

Everything I needed to know about online teaching and learning....I'm learning in OLTD**Kris Sward****Vancouver Island University****OLTD 503 – Final Project**

When writing my first assignment for 503 outlining my initial philosophies about online learning, I came up with a number of beliefs of what online teaching, learning and communication should look like and many of those beliefs still hold true. With little experience facilitating coursework in an online environment, I am basing a lot of my beliefs here on my own experiences learning in that same environment throughout the Online Learning and Teaching Diploma program so far. Those experiences have given me an opportunity to reflect upon what works for me as a learner and how I would go about designing online lessons to provide the best possible education for my own students. Each new course provides new insights and experiences that help solidify my beliefs and understandings of online learning. In this paper I will share some of these beliefs with you.

A note to the reader: the accompanying 'book' to this paper can be found at <http://storybird.com/books/everything-i-needed-to-know-about-online-teaching/?token=xf7sz3jvjr> (also emailed to you). As you read through this paper (or listen to the audio recording) you will note the 'Turn the page' prompts. At that point you need to refer back to the Storybird book and enjoy the wonderful artwork and writing that accompanies this piece. I have also underlined my key beliefs in this paper to serve as a reference point to the Storybird piece. (Might I suggest reading the Storybird book once, then reading along again as you read or listen to this paper.)

There are many reasons students might turn to online learning. Some struggle to fit in to a regular school structure, others are required to travel or have medical issues that require continuous care and therefore cannot attend school during regularly scheduled hours. Some students simply want to make up or earn extra credits and think that an online course will be an easy A for them. What they fail to understand is that the same outcomes covered in a regularly scheduled class must also be met in an online class and that the time spent in a regular classroom should be at least equivalent to the time that they will be required to put in for an online class. When applying for this program I, myself, felt that it was a convenient way to work towards a Master's degree without having to travel too far and spend too much of my time away from my family. I was interested in a number of the course offerings and have been implementing technology in my own classroom for a few years now, so felt that it was a great fit for me personally and professionally. As a highly organized and typically driven person, online learning appealed to me because of its flexible schedules and ease of access. What I wasn't prepared for was the amount of time this program would actually require of me and I have had to adapt my life to include my studies on a larger scale than I had initially envisioned. There have been times where I've found it very difficult to motivate myself to do the work and at times I have also become quite overwhelmed by my studies. True, I have saved time in not having to travel to and from school but I think that I have more than made up for the 'class time' in the amount of time I have spent online meeting with my peers, working on projects, completing readings and exploring and understanding the tools that we are employing in our studies.

In her book, *Online and Social Networking Communities: A Best Practice Guide for Educators*, Karen Kear (2011) alludes to this 'information overload' as she reviews a number of studies that imply that students in an online environment found the workload to be more than

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they had anticipated it would be. From arduous numbers of discussion posts to difficulties using new technologies, students were often unprepared for the amount of work involved in an online class. To say that online learning is an uphill climb is simply pointing out that there is a very steep learning curve involved when starting to teach or learn online and that expectations of the amount and type of workload should be identified early on.

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During our learner led seminar, my partner Jane C. and I built a website to cover our topic of "Too Much Information." I found it to be quite ironic that we both felt overwhelmed in creating this website because we were teaching others how to avoid information overload. I say If you build it, they will come somewhat tongue in cheek as the students in our cohort (and in reality in our future online classes) have no choice but to come to our websites or Learning Management System's if they want to pass the course; however, in this case the amount of time and effort required to create an effective unit speaks to the enormity of the task of 'building it.' Our intention in our seminar was to keep it short, simple and straightforward and not bog everyone down with a lot of information and it did end up looking really good. It had a smooth flow of information and served our purpose of providing the information we needed to get across without being overwhelming. But it was no small feat in creating it!

This quote can also speak to the building of a sense of community. Kear (2011) notes that "low participation is often a problem in online communities". This is frequently a result of students becoming overwhelmed with the number of discussion posts or the amount and type of workload they are experiencing. She also identifies the importance of the community in keeping these learners in the course. "[A] sense of community could help them to keep going when they

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were struggling with motivation” (Kear, 2011). By incorporating social media, perhaps in the form of a class wiki or Facebook page, and encouraging regular communication between students as well as between teachers and students, a sense of place will develop and students will feel a part of the team. Students will come here to build connections, find support and resources and feel a part of their group. If you provide the space, they will come to be a part of it – initially perhaps because they are required to, but as community builds, they will come because they want to. I believe that the building of a sense of community in online courses is key to maintaining motivation and improving student completion rates.

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I have been amazed these last number of weeks at how unique and creative each of our seminar leaders have been in employing a variety of tools for us to explore the concept of online communication. We explored Wikis, Wallwisher walls, Blackboard Learn, Googledocs, Twitter, Pinterest and blogging on our websites – and that was just in Group 2! This variety and creativity shows not only our distinctive perspectives and beliefs, but also the endless possibilities of tools available to us to create enriching learning opportunities for our future students. If you can dream it, you can, indeed, do it!

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In reflecting back on my own experience of building a website for our seminar, I recognize that I went through an interesting metamorphosis during the process. Initially, I was filled with excitement, not wanting to spend my precious time completing that weeks required activities but instead wanting to pour all of my creative juices into building a comprehensive, engaging and interesting seminar activity for my peers. At points I found it overwhelming and

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found that it was taking up too much of my time and stressing me out. In my reflection piece I made reference to this when I spoke of wanting to make it so easy and straightforward for others that I was bending myself out of shape to get them there. So I moved from being excited to being overwhelmed, which I believe is typical of the average online learner. What happened next speaks to the quote: Patience is a virtue...

After completing the website and posting the link to the week's activities I had time to pause. In fact I had a lot of time to wait because initially nothing happened. I waited and waited and still nothing came. What I had to learn about facilitating my first online session was that my schedule of teaching is not necessarily matched to my 'students' schedules of learning. Some people allocate weekend time to work on coursework. Others single out Tuesday or Thursday nights to get their readings and assignments done. Just because we posted information on a Saturday didn't mean that it would be looked at on the same day. My lesson here was patience. I had to understand that others were working through the materials in their own way and at their own pace. This journal entry from the week is a poignant reflection of my experience here:

Thursday – I was feeling a bit panicked today as I was thinking...hmmm, no one has completed our requested tasks. Yikes. My original concern about this week was that it would be less community and more isolation – which is okay in some aspects but in others creates concern around the support networks needed for online learning to be successful. I was thinking that everyone was overwhelmed and had given up already and weren't doing their homework. Then I logged in to our Wallwisher site and couldn't see the background for all the posts....turns out I was just being a tad impatient with my 'gentle prod' email to get things moving. I guess that brings up another difficult aspect of online learning. You can create a

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thorough, interesting and methodical unit and then you have to let it go and wait to see how others respond to it. The waiting is the hardest part. Interesting that after reading the posts I felt much better, even though there are only two blog posts in so far. I guess time will tell how many people will take it seriously, but that part has been hidden from us (or at least from me) so far – I just assumed everyone was studiously working away at completing the courses. Perhaps not. Though I can relate with Ben R – I was on his website today reading his blog and noticed that he is preparing a wiki for next week's session....ah, I thought, he is bogged down creating his seminar – much like me last week missing out on a lot of the discussion forum questions because I was creating a website. I get it....

In reflection, I think that this will prove to be the most difficult aspect of online teaching for me, the waiting for others to hand work in or create discussion posts based on their coursework. Patience is a virtue in any classroom but this is particularly true in an online learning environment.

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Throughout OLTD 501 and 502, our cohort has undertaken many team building activities. Kear notes that this is important as “it helps them to engage more actively with the course, and to gain more value and enjoyment from their studies” (Kear, 2011). The intent of these activities was to build that sense of community, shared understanding and trust I've already made reference to. By developing online presence and identifying with the technology we were using, we were better equipped to move into the seminar type format we've used here in 503. “For these interactions to happen, students need to feel comfortable with each other and with

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their teacher, and they need to be engaged by the online activities they are asked to do” (Kear, 2011).

In 501 and 502 the activities undertaken were, for a large part, synchronous activities. These activities allow students to be sharing their learning at the moment in which they are doing it. Kear (2011) suggests that the best tools for completing this kind of shared learning are discussion forums, wiki's, collaborative sessions and audio/video conferencing, all of which we have employed so far in OLTD. Students can talk and share ideas in real time, provide immediate feedback to their peers, provide their comments and opinions as topics are discussed and have immediate feedback and debate on issues as they arise. This is a key to building that mutual respect and trust, something Salmon (2003) also suggests is important in order for students to move on to the next level of their learning and be able to share information with others. For students to believe what others purport to be true, they need to feel they can rely on them to provide the information they require. Thus these initial sessions of getting used to learning in the online environment also prepared us for being able to collaborate in later courses and create shared understandings.

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On the other hand, asynchronous activities tend to support independent learners. Give us a task (yes, I'm one of them!) and we want to get it done. Provide us with a new tool and we want to analyze its use and effectiveness and determine if it will help us (in which case we put it in our toolbox) or not (in which case we smile and say thank you and discreetly discard it). Asynchronous activities work for us keeners. We can work alone, at our own pace and get through the chunk, wrap it up in a nice, neat package and file it away for further reference. The

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problem with this for us asynchronous learners is that we might not be getting the full benefit of these lessons and activities. During this course I keyed in on one of the discussion points made that suggested that the one doing most of the work is probably the one that is learning most of the lesson. If I relate this to my own classroom, or for instance, an online learning environment, by me doing most of the work on my own, my students are being shortchanged and not getting the benefit of the exploration part. The collaboration with others makes for a richer experience here for the learner. This has been a huge realization for me because I now understand that my students deserve the chance to create those deeper meanings in their own learning as opposed to simply being spoon fed the information and expected to memorize it. Granted, this is a hard habit to change as this is also how I've been taught in the past. I am struggling to adjust to creating my own learning instead of just regurgitating facts, but it is changing the way I think about my learning and teaching.

I think this point was pretty evident in the website used in our seminar. I need structure, order and identified due dates. When I teach I try to be very clear in my intentions and outline exactly what we will do, when and how, so that expectations are clear and defined because I need that in my own learning. My future challenge is going to be letting go of that control, especially in an asynchronous environment, and letting the students take control with my gentle guidance, "as students can learn a considerable amount from each other without the constant intervention of a teacher" (Kear, 2011).

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Throughout the course of our program I have always wanted to start a wiki that outlines all the benefits of learning online. Initially I wanted to add things like: no paying for parking or

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not getting home at eleven o'clock at night from class, not having to be there and leave my kids here, no worries about snow days (though I think that might be a drawback, not a benefit). One thing that I have truly appreciated about the online learning environment is summed up here: Formal attire is NOT required. I think we can all admit to attending a Saturday morning session or two in our pajamas. I've even changed into mine for some of the evening sessions! What this page directly speaks to, however, is the flexibility that online learning allows for its students. There is no need to take time off from work to attend a class that is offered in your community or take significant time out of your life to attend a program offered in another province or country. Work can be done at your own pace and on your own terms.

This is a huge benefit to online learning and one reason that I see it becoming more and more popular in the very near future. Gone is the day when we are blindly following any corporation, instruction or rule that is imposed upon us. As a savvy shopper we are no longer required to pay top dollar for the same item that we can find just by looking elsewhere. We are no longer required to get a degree that sort of matches our needs and interests at the local university because it's where we live, we can get the degree we want, when we want, simply by using the internet to our advantage. As more and more people find struggles with the existing education systems (strikes, course availability, scheduling conflicts for sports or arts activities and/or work requirements), I believe they will turn to the convenience and flexibility of online learning to make their education work for them.

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This next idea is a key idea that I have found in my own studies here in OLTD. It started in 501 where we were introduced to Collaborate, Wiki's, discussion forums and blogging. It

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continued in 502 with CEET Meets, Twitter and the increased use of our discussion forums. It exploded in 503 with the vast number of tools and websites that groups chose to facilitate their learner-led seminars. As a cohort we have been exposed to some amazing tools and learning management systems and I think the key aspect I want to pull out of it all is this: you need to give them time to play. I have a page long list of activities, websites and tools that I want to try – when I'm done OLTD. Upon initial use of each one I thought, “wow, that's neat, and I could use it in this way in the classroom.” The unfortunate part is that because of the huge amount of material we have covered, it is less likely that we'll have time to explore each tool and the less you use right away deepens the chance that you will not build it into your regular practice at all. I think it is important for us, as educators, to realize that we can't just showcase a tool and then move on to another one. Time and time again in this program we've been told to sample the tools we are exposed to, take what works for us and leave the rest, try new things but don't feel the need to be proficient in everything. That's easier said than done. People need a chance to explore each tool deeply and understand how it could be applied to a variety of situations in order to find value in it. In planning our own online courses we need to hone in on two or three valuable tools and showcase them throughout the entire course rather than jumping from one to the next to yet another one the following week. This is another key learning point that has come from my time here in 503. Slow down, play and really make those deep connections to what you are learning so that you can transfer it to your own practice. I'm working on it, I just need more time.

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You'll reach a point where it will be time to just let it go....and hopefully it will all come back to you in the end. I've already referenced my seminar, “Too Much Information” and this idea is a key to that week as well as to my completion of this final project. A huge problem in the

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online learning environment is that students become bogged down by discussion posts, lots of reading requirements and projects that they need to find the internal motivation to complete. As a learner, 'giving up' doesn't happen to me very often, but when it does I find it very difficult to get myself back on track. Kear (2011) alludes to this information overload resulting in student withdrawal and it is a major reason why we see the completion rates in online learning that we do. People feel overwhelmed, like they can't catch up, let alone keep up, and that it would be easier to just forget about it and do other things than to sit down, focus and get the job done. I think it's quite evident that we've all felt this at some point in our OLTD studies. On top of the requirements of our coursework we all have jobs, families and a personal life that puts stresses and responsibilities upon us as well. This is where Kear (2011) points out the need for support from the community, for that network of fellow students to assist us in getting back on track. Salmon (2003) also speaks to the facilitator's role of monitoring student participation and encouraging input and collaboration so that students maintain their connection to the group and are able to fulfill their responsibilities. We will all, at some point, fall behind. Hopefully, however, through the support, guidance and encouragement from our peers and instructors, we will all come full circle, attack that reading list, get through those discussion posts and be able to get ourselves back on track. In doing so we not only get the job done, but we also continue to build that sense of community support that is so necessary here.

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Which brings me back to the synchronous/asynchronous debate. 503 has been vastly different from 501 and 502 in that the majority of our activities here have been asynchronous. After building a collaborative and supportive group (I see 501 and 502 covering Salmon's first and second steps while 503 looked to the third and fourth steps) we struck out on our own and

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were able to share information through a variety of asynchronous tools and methods. This has not resulted in a diminished sense of community, as I first thought it might, but has instead strengthened our bonds in terms of seeking out information from each other and supporting each other's learning in the process. Because of the strong foundation we built as an online community in previous courses, we were able to use our communal trust and build our knowledge collaboratively and cheer each other on in the process.

Whereas before 503 I truly felt that synchronous supported the community and asynchronous supported the keener, I have adjusted my beliefs to encompass the thought that both can be beneficial in different ways. "Synchronous communication, according to most students, could help create a sense of community. However, they seemed to place more value on asynchronous communication. It fulfilled their needs and they felt more comfortable with it" (Kear, 2011). I now see that a blended approach will allow the best of both models to support all learners through each course.

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As well I've adjusted my belief that working on my own and learning in my own way is the best way. I've always been a very independent person and learner; therefore group projects have been a consistent challenge for me. However, I now more readily recognize the benefit of having someone else to collaborate with and to bounce ideas off of. By listening to other points of view and reflecting upon other people's perspectives I have been able to create deeper understandings and beliefs myself. By being a part of the OLTD online learning community I have received the benefit of being exposed to other people's knowledge, ideas and practices and will be able to incorporate the best of these into my own teaching practice. What a great way to

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remain on the cutting edge of using technology in the classroom. Working collaboratively really does help us to improve our own individual practice.

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This particular quote has been used and adapted to many different situations and in many different ways, but the main idea remains the same: don't follow where others may take you but strike your own path. In online education there are many websites and pre-made courses out there to teach you everything from reading and writing to quantum physics. These sites are a great place to start from, but the real value in online education is the direction you choose to take in making use of the vast amount of resources available. Some of the tools that we have used throughout our courses I have not chosen to use in my own practice, even though I have understood and been able to appreciate their value. Others tools I have implemented right away in order to share their significance with my students. Still more I have on my list of things to try as time permits. I think the key here is that as learners, teachers and people on this earth we need to strike our own path, make our own way and not let others direct us in how and what we should learn. Instead, we need to use our teachers as guides to provide us with ideas and nurture our learning as we struggle to find our own way. A number of our class members have touted the merits of self-directed learning and I am coming around to the idea and its benefits myself.

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Of course we need to recognize that online teaching and learning is harder than it looks. Kear speaks to not only the benefits of online learning communities but the challenges to them as well. Student isolation, information overload, technical difficulties and negative attitudes are all common feelings in an online environment.

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But what we really need to focus on here is the importance of building those support networks into online communities, of cultivating that trust, support and camaraderie, and of having a little bit of a social side to our lessons so that we can relate to and find similar interests with our online peers. It's important that we support each other, take interest in our fellow students and share the load of learning, teaching and creating shared knowledge,

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...that we spread the word, share our ideas and lead others to find greater understandings of their own.

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It's important that when we fall, as we inevitably will, we get right back up again and keep on trying. We need to support our fellow learners or, in the case of online teaching, our students along their way and provide them with the tools, knowledge and motivation to encourage their own learning. After all....

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This is our learning journey.

From the beginning of OLTD my beliefs regarding online learning have been fairly straightforward: effective communication is a key component particularly in building a sense of community and online presence; lessons and units need to have a good flow and be easy to access, navigate and work through; content must be engaging, with multimedia and hands on

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activities being used to create and share knowledge in a dynamic way; units should be broken into achievable chunks that students can fit into their already busy lives; and guided reflection is necessary to build understanding and make key connections to coursework.

Thus far, OLTD has provided me with experiences that have helped me to identify these beliefs and my time here in 503 have helped to modify and cement them firmly in place.

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