

## COMMENTARY

### Unexpected Transitions: From Lifeboats to Online Learning

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#### Abstract

*At the height of the pandemic, schools across the country shut down, shifting classrooms to a remote learning modality. While the use of emergency remote teaching (ERT) provided an alternative for schools, it was a difficult transition. Online learning is often compared with ERT, although the two are different. Where ERT is a quick and temporary resolution, online learning is a long-term investment developed to provide a quality educational experience for students. Both are necessary lifelines to learning, but online education is vital in multiple ways. Rather than a substitute, it is a core fixture on the higher ed landscape, with more and more students, faculty, and administrators recognizing online education's benefits. This essay explores remote and online learning as lifelines in different contexts. It reflects on the impact of online learning from three views: a personal account, growing demands for contingent faculty, and the diverse needs of non-traditional students.*

**Keywords:** *online learning; remote learning; non-traditional; adjunct; contingent faculty; higher education; education; pandemic; COVID-19*

#### Introduction

According to the National Council for Online Learning (2022), there needs to be more understanding of the difference between remote instruction and online learning. Working as an online instructor since 2012, I had never given the difference a thought, but the pandemic has, to my realization, illuminated a difference that warrants scrutiny. For the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), qualifying remote from online learning is vital as the distinction underscores the necessity of both in higher education – one is analogous to a lifeboat, the other to a cruise ship.

According to the OLC, remote learning simulates a face-to-face classroom via an online experience through Zoom, MS Teams, or other web-based meeting applications. This practice became a much-needed educational lifeline as the COVID-19 pandemic forced campuses to close and scramble to find a replacement approach that could

quickly and reliably substitute until students and staff could safely return. Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is a temporary solution that is set up quickly and is not intended to replace face-to-face, blended, or hybrid courses, which resume at some point (Hodges et al. 2020). Alternatively, online or distance learning remains strictly online. It requires months of preparation and planning before courses can go live. Instructor training is exclusively for an online environment and focuses on using tools and techniques that are curated for this educational landscape and developed solely for administrators, instructors, and students who choose this format for their personal and professional goals (NCOL 2022). As Hodges et al. explain, “confusing [remote learning] with robust online education is akin to confusing lectures with the totality of residential education” (2020). This comparison certainly rings true in the training and support that accompanied my own experience in online education. Direct or synchronous interaction is integral to online instruction. However, it is only part of a broad range of professional practice, knowledge, and skill required to ensure a quality educational experience for online students. As in residential education, this takes time and effort to acquire.

## **Recovering from a Shipwreck**

My journey into online education started over a decade ago. Ironically, it would be the lifeboat I needed to get back on my feet. The wave of the Great Recession caused irreparable damage. Like many, my husband and I found ourselves unemployed and unable to make payments on our home. I had been a stay-at-home mom after completing my graduate degree. We were privileged to raise a child at home without struggling to stay afloat. The economic crash hit a year after she was born, working its way across the country and finally to us on the West Coast. My husband was suddenly out of a job. Despite our experience and education, there were no jobs available. Living off our savings, we tried to keep our heads above water until the market recovered. As time passed and our savings dwindled to nothing, we decided to leave. We lost our house, having drained our finances in a futile effort to keep it. It was devastating, and now we had to start over.

I grew up in Houston and had a support system living there. It was there that we could and would start again. Our priority went to finding work. Although challenging, we understood that we were fortunate. We had landed in Texas with friends and family eager to help. While my daughter played with a friend’s children, we looked for work.

Having worked as a teaching assistant, I looked for similar jobs and found an online university seeking adjunct instructors to teach anthropology. With a master’s degree, I was qualified for a position, and the flexibility of the work would allow me to keep looking for more opportunities. The school hired me part time, and training started right away. Unlike the trial-by-fire experiences some faculty endured with ERT, I studied with a seasoned professional for several weeks. The learning process was extensive, but I felt well-supported, which helped to reduce anxiety. I trained with other new hires; we were

all getting our feet wet and getting to know each other and the university in a virtual setting. Some of us were new to online education, while others were already established pros. Familiarizing myself with the virtual classroom was enjoyable. I was getting my bearings, happy to be employed, and excited to teach a subject I loved. It was great to feel productive again, working towards a goal and earning a much-needed paycheck. Although it was not a steady income, it was income. Finally, I felt as though I headed toward more stable shores. But I wondered, while this may have been the lifeboat I needed, was it what I wanted?

## The Ebbs and Flows of Academic Dreams

I had heard horror stories about working as an adjunct instructor. Full-time faculty positions were scarce, and the possibility of a tenured position had grown practically non-existent in the humanities and social sciences. Following the 2008 Great Recession, achieving the goal of being a tenured professor became less and less likely for many graduates. According to a 2022 study released by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 53.5 percent of higher education institutions replaced tenured positions with contingent or fixed-term positions over the last five years (Tiede 2022). In 2004, 17.2 percent of tenure-track positions were replaced with fixed-term positions in four-year institutions. In what the AAUP (2018) refers to as the “casualization of faculty labor,” what was once a crisis had become the inevitable transition to an uncertain career elsewhere (Winter 2021).

Instructors face a variety of professional and personal obstacles, regardless of their pedagogical medium. Contingent or adjunct faculty are defined in different ways depending on the institution, according to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). As a group, they constitute a majority of faculty in the U.S. They can be employed part time or full time but do not have the job security or benefits of tenure-track professors. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Adjunct Faculty Quality of Work/Life Report (2020) states that 75 percent of academic faculty cannot get tenure, and 47 percent work in part-time positions. The ability to achieve tenured status, which affords faculty security and academic freedoms, has declined significantly since the 1980s, while contingent hires have increased (AFT 2020). While such job opportunities have expanded, compensation for the highly skilled professionals who fill them has not. Nearly 25 percent of contingent faculty are on public assistance and 40 percent are unable to cover basic expenses (AFT 2020). Adjunct instructors in particular have been characterized as the “working poor” (Rhoades 2013). Course assignments can be inconsistent, depending on institutional needs. Hourly pay scales can seem adequate, but for many, hourly rates reflect in-class time only and typically do not include expected duties such as grading, lesson planning, or office hours (*LA Times* Editorial Board 2021). According to the AFT survey, 24.8 percent of adjunct faculty earn less than \$25,000 annually (AFT 2020). In a traditional classroom setting, transportation is also a consideration. Adjunct instructors must travel to and from campus several times a week.

Classes scheduled during the day limit an instructor's ability to find other work to supplement their income. This limitation is different for those teaching online, however. Just as students prefer the flexibility of online education to maintain personal and professional obligations outside of school, instructors may find that online teaching can accommodate existing schedules and allow them to hold multiple positions while working from home. In my experience, I needed to teach for more than one institution to make what I felt was a livable wage, so this flexibility was necessary. I looked for more opportunities in online teaching while still wet behind the ears from my first term as an online instructor.

## **A Crew's Ship**

It wasn't long before I realized I was also part of a community of online educators. Initially, I would hear personal experiences during the small talk that occurs before faculty meetings. I soon learned that my colleagues and I shared common ground. We faced similar concerns to most educators but our connection to any professional support (administrative, peer, etc.) was limited specifically to an online presence. Faculty meetings are the primary way I stay in touch with other instructors, but there are other opportunities to connect. Participating in online workshops or webinars are also options to connect with the online learning community. Through one of my school affiliations, I was offered membership in the Online Learning Consortium, a nonprofit organization dedicated to online education. The OLC provides tools, resources, and opportunities for collaboration and networking across a community of learning professionals and associated institutions. Like other professional associations, formal organizations like the OLC are essential, anchoring large communities from various fields and industries found underneath the umbrella of online learning.

To be successful, these groups must be supportive on a social-cultural level and engage their members through features and resources geared towards a holistic, inclusive experience (Hodges et al. 2020). Such engagement must provide notable benefits to educators and pedagogical scholarship. As I grew more comfortable and experienced with each course, my engagement with academic scholarship gathered momentum, and I found a new sense of belonging. Not only had I found a job, but I also found purpose in teaching in my desired field with the stability that I desperately needed since losing my home. I enjoyed interacting online, but a feeling of isolation would now and again materialize. This sensation, made familiar to most of us thanks to COVID, would, at times, loom. As work progressed and my schedule started to fill with work, the online learning community became less of a link to academic scholarship and a professional network and more of a distant shoreline, far away from the tiny island behind my office door. Although I was still sailing on a luxury liner, I felt like I had spent most of my time locked away in a cabin. I needed to find a way to unlock the cabin door or, at the very least, open a porthole. Opportunities were available to me. Becoming more involved in professional organizations like the American Anthropological Association and

participating in “coffee chats” and “brown bags” set up for faculty by program deans or administrators brought me back to the community to connect and share. This interaction is essential to personal and professional growth but even more critical for our mental health as educators – working remotely or otherwise.

## Same Goal, New Compass

For students, support is just as crucial. Perhaps at no other time was this as evident as during the pandemic. The quarantines and lockdowns associated with the spread of COVID-19 sent most higher education institutions into an emergency mode they had not previously encountered. Responses caught students off-guard. To ensure a sense of continuity, emergency remote learning was quickly put in place and students, faculty, and administrators scrambled to adjust to the temporary but highly disruptive change. For online learning students, the pandemic was also disruptive, but the experience was quite different. Online faculty and administrators did not face the same remote learning challenges as their brick-and-mortar campus counterparts, but they shared other challenges. Reevaluating policies allowed more flexibility and accommodations for students experiencing difficult circumstances either directly or indirectly related to the pandemic. As Hodges et al. (2020) point out, quality instruction is by design and supported by rigorous research, which is most often not possible when rapid and unexpected changes occur. Rather than having to take on the additional stress of adapting to an unfamiliar teaching modality, online instructors have an increased opportunity to devote more time to other duties like student support.

Despite efforts to lessen the impact of the pandemic, disruption could not be avoided. The unexpected transition to remote learning, as we are now aware, caused a major interruption in continuity for many schools. Online learning is viewed erroneously as “lower quality” than face-to-face learning, and the sudden switch to remote learning and subsequent pitfalls that occurred as a result could have reaffirmed this false claim (Hodges et al. 2020). As data emerge and clearer distinctions are made between ERT and online education, we see a shifting scholastic landscape toward the availability of more online and hybrid (e.g., a part online and part on-campus schedule) courses offered at colleges and universities across the U.S. Recognizing the benefits provided by online education, the lifeboats that kept institutions and their stakeholders afloat during the pandemic are being replaced with cruise ships to provide a quality education and meet the changing needs of students.

Choosing to accomplish education goals via online courses has increased over the last few years, but the advantage of virtual classrooms to students is not a new phenomenon. This is especially true for non-traditional students who are typically older and balancing personal and professional responsibilities that can make a ground campus experience more challenging. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), nontraditional students are defined according to factors that contribute to the

risk of attrition, such as age, background, residence, employment status, and whether students enroll in non-degree programs (Horn and Carroll 1996). As a lifeboat, online programs offer these students a path to higher ed that is more accessible, more convenient, and allows students more control over their own schedules to manage time more effectively. It is not only non-traditional students who recognize this benefit. In a 2022 report on students and technology by *Educause*, higher ed students' preference for online modalities was found to be increasing, growing from 9 percent in 2020 to 29 percent in 2022. According to the report, preference for online modality is linked to being able to maintain personal and professional obligations while attending school (Robert 2022). In a luxury liner, students encounter faculty and administrators specially trained to provide a quality educational experience in a virtual campus setting. For many, it allows for the best of both worlds, balancing work and family without sacrificing a quality education. Online schools are the best fit for their needs.

Balancing priorities and managing time is a requirement for any college student, regardless of modality. Having a job or taking care of a family can interfere with the ability to complete coursework or study for exams. Many of my students are nontraditional and face many hurdles. As shown in a recent publication in *Education and Information Technologies*, nontraditional learners may experience problems such as successfully adopting a student role, maintaining work/life balance as a student, comprehending academic expectations, and staying motivated (Ren 2023). I've had students communicate that they are homeless, in abusive relationships, formerly incarcerated, or recovering from addiction. Some have had their children taken away, some are going through a divorce, and some are terminally ill. Many of my students are military personnel or part of military families. All are participating in online learning, intending to obtain a quality education in a more flexible setting that accommodates complex lives made even more complicated due to the arrival of the pandemic.

Online learning does not equate to a safer environment for my students. Many are finishing assignments during lunch breaks or after a long day at work, while currently looking for a job or caring for someone ill. Students who are ill themselves often complete coursework if they can and apologize for late work. We have yet to truly understand the overall impact of the pandemic on the global population. Still, as an instructor, my students have significantly altered my perspective on higher education in a way I never expected. The drive and persistence that I encounter in my online classroom are humbling. To work with such dedicated students is inspiring.

I enjoy teaching and the opportunities it gives me to learn from my colleagues and students. Over time, I grew into the role of an educator, excited to introduce anthropology to my students, especially in courses outside of the field. Whether they were majoring in criminal justice or cybersecurity, I would be keen to hear that a student has "found" anthropology and would like to know more. To see that the course made even the slightest difference to a student or ignited a spark of curiosity would send me

over the moon. My students' enthusiasm and desire to learn would inspire me and encourage my search for more teaching opportunities in other schools and disciplines. Working for colleges that do not offer anthropology courses, an interdisciplinary background relevant across a broad swath of teaching subjects has been helpful. Over the last decade, I've taught courses in ethics, cultural diversity, social sciences, and the humanities. In this setting, anthropology came to my rescue. It is a multi-purpose vessel, valuable to fit the educational needs of diverse student populations across various programs, and I am happy to navigate these waters.

But I will admit, it was not always smooth sailing. There were times when an unresponsive student would incur a litany of disgruntled mumblings and eyerolls. Exasperated and unsympathetic, I failed to consider what may be in the way of a student getting work done. Our patience wears thin, and we default to assumptions to explain late or missing assignments. This behavior can happen with faculty and students, especially during stressful, unexpected transitions to an unfamiliar format. The seas can get rough whether you are on a lifeboat or cruise ship, and you can blow off course. But, over time, adjustments are made, best practices develop, and instruction continues to evolve. Connecting with my students and reflecting on my own life experience helps me stay aware that things happen – life happens.

I've learned from my students how important it is to do our best right where we are, and to make our best experiences from our wins and losses, whether in a lifeboat or a luxury cruise ship. As we become aware of the difference between remote and online learning, we can appreciate each for what they offer us as a community of learners. However, online education's value is more than simply an alternative to the traditional classroom. It results from the intent to achieve goals that may otherwise be unattainable, providing knowledge and experience needed for personal and professional success. It is the cruise ship to get us to where we need to be and brings us to new shores.

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