class or shared solely with the teacher. They differ from discussions in that they are not intended for comments by others, although they may include comments intended to support the student. The added benefit of blogs that are shared with classmates is that they foster a sense of community where students can learn from each other while engaging in discussion, exploration, and discovery (Glogoff, 2005).

In summary, student engagement with teachers, peers, and content is vital in the online learning environment (see Table 1, part 1). While there are various strategies, tools, and techniques to achieve this end, teachers are ultimately striving to create an environment that allows learning to flourish. This effort is critical regardless of the course delivery mode.

### *Stimulating Intellectual Development*

According to Bain the best teachers create a natural critical learning environment. Bain would argue that this can be done using any number of methods or teaching styles. However, such an environment hinges on one key element: questions. Bain states that “Questions play an essential role in the process of learning and modifying mental models” (p. 31). The best teachers want students to develop their own questions and then show the students that their own personal questions are related to the questions presented by the teacher. Bain would argue that the best teachers create life-long learners. Asking and answering one’s own questions is a core element of life-long learning. As Bain put it, “Human beings are curious animals. People learn naturally while trying to solve problems that concern them” (p.46). Teachers could easily devise any number of questions to ask their students, but the best teachers ask questions that students want to answer. Creating a natural critical learning environment hinges upon the teacher’s ability to either motivate the students to solve a problem outlined by the teacher or the teacher’s ability to

show the students how to solve their own problem. This goes well beyond the multiple-choice scanner sheet exams (or the online equivalent) that are so common on college campuses. As Bain put it:

The best college and university teachers create what we might call a natural critical learning environment in which they embed the skills and information they wish to teach in assignments (questions and tasks) students will find fascinating – authentic tasks that will arouse curiosity, challenge students to rethink their assumptions and examine their mental models of reality. (p. 47)

Table 1. *General Categories of What the Best Teachers Do (after Bain, 2004) with Examples and Behaviors Specific to Online Teaching*

<p>(1) <b><u>Fostering student engagement</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a community of learners</li> <li>• Foster student-to-faculty and student-to-student interaction</li> <li>• Judicious and strategic use of humor</li> <li>• Creative and engaging use of videos, chats, podcasts, wikis, and discussion forums</li> <li>• Use blogs to facilitate reflective thinking, collaborative learning, and knowledge construction</li> </ul> <p>(2) <b><u>Stimulating intellectual development</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create natural critical learning environments</li> <li>• Generate provocative acts, questions, statements</li> <li>• Reflect on students' inaccurate and incomplete preconceptions or mental models</li> <li>• Use technology to create engaging and authentic content</li> </ul> <p>(3) <b><u>Building rapport with students</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand one's student population and determine the amount of help needed</li> <li>• Let students get to know their teacher</li> <li>• Use introductory video or other self-disclosure resources</li> <li>• Keep written records of communication that include relevant student information</li> <li>• Be flexible with deadlines and due dates</li> <li>• Provide individualized feedback on assignments and activities</li> </ul>
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Bain (pp. 99-103) describes five elements of a natural critical learning environment. These include (1) presenting a provocative question or problem, (2) guiding students to understand the significance of the question, (3) encouraging the students to think critically, (4) providing a learning environment that helps student to answer the question, and (5) leaving the students with additional questions and the desire to know more. Once again, none of these elements are contingent upon the delivery method. There are any number of tools that can be used to incorporate these elements into an online class. To understand how these elements can be incorporated in an online setting, consider the first and perhaps most important element: presenting a provocative question. Bain provides a suggestion for how this can be implemented online. At the beginning of the course an internet survey can be used to discover what questions students have as they start the course. Regardless of how these questions are solicited, the teacher's attitude and subsequent actions are most important. If teachers just ask the students to list questions they find interesting, this is a futile exercise. In a face-to-face setting, classroom time could be used to help students answer these questions. This could be replicated online using a discussion board. In a similar fashion, Bain notes that some of the best teachers use the internet to leave students with a final question after class. This can be a thought-provoking exercise that encourages students to apply content, transition to new material, and integrate previous course information.

While it may be more difficult to create the natural critical learning environment in the online setting, it is not impossible. Even problem-based learning, which incorporates many of the elements discussed by Bain, can be implemented online (Savin-Baden, 2007). It is important to reiterate that the tool or method is less important than student learning outcomes and the teacher's attitude. A teacher who places students first can make any tool work, and creativity and ingenuity are often called for to "make it work." As an example, consider the online lecture. As most experienced online teachers know, there are several commercial programs that can be used to capture and convert class presentations, screen shots, and screen captures to audio-video files. Most laptops have a webcam, and there are many devices that can record video. Programs are available to create video lectures with cartoon characters for those who would rather not record themselves. If teachers are dynamic lecturers and have the ability to hold a class's attention while asking stimulating questions, then they can easily capture these lectures and place them online. There are multiple avenues to broadcast class lectures through Web-based tools, virtual environments, mobile applications, or a dedicated media server provided by one's school.

If the teacher has taught the class in a traditional format, there are questions that have likely surfaced that can be used effectively in the online format. The best online teachers need to identify those questions and determine ways to keep them when moving to online delivery. For example, when creating video content for an online class, the teacher may ask students to pause the clip and ask themselves "what is it that I will need to know to continue this process?" or to attempt a math problem before seeing it completed later in the video. Of course, there is no guarantee that online students will take advantage of these opportunities any more than students in a traditional classroom will.

When students start asking questions, they are on the path to becoming lifelong learners. Teachers might, for example, have their students ask a question and then apply what they learned in class to write an essay answering their own question (Frank, 2007). Given the wide variety of tools available to students, they could write a traditional essay, create a video essay answering the question, and use blogs, wikis, and discussion boards as venues for asking and answering questions.

In summary, when it comes to stimulating intellectual development in students, questions are the key to creating a natural critical learning environment (see Table 1, part 2). Questions are universal; they can be asked and answered anytime or anywhere. They work best when the students ask them or when the students find them interesting. As long as it is possible to ask questions in an online class, then Bain's natural critical learning environment can exist in an online class.

### *Building Rapport with Students*

One way that Bain identified highly effective teachers was by how they treated their students. He recognized that such teachers "tend to reflect a strong trust in students. These teachers usually believe that students want to learn and they assume, until proven otherwise, that they can. They treat students with what can only be called simple decency" (p. 18). As Bain illustrates throughout his book, "building rapport with students" in this way is a crucial element of what the best teachers do. The principle question for our purposes is how to build this kind of rapport effectively in the online environment. As Zappala (2005) so aptly noted, it is important "not to be misled by the word 'distance' in distance education so as to believe that the relationship between the good teacher and learner is any less important than it would be in a traditional classroom" (p. 61).

So how do teachers close the "distance" gap and build rapport? Bain identified some first-day activities that some highly effective teachers used to get to know students. These included pretests, survey forms, and a course overview that identified several questions that the course would help them answer. It is important to note that the best teachers gathered that information "not to judge but to help" (p. 158). In the online world, it can be difficult to gather information from students at all. One possibility is to require permission of the teacher before the student can enroll in the class. An office visit might be required, but a phone call can be a way to establish contact in a more personal way. When rapport is established, the teacher is better equipped to gather information about students in a variety of ways that may help with success later in the semester. Many times students will reveal past difficulties with the subject matter, personal issues that may affect their performance, or job and family obligations that can vary from week to week. Knowing this information may help a teacher use strategies that are better for this student as the semester unfolds. Hoyle (2010) indicates that even if the online students are well-qualified or -prepared, "instructors are encouraged and expected to go the extra mile and do some hand holding and advising

should it be needed” (p. 39). On the other hand, as one of the exemplary teachers from Lewis and Abdul-Hamid’s (2006) study put it, “I’m not so sure that all this attentiveness doesn’t foster a lack of initiative on the student’s part” (p. 91). One of the results of these FLC discussions was the recognition of the importance of determining this balance and how knowing one’s student population is essential to reaching that goal.

The distance gap needs to be bridged in both directions. It is not sufficient for teachers to get to know their students without letting them get to know their teachers as well. Online teachers may find that they can use introductory activities to tell students a little about themselves. These can include relatively simple steps such as the posting of one’s teaching philosophy and the creation of a “getting started” course module (Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008). The use of video clips allows online students to feel that they get to know the teacher. Some teachers will share thoughts and stories to try to bridge the distance gap. Participating in class discussions can also allow teachers to get more personal with their students.

Some reviewers refer to these general behaviors as teacher “presence” (e.g., Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Facilitating interpersonal contact is an important role for online teachers and creating a social presence by projecting their identities is essential (Swan, 2002). Self-disclosure, through sharing personal stories and experiences, can promote bonding. The use of humor can be an effective strategy to convey openness or to establish a level of comfort that nurtures the learning process. Likewise, the use of emoticons and addressing students by name can contribute to establishing a social presence online (Aragon, 2003).

Recommendations of the correct manner or frequency with which teachers should employ these behaviors miss the point. It is clearly not simply a question of whether or not teachers do these things. Rather, it is how and why teachers create presence and build rapport with their online students. This might explain why, for example, that there is little agreement among experienced online teachers about the ideal frequency of participating in threaded discussions (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006).

Bain pointed out that “you don’t teach a class. You teach a student” (p. 97). Therefore it is important to remember that even though a teacher may not physically meet an online student during the semester, that student deserves to be recognized and treated as an individual. Because the online teacher is missing facial and body language cues that a traditional teacher would have, an online teacher can keep written records of communication that include relevant information to foster a personal connection. This allows the teacher to follow up with a student who has an extenuating circumstance, is “missing” from the online class, or is experiencing a life event where celebration is in order. Many online students are surprised by a call or note after a surgery or the birth of a child. Such contacts remind them that they are an important part of the class and are missed if they are not participating.

There are many other ways that online teachers can build rapport with their students. For example, just as with students in a traditional class, deadlines and due dates may need to be extended on occasion. This flexibility can be much easier in the online course, where the student can have access to all course material with the click of a mouse. Feedback on assignments is an important part of this process, conveying to students that teachers believe that they are capable of doing the work and are willing to help them. In some cases, this is more easily accomplished in the online environment, because a student can receive individualized feedback without having to wait for the next class meeting. Personalized contact can be anything from a note on worrisome midterm grades, to encouraging words to strive for a higher grade.

In summary, when it comes to building rapport with students, the best online teachers should understand the characteristics of their students and adapt accordingly (see Table 1, part 3). Underprepared, first-generation students probably should be treated differently from a graduating senior. Students differ in their ability to adjust to college, the level of monitoring and scaffolding they need, the amount of experience they have with online learning and the course management system, and so on. An important element of rapport building is that teachers are flexible – with regard to getting to know their students, getting their students to know them, working around deadlines, and creating an atmosphere that enhances learning.

## Conclusions & Implications

Compared to teaching face-to-face, does teaching online make it *more difficult* or merely *different* to demonstrate the characteristics of the best teachers identified by Bain (2004)? These characteristics embody the “art” of teaching and include things such as enhancing student understanding and critical thinking skills, changing the world views and mental models of students, instilling a desire to learn, and effectively communicating the teachers’ attitudes toward their profession, discipline, and students. On balance, we believe that the answer is “yes” to both parts of the previous question. The decreased amount of in-person teacher contact with students makes it more difficult to teach well online. It is also likely that part of this perceived difficulty can be attributed to a generation of teachers who have been taught in a traditional manner. Teaching online is also clearly different from teaching face-to-face. However, by attending to the issues raised in this paper and adjusting their teaching styles and course content accordingly, there are many ways that online teachers can succeed and thrive.

The point is not that online teaching is easier or more difficult, or that the trick to effective online teaching is the proper use of specific tools and techniques. The point is that online teaching is *different* than traditional face-to-face teaching. The best online teachers go beyond the technology. In the short life of online teaching and learning, specific tools and techniques have waxed and waned in popularity. This will, no doubt, continue in the future.

As other reviewers have argued (e.g., Fish & Wickersham, 2009; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006), excellent online teaching is not only possible but already occurring. In our examination of this topic, the question arises of how a course might lose something or be limited when it is no longer taught live or in-person. Recognizing and adjusting to these potential losses and limitations is what is meant when we talk about the “attitude” of the best online teachers. If teachers can determine the essential components of their courses that create a natural critical learning environment, then their use of a specific tool or technique can and should be guided by those components. In other words, whether teaching online or in any delivery mode, the desired and/or essential learning objectives should guide the course design and choice of instructional tools and approaches.

This “pedagogy-driven” approach can be contrasted with what we and others think is the more common “technology-driven” approach (e.g., Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008; Fish & Wickersham, 2009; Hutchins, 2003). In the latter case, teachers try to determine how a specific technology can be incorporated into courses with little attention to how that tool helps them to meet their teaching and learning goals. In essence, they can be seduced by the technology or the delivery mode and give in to the temptation to use instructional technology for its own sake. Because of the nature of online teaching, this cart-before-the-horse problem can be exacerbated compared to traditional face-to-face teaching. In addition, an online environment should be learner-centered, not teaching-centered, and must be designed with the learner in mind where active learning methodologies are employed to promote deeper learning (Aragon, 2003; Grandzol & Grandzol, 2006; Knowlton, 2000).

Another point we have tried to make in this paper is that there are multiple ways to teach well online. Just as in the case of the best traditional teachers studied by Bain (2004), online teachers can use a variety of approaches to foster student engagement, stimulate intellectual development, and build rapport with students. Recognizing the potential for individual variation in teaching well online suggests that there are no essential tools or techniques that all teachers should use. Rather, what is essential is a specific pedagogical attitude that reflects a high level of commitment to and investment in students. How these elements are operationalized into teaching practice is up to the individual teacher.

Thinking of online teaching as a short cut – that is, approaching online teaching and learning as easier, or taking less time, or as something that can be put on “autopilot” – leads to much less effective teaching and learning. A more productive and transformational approach to online teaching is to recognize that it allows teachers to transfer time from content delivery to time that can be devoted to fostering student engagement, stimulating intellectual development, and building rapport with students.

To those readers who were hoping to that we would provide more specific recommendations on what tools or techniques to use (and not use) for online teaching, the response should be clear by now. Whenever teachers are considering a tool/technique/strategy/approach (regardless of delivery mode), they would be best served to ask how that choice will impact student engagement, intellectual



development, and personal connections. That is one of the most important challenges facing teachers who aspire to develop their students into life-long learners.

### Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Barbara Draude, Jackie Gilbert, and Brenda Kerr for their very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Manuscript received 13 May 2011; revision received 8 Nov 2011.



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