

Thoughts about online Teaching and Learning from Kevin Kelly,  
Lecturer, College of Education; SFSU, Director, Wiley Learning Institute

### **"Online education" may be better described as "untethered learning"**

**There is a common misconception that online education means all online learning takes place behind a computer screen.** However, it's just as easy to assign students to interact with the world in meaningful, discipline-specific ways and then go online to share the results or demonstrate new competencies. Nursing provides great examples. No one would expect that a multiple choice test does as good a job of demonstrating specific triage skills as an observation log by a supervisor at a hospital or clinic.

**"Untethered learning" works better as an overarching term than "online education" due to the growing use of mobile devices.** More mobile devices (e.g., tablets) were sold than computers last year.

### **We need to dispel the many myths about online education**

Enough studies have been performed to put some of the common myths about online education to rest (e.g., US Dept of Ed meta-analysis of online education: <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>).

**We cannot assume the quality or difficulty of a course by its delivery method.** Instructional design, student engagement, and many other factors play a bigger role in student success than the delivery method, which makes no significant difference. San Francisco State has made a name for itself with the hybrid-flexible format, which emphasizes one of SF State's core values, accessibility.

**Teachers must play an active role in the learning process, regardless of delivery method.** A common objection about online courses is that an instructor just sets it up and then goes on vacation for a semester. Most people teaching hybrid or online courses will tell you they are a lot of work! Just as there are online instructors who take advantage of circumstances, there are in-class instructors who "phone it in."

**There's no significant difference in cheating between students in online and live classes.** (See <http://faculty.mwsu.edu/psychology/dave.carlston/Writing%20in%20Psychology/Academic%20Dishonesty/new/adon.pdf> and <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring131/watson131.html>) All the same, there are steps we faculty can take--not just to curtail cheating, but to promote and proctor learning (about citation, collaboration, etc.).

**It is possible to have meaningful dialogue in both face-to-face and online environments.** Those who say you "just cannot have the same type of interaction online as you can have in a classroom" are both right and wrong. Online discussions allow ALL the students to participate, as opposed to the small percentage who engage in person. The quality of those discussions is defined not by the medium but by the instructions, the exemplars, and the expectations set by the instructor. As an exercise, I have had instructors read a "script" from a class discussion without telling them it was from a discussion forum online. Everyone was impressed by the quality of student thoughtfulness

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and deepness of human connection, and shocked by the fact that it was done online.

### **There has been a lot of talk about MOOCs**

There has been a lot of talk about MOOCs, what they mean for education, and how they may impact faculty. MOOCs can be seen as just the most recent iteration of open educational resources (e.g., MERLOT) and open courseware (e.g., MIT's OpenCourseWare initiative). It's a way of sharing course content. Like publisher created content, anyone who wants to use MOOC content should vet it and make sure it does the best job to help students reach the specific learning outcomes for his/her course. Are there organizations trying to assign credit for completing MOOCs? Yes. However, the percentage of people who complete a MOOC is incredibly low.

#### **Consider using MOOCs a different way—to “flip the classroom.”**

Campuses like San Jose State have done interesting research about using MOOCs as a way to "flip the classroom"--in other words, they make better use of class time by pushing "sit and lecture" activity out of the classroom, and engaging students in more meaningful activities. There are professional development implications here, as faculty who want to try this teaching and learning modality may want to see different student engagement and collaborative learning strategies. We only have to look at the student success rates from San Jose State's study to know that this is worth investigating (see <http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/california-state-u-system-will-expand-mooc-experiment/43361>)

### **Competency-based education has arrived**

**The US Dept of Ed recently endorsed competency-based education** (see <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/03/19/feds-give-nudge-competency-based-education>). Accreditation agencies like WASC are trying to determine how to address challenges—e.g., how to best serve students who may follow an educational path that involves multiple institutions. However, many students are already attending multiple institutions—sometimes as many as 5 or 6--either to prepare for transfer or to complete courses they cannot get at SF State.

**ePortfolios provide avenues for authentic, competency-based assessment.** As San Francisco State is a national and even international leader with respect to electronic portfolios, which provide avenues for authentic assessment, critical thinking, reflective learning and writing, and bridges to career for students after graduation. I hope we can build toward a culture of assessment that starts with every freshman and transfer student getting an e-mail address and an ePortfolio when they begin at SF State, and using it throughout their academic career.

### **Faculty and students continue to need support**

**Each college should have at least one faculty peer mentor.** Groups like Academic Technology work a lot of magic with skeleton crews and

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shoestring budgets. To reinforce their praiseworthy efforts, I propose that each college should have at least one faculty peer mentor, released from one course each semester, to support colleagues as they put parts or all of a class online. This position should rotate, so that people who benefit from mentoring could themselves become mentors.

**SF State should investigate student Tech Mentors.** Similarly, institutions like La Guardia Community College have student Tech Mentors who help fellow students and even faculty with digital tasks ranging from simple to difficult. It is a tiered system with the most veteran Tech Mentors providing organizational as well as technical support. SF State would benefit from an initiative like this.

**We do need to keep an eye on class sizes,** which can balloon in the online environment, and the impact on faculty workload. I was grateful when the College of Ed capped each section of my current class at 100 students each. Sizes may differ from department to department, though. The format of the class and the type of assignments students complete may play a role in class size—i.e., it takes longer to grade meaningful assignments like papers or projects.

**Keep an eye on external factors influencing the move toward untethered learning.** Whether it be student demand for flexibility or the institutional demand for improving graduation rates, instructors are the ones who play a key role in striking a balance and helping students to reach the learning outcomes.

**Survival of the fittest: those who adapt are those who survive.**

Looking back to Darwin, he might remind us in these changing times that those who adapt are those who survive. I have personally worked with hundreds, if not thousands, of faculty over the last 15 years, and see each person adapt in his or her own way. I believe the CFA can support faculty no matter where they are in the adoption curve--from early adopters to the late majority--by working toward policies and practices that reflect the 21st Century world in which we live, work, and collaborate. Here are just a couple suggestions to start:

**Promote effective practices found at SF State, within the CSU system, and beyond.**

**The Academic Technology Winter and Summer Institutes provide venues for faculty to share with their peers** how they use technology or online teaching practices. CSU Chico's Rubric for Online Instruction is a great guide for what's important for design and delivery of an online activity, module, unit or course.

**Faculty ePortfolios would allow instructors to demonstrate their own skills and knowledge**--related to teaching, research, service and more--with the added benefits of being able to easily link between their own work and link to the work of colleagues, students, and organizations. The current system of binders and boxes inhibits common efficiencies and functions like searching or simultaneous review by multiple people.