

## BOOK REVIEW

# Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching

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*Lessons from the Virtual Classroom:  
The Realities of Online Teaching. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*  
Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt  
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In an updated version of their first edition, *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Learning*, Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt address technological changes and developments in online teaching emerging in the last ten years. The authors provide guidelines and suggestions not only for the K-12 sector, but also higher education relating to the challenges in the online environment including: assessing student needs, identifying faculty training issues, and addressing classroom dynamics. The authors offer examples from genuine online courses integrating feedback from instructors and students.

The allure of online teaching and the transformational impact not only on the teaching and learning environment, but also the immense possibilities for educational access to a larger audience has come full circle. The initial rush for educational institutions from K-12 to post-secondary colleges and universities to create online courses for student consumption provides the current backdrop for scrutiny not only by accrediting agencies and external stakeholders, but also by participating institutions as student feedback offers data about the reality of online learning. Building on the first edition, the second edition, *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching*, by Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt assures the audience that their focus will be on best practices in online course delivery including key concerns and challenges that remain a constant in this mode of education. The authors not only succeed, but also exceed expectations. *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching*,

is not only a comprehensive resource for online learning, but also a troubleshooting guide for faculty and administrators as they navigate the ever-changing world of online learning. Text content is divided into two sections providing an effective structure for institutions to reflect on current as well as past practices.

In the book's first section, "*Rethinking Education for an Online World*," the authors bring their audience up to date with not only current trends, but also emerging technologies and issues faced by faculty and administrators as they continue to refine and develop online course delivery. While not ignoring the current debate regarding the effectiveness of distance delivery by citing literature reviews particularly from Phipps and Merisotis (as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2013, p. 19) who identify categorical concerns over student outcomes, student attitudes, and student satisfaction, Palloff and Pratt move forward under the guise that distance learning is here to stay. With this premise in mind, the authors tackle the big questions specifically aligned with faculty preparation, or lack thereof, and the need to engage in pedagogical discussions and training for online instructors. Using anecdotes from dissatisfied online students, Palloff and Pratt cite lack of faculty preparation for online instruction as a key factor in failed course delivery. Also, the authors cite research by Herbert (as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2013, p. 23), which revealed that instructor responsiveness to perceived student needs increased student persistence and retention. While the authors could have ended the discussion there, instead, they chose to refer to online teaching as an art form, proceeding with practical solutions to faculty preparation by suggesting varied elements to training programs that assist institutions in establishing comprehensive frameworks for online learning. Holding true to the realities of online teaching and learning, the authors effectively address the faculty/administrator dynamic advocating the need for faculty members to understand they may need to

release some control over the learning process in building the necessary learning communities for online success. Also, administrators need to listen to faculty concerns making them part of the online learning decision-making process. While this section in the book provides exceptional content regarding the truth about the online environment, a more comprehensive analysis relating to faculty/administrator dynamics would have further strengthened this section.

In the book's second section, "*Teaching and Learning Online*," Palloff and Pratt focus on online course development for faculty and students. The authors advise that online courses must focus more on interactivity, a consistent theme in this section, and not on content delivery, which has been standard practice. Essentially, Palloff and Pratt suggest that too many online instructors try to emulate traditional course practices such as lecture into the online environment with little success. Utilizing reflective practice consistently throughout this section, the authors provide a questioning format requiring instructors to take a critical and inclusive review of their online courses. Citing the research of Boettcher and Conrad (as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2013, p. 88), Palloff and Pratt integrate Boettcher and Conrad's "good course design three-question" structure into an expanded chain of ten questions, providing an excellent guide for taking content to online delivery. For example, questions addressing who are the students in the course, how will academic performance be assessed, and how will attendance be monitored, allow instructors to be proactive in moving to the online environment. Using the ten-question outline, the authors provide a real-world process example of a developed undergraduate course in sociology to illustrate the practices they support. They also provide exhibits, a sample discussion board, and rubrics for assessment. Initially some instructors may find the sociology course not applicable to their content area, but after careful review, they should be able to utilize the process for any course they choose

to create. Again, the key focus in the book is pedagogical process not content; the authors suggest that content experts who lack pedagogical training be paired with effective instructional designers to ensure success. The final chapters of this section address the most significant and persistent issues relating to working with online students. Online course creation can become more about getting the course up and running with little regard to the matriculated student. At the end of the second section, Palloff and Pratt offer a thorough view of online learning from the student perspective. Once again using actual anecdotes and quotes, the authors attempt to share the online experience through the lens of online students. In *“Working with the Virtual Student,”* Palloff and Pratt contend that just as faculty members need trained in the online environment, students need trained as well. Stressing the need for collaboration along with technical support issues, the authors address a number of key issues and concerns that have frustrated instructors and students in the online environment. Arguably, the best chapter in the second section is *“Online Classroom Dynamics,”* an elusive topic for many instructors who struggle with the best approach in fostering a comfortable and effective online classroom. Palloff and Pratt reiterate interactivity as a key theme while providing ways to promote it in the online world. The authors focus on the role of instructor as facilitator, thus setting the stage for effective classroom dynamics. Emphasizing the importance of group work and group formation, Pratt (2013) referred to the “electronic personality” as some individuals come in the online environment and other parts of their personalities appear, thus creating possible conflicts in group formation (172). Citing the

work of McClure (as cited in Palloff and Pratt, 2013, p. 184) regarding conflict, the authors discuss the importance of conflict and conflict resolution as a key mechanism that enhances the learning experience. While instructors may attempt to reduce or even ignore conflict in the online environment by using passive activities and asynchronous discussion, it is the reality of this conflict and classroom management in the online environment that makes this discussion essential, pertinent, and relevant in today’s online classroom. To further support online classroom dynamics, Palloff and Pratt could have provided more faculty anecdotes along with the student anecdotes to emphasize the impact on the online environment, but this does not take away from the significance of this conversation.

The authors in *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching* provide a phenomenal resource for institutions that want to create quality online learning. The authors not only identify and clarify online learning issues, pitfalls, and concerns extensively, but they also provide practical solutions based on research-based best practices. The reality based context and tone of the text forces institutions to review past and current practices with a reflective eye and not a passing glance. The supporting exhibits, charts, and related rubrics can be adapted to almost any institution and the appendices at the end of the book, particularly the “Sample Training Guide for Faculty,” are worthwhile and relevant to the ongoing development of distance learning. This book is an invaluable tool for novice institutions or for institutions that have been involved in distance learning for many years.

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