

Book Review

Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching, 2nd Edition

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Citation: Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt. (2013) *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching*, 2nd Edition. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Publisher's Description: The second edition of the classic resource *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom* offers a comprehensive reference for faculty to hone their skills in becoming more effective online instructors. Thoroughly revised and updated to reflect recent changes and challenges that face online teachers, *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom* is filled with illustrative examples from actual online courses as well as helpful insights from teachers and students. This essential guide offers targeted suggestions for dealing with such critical issues as evaluating effective courseware, working with online classroom dynamics, addressing the needs of the online student, making the transition to online teaching, and promoting the development of the learning community.

In a time of expansive and accelerating technological advancement, education has become both easy to access and complicated to deliver. In *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom*, 2nd Edition, Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt revitalize their original version of this text by focusing on the present-day realities, challenges, and advantages of online instruction in terms of student experience. Divided into two parts, the text presents the current status of this modality of instruction and then proposes a set of practices to improve course delivery within a virtual environment. The chapters form a progressive arc, beginning with "Online Learning in the Twentieth Century," moving through chapters that focus on pedagogy, technology, and course delivery within technological spaces, and ending with a section titled "Lessons Learned from the Virtual Classroom," which reflects upon and summarizes the main points of the book. By reconsidering course structure, classroom dynamics, and the role of teachers in the virtual learning environment, the authors analyze the online instructional modality from three essential perspectives: administrators, course developers, and, of course, teachers. From these often conflicting viewpoints, the authors propose that effective online course development and operation depend to a large extent on collaboration between these "stakeholders," who, Palloff and Pratt argue, must make student learning their primary focus (p. 47).

Workman-like in its approach, the textbook acts as a guide for current or soon to be practicing online instructors. While the text offers pragmatic advice—logistically, organizationally, and pedagogically—it also, at times, forwards innovative theory. One suggestion urges faculty teaching online classes to abandon their traditional desire to control the classroom environment, at least in part. Palloff and Pratt claim that students more willingly "take responsibility for their learning" when they "take on part of the teaching function" (pp. 142-143).

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In this active model, students assume an “equal role in the learning community” with their instructor and peers (p. 148). Consequently, the role of teacher also changes to that of “a guide on the side” rather than “a sage on the stage” in an effective online learning community (p. 137).

This sense of communal learning resonates as both the core argument of the text and a potential solution for improving the learning experience for online students. Palloff and Pratt enumerate several characteristics of an effective learning community: reliable technology, student comfort with both the technology and each other, multiple points of and opportunities for communication, regular, personalized feedback, collaboration, and, when necessary, intervention.

To exemplify the importance of these characteristics, the authors share two case studies, one in which they have succeeded and another in which they have struggled in their own efforts to create a meaningful learning community. For the sake of retaining some measure of objectivity and to illustrate the importance group dynamics play in online community learning, the authors evaluate these experiences through the lens of Bud A. McClure’s 2004 “seven-stage model of group development,” which consists of “preforming, unity, disunity, conflict-confrontation, disharmony, harmony, and performing” (p. 161). By doing so, Palloff and Pratt identify crucial junctures during the semester in which course participants progressed, stalled, or regressed in their efforts to achieve performance. These extended narratives provide valuable direction for teachers at all stages of community building in the online classroom.

Of course, the success of any online class or program requires the appropriate infrastructure, financial support, and strategic plan. Unlike other texts of its kind, *Lessons from the Virtual Classroom* considers the broader vision of online education in a university setting. The authors negotiate the political tightrope of dichotomous agendas rather fluidity, if not entirely objectively—as teachers first, Palloff and Pratt occasionally lecture administrators on behalf of instructional needs which may, at times, alienate and frustrate a group often encumbered by budgets and competing college needs. Even so, requests for appropriate funding, consistent and accessible technology, training, and a manageable workload constitute reasonable expectations for developing and managing effective online courses. Moreover, the text asks teachers to think beyond the limited scope of their virtual classes to consider the complexities of operationalizing an online course or program at their respective college or university. This broader vision may contextualize slow adoption, inadequate support, or limited resources relative to instruction in this modality. More importantly, it empowers teachers to actively and knowledgeably participate in all stages of virtual course development.

This text offers comprehensive insight into virtual education and details the evolving role of teachers in the online modality. It also provides exceptional practical advice and experiential examples of revised or re-envisioned pedagogies applied in this environment. The text not only informs teachers of best practices, but also educates course developers and administrators of the steps required to integrate or improve this modality of instruction at their institutions. Palloff and Pratt make clear that a successful online student learning experience depends upon a strong technological and fiduciary foundation, accessible and simple systems, the creation and perpetuation of learning communities, and open, regular communication. This insight alone makes the book worth the investment for those involved or on the verge of becoming involved in online education.