



# How I Became a Convert to Online Learning

*A teacher's skepticism about online education turns into belief when he teaches his own online course.*

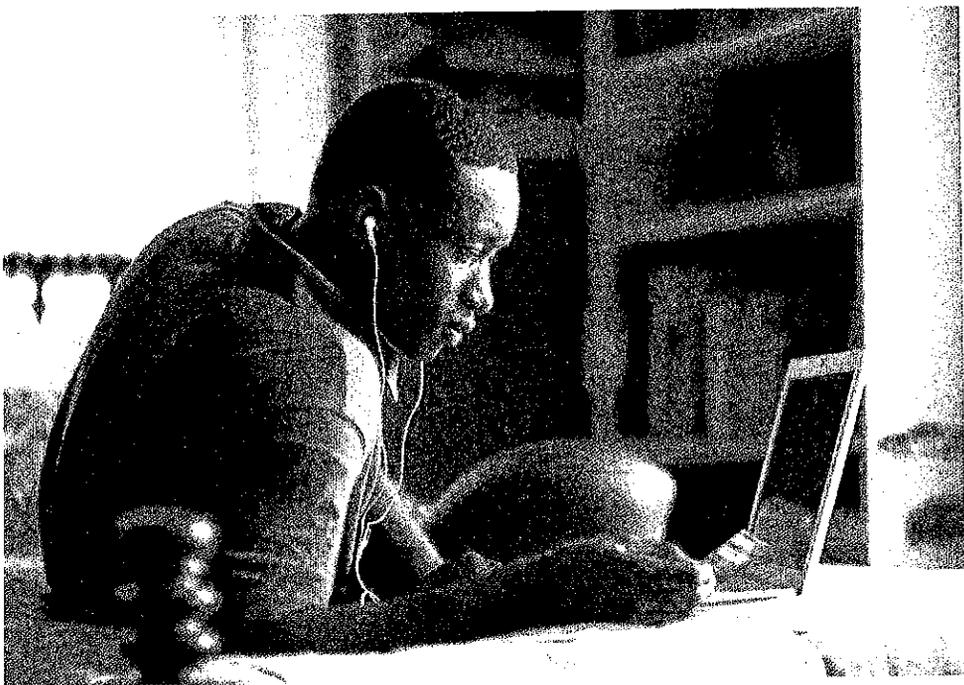
**Nick Kremer**

I wasn't (quite) born yet when MTV's first music video aired in the United States in 1981. "Video Killed the Radio Star" lamented the end of an era while ironically capitalizing on the new video technology that would allegedly lead a new generation of adolescents to completely disregard the time-honored traditions

of the music world. I had that cultural milestone in my mind when I sent a fateful e-mail last fall. In that e-mail, I volunteered to launch a new digital venture that had the potential to change the learning landscape in our district. Would digital learning kill the real-world teaching star?

My new venture began when my

school district put out a call for new summer course proposals in an effort to boost summer school enrollment and help offset cuts in state funding. As a teacher who had vigorously defended his precious summer months, I was wary about getting involved. But I had always wanted to offer a creative writing course, and curricular and budgetary



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restraints prohibited me from doing so during the school year. I knew the class would engage students, but I questioned whether it would be appealing enough to entice both teenagers and myself away from the coveted freedoms we enjoy over break.

As the deadline for proposals approached, I had an epiphany: Why not offer the class online? Students could participate from their homes, on their own schedules, without having to wake up early or miss afternoons at the pool. I could still take graduate classes at the local college and provide day care for my kids. Vacations, summer camp, part-time jobs—all would still be possible. I could reasonably guarantee high enrollment from students who would otherwise never take summer school, and I knew that our new superintendent would be supportive because he had been trying to jump-start online education in the district. It seemed I had stumbled on the perfect plan.

There was just one problem: Students don't learn anything in an online class! That had been my experience, at least.

Sure, online courses were useful—I had completed a required statistics course online in a little under 16 hours one semester in college, and I knew many teachers who used online programs to advance steps on the salary schedule—but I had yet to meet anyone who actually received a meaningful education online. Online courses were like some of the worksheet-based classes I had taken in high school—fill in the blank without talking, get your A without thinking, and move on with your life.

I wasn't going to compromise my professional ethics for the convenience of online learning. But after listing all my objections to online education, I found ways to overcome them effectively in designing my district's first online language arts course: Creative Writing in a Digital World.

#### **Objection 1: Online classes require less work.**

Educators place a high value on attendance—so much so that many schools refuse to award credit to a student who has excessive absences from class.

Understanding and retaining knowledge and skills require contact time during which students can experiment and critically engage with curricular content.

In an online class, however, contact time is difficult to regulate. In fact, this is often touted as a benefit of online instruction—students can work at their own pace, thereby experiencing differentiated instruction. However, *true* differentiated instruction provides enrichment for advanced learners; all students work for the full time allotted whatever their ability level. When students must merely complete a checklist of tasks and then take a test, as is the case in many online courses, learners miss opportunities for growth.

To maximize the amount of time students would spend learning, I actually designed my class as though I would be teaching it in person. When I planned lessons and activities, I tried to ensure that students had to spend as much time “engaged” online as they would have spent in an in-person class. If I would normally spend a class period reading, discussing, and writing about a short story, I made sure that all of those activities were contained in a single online lesson that would take the same amount of time to complete.

I was surprised to find that I often had to create more assignments for online lessons than I had originally anticipated because the oral discussion that normally occurs in an in-person class had to be conducted in writing. I felt that it was important to maintain the same amount of communication that an in-person class would provide, so I did not shy away from assigning a multitude of writing assignments online.

#### **Objection 2: Online classes lack meaningful interaction.**

Talk in the classroom offers learners a diversity of opinions, experiences, expressions, and ways of thinking about

a topic or concept. It also implicitly teaches students how to manage conversations, make complex communication decisions, and negotiate relationships with others. These valuable lessons are often lost in online study.

Online classes pose some significant challenges for developing community interaction. How can a group of people communicate without a common location or time frame? The typical solution is a discussion board on which students post comments to a community forum and read and respond to others' comments. The popularity

I decided to remove the quantitative requirements for discussion board contribution and instead embrace a qualitative scoring scale. Asking students to "engage in meaningful, ongoing conversations with a wide variety of colleagues" produced many more authentic discussions than the previous method of requiring a certain number of posts did. Allowing students more choice over their discussion topic (within the realms of the curriculum) also improved engagement, as did offering nonacademic discussion boards where students could post home pages about

their discussion for grading purposes.

For my own conferences with students, I required students to include a writer's statement requesting specific feedback with every draft they submitted to me. I then recorded a short podcast commentary on each paper, addressing students' questions or concerns and offering ideas for revision and editing. I found conferencing to be considerably easier in the online environment, where I did not have to spend large amounts of time writing my thoughts on paper or trying to manage a live classroom and meet individually with students at the same time.

## Communication is essential for preserving contact time with online students.

of texting among teens illustrates that discussion boards can be extremely effective when students are motivated to talk about a topic.

When conversation topics are dictated, however, discussion boards can quickly become unproductive. Students can easily tune out an online discussion because they never have to actually hear it! To prevent this, online teachers often require a certain number of posts from students. But this procedure can backfire. Students might log in, contribute their post, respond with "I agree" to the first two of their classmates' posts that they encounter, and then log out. Dialogue is one-way, and conversations are started but never developed. In fact, sometimes students don't even revisit the discussion board to see how their peers have responded to their own post. Additional regulations like minimum word requirements can help mitigate this problem, but rarely can such artificial communication be construed as actual discourse.

I have yet to fully solve this problem, but in the middle of class last summer

themselves and chat about interests beyond class.

As a language arts teacher, I was even more concerned about adopting a writing workshop model online. I often struggle with getting students to engage in meaningful peer revision in my face-to-face classes, so I figured that it would be even more difficult to get them to do this outside class. The opposite actually proved to be true. Free of classroom distractions, students were extremely interested in reading and responding to one another's work on the peer revision board, a class blog where they published their drafts and received feedback from classmates. *Love this / wish*

Students also participated in virtual writing conferences with an assigned writing group. Once a week, each group of three students chose an hour to meet and thoroughly discuss their drafts in an online chat room (or by Skype with video and audio). Writers could ask questions and get immediate feedback from readers, which also vastly improved community in the course. Students then sent me a transcript of

### Objection 3: Cheating runs rampant online.

When I took an online statistics class in college, I knew of other students who had hired a math major to log in to their account and take the quizzes and tests for them! Although extreme, this example is not necessarily uncommon, and it speaks to a serious issue with virtual learning: It's easier for unethical students to cheat the system when they are not being monitored firsthand.

Of course, there are ways to prevent this kind of cheating. One is to require students to take major tests in person (with ID). Another is to solicit frequent writing samples from students, beginning with an enrollment essay, to check for consistency in their work. A third, perhaps easier, way is to design personal, in-depth assignments that cannot be easily plagiarized.

I chose the third option. Throughout the class, students had to submit dozens of guided free-writing exercises that they later developed into an original full-length story or creative essay. For example, during our nonfiction unit, students had to create a memoir map that helped them brainstorm possible autobiographical writing topics, submit character sketches of real people in

their lives, and compose written "self-portraits." This personal specificity and the inclusion of idea development steps made it impossible for students to find ready-made papers online, and the amount of work and introspection involved discouraged others from taking the class for enrolled students.

I also found, though, that I had to change some of my expectations and embrace the nature of online learning for what it is. I had a series of podcast lectures instructing students about the elements of writing we were studying, and I wanted to use quizzes as a way to ensure that students watched these lessons. I knew, however, that it would be virtually impossible to prevent students from consulting reference materials or other people when taking an online quiz. Rather than fight this,

I allowed students to consult other materials and to take the quizzes multiple times. After all, my goal in having quizzes was to ensure that students learned the content—why would I prohibit anything that might improve that content mastery? Their papers were the main assessment; the quizzes just served as an accountability tool to lead them in the right direction.

#### **Objection 4: Online classes are discriminatory.**

Another immediate objection to online education is equitable access. Forty-seven percent of students in my school qualify for free and reduced-price lunch; many do not have computers or Internet access at home. How could they participate in an online class? Even if students did have access to the essential

technology, would they have the skills necessary to use it?

The question of student skills had an easy solution. Before the class began, I scheduled a live, mandatory orientation session in which I met the students; logged them into the ANGEL program we would use for the course; and taught them how to navigate the website, download podcasts and texts, and use tools like the discussion board or the drop boxes for uploading their files. I also used the opportunity to obtain an in-person writing sample that told me about students' lives and writing abilities. I filmed the orientation and placed it on the class home page so students could easily access it if they had questions later.

The access question also ended up being easier to fix than I originally

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anticipated. Because summer school would be in session, I arranged for any student who did not have computer access at home to be given time in the high school media center lab during either the morning or afternoon session to work on my online class. It turned out that no one needed this option—the one student without home computer access preferred to walk to the public library to work—but I rested easier knowing I wasn't systematically excluding anyone from participating.

### Success!

After finding solutions to all the objections I raised, I proceeded with my online class and found great success in doing so. Besides the flexibility, I enjoyed many other unintentional benefits: no instructional time wasted

on classroom management, no need to make copies or spend money on supplies, instant computer grading of quizzes, no worry about negotiating computer lab schedules, a permanent record of all student work and instructor correspondence, and a system already established for future classes.

Students also found the course successful. In a survey conducted at the end of class, a majority of students commented that the course was at least as difficult as a typical language arts course and that their content knowledge and craft grew considerably. They also appreciated the freedom of the online format; students agreed that the course would actually work better as an online class than as a regular class and that they would not have participated had it been offered in-person instead. A

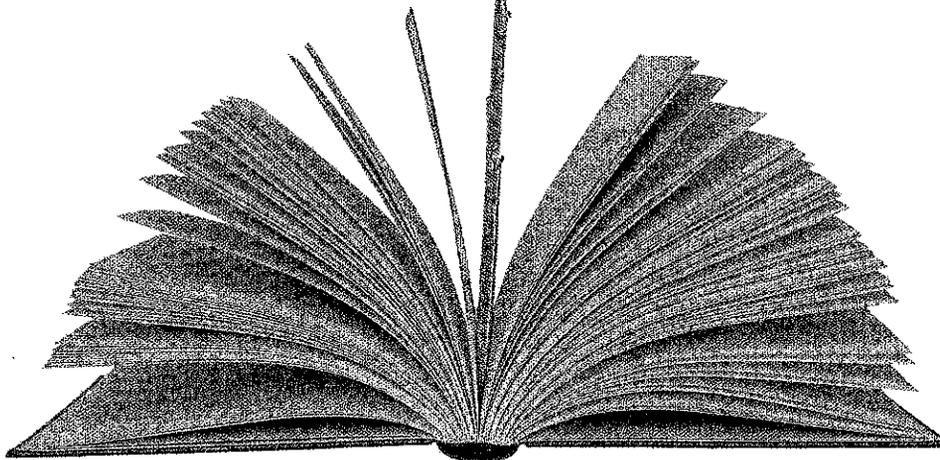
majority of students also thought there was a good balance between independent study and interaction with other class members.

Throughout the process of designing and facilitating this course, I found myself slowly evolving from critic to champion of online education. It was a journey worth taking, and one I look forward to continuing in summers to come. Video didn't kill the radio star—it fostered unprecedented growth for both media. I no longer see a reason to assume that online education will do any worse to the traditional curriculums we hold so dear. 

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