



# Faculty Forum

*From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning*

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## What Tiger Woods Taught Me About the Transition to Online Teaching

Recently, our Master of School Administration Program in Educational Leadership began to face intense competition from nearby institutions and now I, after almost 10 years of face-to-face teaching experience at WCU, teach totally online classes. I had taught hybrid classes, but I was extremely reluctant to make this change, even though I had always been a pioneer and a risk taker. However, last May, while facilitating the Faculty Learning Community on Online Teaching and Learning at WCU's Summer Institute, my colleagues and I discussed what I call our "transition angst." One faculty member compared our experience to that of Tiger Woods.

A few years ago, the phenomenally successful Woods fired his coach, changed his clubs, and drastically altered his swing. As crazy as it seemed ("if it ain't broke, why fix it?"), Woods was anticipating his vocational future and making necessary adjustments to maximize his golfing potential. Even though the transition was rough, it now appears that this outstanding athlete emerged with a better long-term vocational future.

As with Woods, what had become comfortable had served me well. My teaching evaluations at WCU were good and I was a finalist for the Board of Governor's Award for Excellence in Teaching. Would these things continue if I gave up face to face teaching? Was my ego getting in the way? I was being forced to give up my stage—my place in front of my audience, my students. Teaching is a performing art and I enjoy performing. Could I give this up?

I was dealing with the first question education professionals typically ask when they are about to make a change—how will this affect me personally? I then began to face the fact that teaching is not about me but about my students and what they need. The reality was that many of our students had access issues with their courses related to time, family commitments, and travel over winding mountain roads. In addition, the competition was breathing down on us.

I then had to face the second question—will I have the skills to do this? I reached out to my colleagues and a Web designer to assist me. I joined a WebCT support group and became an active participant. In my two fully online classes I have had my share of mistakes and failures. For example, I still have not mastered the Discussion component. But I now can concern myself with a third question—how will this affect my students? I



constantly review my course evaluation data and rely heavily on midterm evaluation. My students want organization, clarity, a variety of communication strategies, a chance to interact with their peers, frequent contact with me, and a personal touch. I discovered audio online tools and now my students can hear me—who I am, my Southern accent, my high school principal stories, and my response to their work (I can still perform!).

Our department found our current faculty evaluation instruments inadequate for online instruction. We therefore developed our own instrument, looking at course-specific questions, teaching-specific questions, and questions concerning the online learning environment. I analyzed the quantitative data over two semesters. One hundred percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed on the following: the syllabus and the organization of the course facilitated learning, the course used diverse communication strategies to facilitate learning, and the instructor communicated information clearly and facilitated peer student learning effectively through threaded discussions, chat, email, or WIMBA voice tools. Ninety five percent agreed or strongly agreed that the quality of the interaction with the instructor equaled or surpassed the quality of interaction in on-site courses with 86 percent indicating that the quality of interaction with student peers equaled or surpassed the quality of interaction in onsite courses.

A review of open ended comments revealed several themes. One third of the comments indicated that the element of the course that contributed most to student understanding was the use of WIMBA voice tools. Other comments concerned the organization and clarity of the course, the use of discussion, the availability of the instructor, and meaningful assignments. In the area of suggestions for improvement, several students indicated a desire to still meet occasionally with their peers. I miss seeing my students face to face, but an online class seems to force accountability for students, and how well I have come to know them online has had a positive effect on their learning.

Maybe online teaching and learning can be effective. However, effectiveness demands close attention to the organization, clarity, and design of the course—no different in fact from the demands of any other kind of teaching. In addition, it is important to personalize an online course as much as possible and voice tools help. Certainly as we compete with an increasing online market in higher education, we must be innovative while maintaining a commitment to quality and personalization. We need our colleagues for feedback. And, finally, we must be focused on students. Every class does not need to be an online class, but I have found that we have the resources at Western to ensure that such classes can be effective.

**Anna T. McFadden, Interim Director, Coulter Faculty Center, Educational Leadership**

*For a copy of the evaluation data, email Anna at [amcfadden@email.wcu.edu](mailto:amcfadden@email.wcu.edu).*



# *Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning*

Response to "What Tiger Woods Taught Me About the Transition to Online Teaching," by Anna McFadden, 2/1/06

Just recently, I took a drive to meet with a graduate student in one of my online courses. I did this because I respect the student's candor and judgment in providing me with a reality check on her perception of success in engaging an online course I was teaching for the first time. And, yes, I really valued the personal conversation over lunch and coffee that online settings deny me.

Although she generally offered encouraging feedback, a particular comment troubled me. The sentiment, attributed anonymously to a few of her peers, affirmed in effect, "This is the last online course I will ever take." (I hope that the comment wasn't in reference to my courses, but who knows?) The students particularly complained about the work overload confronting them in online courses. With few exceptions, students find online study exceedingly demanding. Mea culpa; my courses may have provoked some of the negativity reported by my trusted student conduit. Zealous to advance student engagement, I overdo things, unwisely running several interactive assignments simultaneously. I ask students to multi-task when their busy lives already demand more multi-tasking than they should ever be asked to handle. This can make them cranky.

I relate this because of my certainty about the following things:

- For better or worse, online teaching will continue to grow in traditional universities and non-traditional commercial providers of higher education.
- Migration from site-based to online teaching places an acute transformational demand on the professional identities of faculty and students impacted by it.
- Getting online designs and executions "right" is a challenge for all faculty, including the most seasoned online instructors.

Anna McFadden's "Tiger Woods" analogy is helpful because it focuses on the "tool" transformation of online instruction. In such a conversation, we are not discussing content transformation beyond the degree to which any decent teaching should keep up-to-date. Nor are we talking about transformation in the basic principles of good teaching. In 1996 Steve Ehrmann offered a cogent translation of Arthur Chickering's seven principles of good practice into the then-nascent educational realm of computer-based communication. The translation isn't revolutionary. The same good practices tend to show up in diverse forms of teaching. It is the equivalent of American to British English, not English to Urdu. A more transformational metaphor emerges from the "tool" perspective that Anna presented, perhaps from golf clubs to cooking utensils.

Much professional reflection, development, practice, and trial-and-error is required to transform good *teaching* practice successfully from one tool set to another rather foreign one. Several years ago Randy Bass, this year's keynote *SoTL Faire* speaker, told a story about technology infusion into one of his courses. He wrote about the discomfort that he and his students experienced as they confronted the new tools they were suddenly being challenged to use. Discontent showed up in Bass' student course evaluations. He was no less an excellent teacher than he was before he changed his pedagogical toolbox, but his student ratings indicated otherwise. It was the "tool transformation," not his teaching, that upset the perceptual appletart.

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I think it's fair to say that I am a relatively experienced online teacher. Yet I continue to struggle. I work and worry here and there, successfully and unsuccessfully, with new and re-designed online teaching strategies. Never for a nanosecond do I believe I have it "right" in the way that I have occasionally felt satisfied (justified or not) with my classroom teaching. My students' evaluations, though mainly positive, remind me that my course designs are works-in-progress that still need hard pushes along the learning curve. I doubt that I am alone in this regard.

This brings me back to the "certainties" articulated above. To deal with them effectively, the University and the faculty need to reinforce one another to create scholarly settings where students embrace their online experiences, each one eager for the next experience, not pining for a return to practices that may increasingly be unavailable to them. As an institution and as a community of scholars, we need affirmation that the transformational depth we confront is recognized. If this is done, resources will follow to assure that we get things as "right" as we can as quickly as we can, knowing that there will always be a distance to go.

I wonder if Western has students who, having taken one or two online courses, are saying, "I'll never go back to the classroom again?" I don't know. Maybe we should find out.

**John LeBaron, Educational Leadership and Foundations**