

Games Online Students Play:

Building a Firewall New Instructors (and Burned Out ‘Old Ones’) Can Use

Cynthia Seguin

As some of the first in our Teachers College to teach graduate courses online (the “bleeding edge” of technology), we have often discussed the joys of online teaching. We represent different disciplines—school administration, instructional design and technology, educational research, and secondary teacher education. One Friday afternoon by happenstance, we shared a few frustrations and challenges of online instruction and laughed as we said “Who would have ever imagined we’d encounter this!” We thought of the phrase “What games online students play,” reminiscent of the best seller (Ernst, 1972), *Games Student Play (and What to Do About Them)*, and this article was born.

At the start we wish to make an important point: Online learning is wonderful for students who are independent, mature, engaged, well-organized learners, especially those who enjoy words, intellectual stimulation, and writing (Rintala, 1998). As higher education moves to degrees taught entirely online, we think issues are emerging that require even greater faculty skill in providing an appropriate framework of clear expectations, particularly for students who do not have the maturity or study skills required. As mentioned,

our experiences are with graduate students, presumably more mature and self-motivated than undergraduate students.

Problems can occur in both traditional or online classes when academic and “life” pressures grow and students kick into panic mode. Most students and faculty work through traditional problems in an atmosphere of mutual trust. We have observed that, as online students find themselves sinking, then: “The games begin!”

GAMES ONLINE STUDENTS PLAY

In recent years the traditional ivory tower illusion of mutual respect and ‘fair play’ has been shattered as more students with behavior problems take university classes. While veteran faculty historically take the onslaught of “challenging” student attitudes and behavior in stride and “survive,” we think recent changes in student behavior coupled with the advent of online learning poses new paradigm shifts. When a classroom is online, unique “behavioral” issues come into play. For instance, online faculty don’t have the benefit of those ‘STOP it now - don’t you dare go any further’ icy, authoritative glares that historically work miracles with

inappropriate student behavior.

Indeed, our experiences have us wondering: Has student motivation and attitudes taken a nosedive lately? Just like school violence that happens in “other” communities, we understand that ‘behavior problems’ no longer happen to ‘other’ teachers. While we have the pleasure of working with many wonderful students, we are beginning to witness college student disrespect to faculty and classmates, as well as read reports of outright hostility towards working hard for grades.

As we talked with each other and investigated further, we found four “game-playing” patterns emerging among online students. We named them: (1) Control and Intimidation: Online Bullies, (2) The Power of Course Evaluations (I can get you!), (3) The Computer (formerly “dog”) Ate My Homework and Other Excuses, and (4) Shifting Blame. These led to the revelation of an institutional game called Rush to the Gold Fields. But most importantly, we sought ways to proactively counteract game playing by creating carefully crafted steps we hope other faculty can use to protect academic integrity and ensure civil discourse in online courses. We call these steps “firewalls,” as they are designed to stop the smoke before problems flare.

Control and Intimidation: Online Bullies

We are seeing “in your face” aggression (bullying) emerging on our campus as well as nationally. Instructors who offer a student the opportunity to redo a poor assignment may be called “d***head” or “b**ch” in person or on the class evaluation. ‘Unreasonable’ faculty requests (such as quality work) may be countered by a student dropping the class and then trashing the instructor. Often, unless the student is entering a program that relies on your letter of recommendation, there is little recourse for verbal abuse.

Distance learning is a perfect environment for “these guys”—a captive online forum for ‘showing off’ and ‘intimidating others.’

Hostile work environment laws, unfortunately, do not address protection from hostilities of students.

Remember the scene in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, when Butch asks his partner after some excellent shooting from the gendarmes: “Who ARE these guys?” Now we ask: Who ARE these online bullies? In our experiences, online bullies are smart and good with words. Distance learning is a perfect environment for “these guys”—a captive online forum for ‘showing off’ and ‘intimidating others.’ The bully loves online learning because it provides a forum for feeling good by putting down others. This aggressive behavior, which would seem out of place in university classrooms, is defended online with the retort: “What do you mean I can’t say that? I am entitled to my own opinion!” In one case, a student would not ‘cease and desist’ online trashing of courses, instructors, and authors until threat of possible lawsuits for slander.

Some unique challenges emerge as enrollments grow to include international students. Lack of English skill

is one issue, especially when American classmates use colloquialisms that can be misunderstood. Other cultural clashes emerge. For example, international students from countries where abuse (verbal and physical) towards women may be tolerated, may not understand that intimidation of faculty or classmates is not acceptable. Further, without regard for university or individual course ‘rules,’ we had an international student fail to show up the first month of class without good reason and take great offense that he cannot join the class late and make up missing work for full credit. International students are no different, however, from their domestic classmates in requests to bend class rules and intimidate

faculty for high grades. We’ve asked ourselves: Is this generation, as in Lake Wobegon, all (way) above average? Small wonder then, that “Professors on Prozac” (Trout, 1997) was reported as the best-attended session of the Modern Language Association Convention in 1996. What’s happening?

While current literature mainly covers traditional college classroom ‘bad behavior,’ we think the online classroom is presenting new unique challenges. Warning of what is to come in the new millennium is perhaps signaled by the online flaming of the 1990s. Many K-12 schools added Acceptable Use Policies for Internet use that must be signed by both the student and parents. What can we do in online classes?

The Firewall

How do you tame the online bully-turn aggressive, intimidating behavior into assertive communications appropriate for a classroom or even the workplace? We believe this is our obligation as faculty. Here is language for an Online Ethics Policy that may

help you build your own firewall:

Out of all of these diverse perspectives that we bring to class, therefore, let us try to communicate what we think, feel, or want in ways that are courteous and respectful, as well as supportive and encouraging of each other. Please do not discuss private issues about the class via the class discussion environment. If you have issues with the class content, amount of work, grades given, etc., send them directly to the professor through private e-mail. This does NOT include clarification on assignments—please DO send these to the discussion area. An answer by the instructor or our classmates may benefit everyone.

Choose your electronic wording carefully: Sometimes we forget how hurtful one word may be, particularly when we are not face to face. So, please do not use ‘loaded’ words like “I demand,” “offends,” “insults,” “implies,” “resent,” “loathe,” “angered”. Use emoticons [:-)] when you are joking. Humor is often lost in this medium so if you are kidding about something, please remember the smiley face. :)

All class members are entitled to their opinions—even if they are different or “wrong” in your eyes. Even if you disagree with statements made, be careful how you respond. Sometimes if YOU respond in a negative manner, other class members may view YOU, not the other person, in a negative manner. (With thanks to our colleague Jennifer Summerville for sharing her policy that gave us ideas for this version)

Besides stating the policy, agreeing to it could also be a course requirement. On our campus, generic university ethics policies exist, but may not be readily available to off-campus students. It may be worthwhile to place links to them in the course outline. Fortunately, ‘push’ has not come to ‘shove’ very often, but reminders of a ‘policy’ are extremely effective in helping bullies back off. Of course, it is important to encourage students to

express opinions (which we value and are an important part of learning) in a courteous, appropriate manner.

The Power of Course Evaluations (“I can get you!”)

This game is clearly: “Teach me LESS; require LESS. I paid my tuition; I’m entitled to my A.” The bottom line is students have great power to use the “constructive” process of course evaluation to threaten faculty into lower standards and higher grades. Is the course evaluation game (“student feedback”) intensifying in tone and language? Judge for yourself by these ‘typical’ comments indicative of a “culture war” between professors and students (Trout, 1997, p. 2-3):

- “It is unfair to drop someone’s grade because he/she missed to (sic) many days.”
- “He needs to realize the limits of his students...the course had a tremendous work load-two 6-8 page papers, a presentation, a midterm, final, and the 12-15 pg. Research paper-whew.”
- “She grades way to (sic) hard.”
- “Allow us (class) time to write an essay that can be allowed to be handed in with a wonderful grade.”

Trout also told of a professor who dared to assign homework and three students immediately approached the dean to complain. A group of angry students at another university walked out of class because the professor used supplemental math problems (not in the textbook) to expand their expertise (Toom, 1993). Additionally, an administrator at a western university warned a professor to give more A’s for fear of lawsuit. Another faculty member there was criticized for asking student to learn more than students in another section-viewed as an inequity rather than better teaching or higher standards. A professor at a southern university was accused of being too demanding because he insisted on correct grammar, syntax, and footnotes (Campus, 1993). Lastly, in Sacks, 1993 a student evaluation comment summarizes the sentiments of Genera-

tion X: “If I don’t get a decent grade because of your critical attitude, I will be speaking to your superiors” (p. 154). We wonder if higher education is facing a growing CRISIS. As if those comments are not chilling enough, we find a description of today’s undergraduate problems characterized as indolence, substance abuse, and excessive careerism (Willimon and Naylor, 1995).

While these reports paint a ‘worst-case’ scenario, we do for most moments love our teaching and find that some of the best suggestions for improving our online courses come from students. Are some course evaluation ‘complaints’ valid? Absolutely! Instructors and administrators should examine substantive issues, but recognize petty criticisms and “blame games” for what they are. Sadly, what has been an important source of feedback and evaluation can turn into blackmail (“I can get you” games), especially in Internet classes.

The Firewall

Faculty members perennially make decisions regarding online curriculum design and instructional philosophies. One of the best firewalls we find is the support, encouragement, and camaraderie of colleagues on our campus as well as nationally. There is a moderated listserv (DEOS-L), sponsored by The American Center for the Study of Distance Education, for example, that facilitates discussion of current issues in distance education: <http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deos-l/deosl.asp>. Our best advice is to connect with experienced online colleagues who are willing to share insights and course expectations in person, through writing in professional journals, and state and national conferences on online learning (or strands in curriculum and instruction conferences). After all,

online learning is not for the timid! Don’t go there alone!

We also hope you will try some of

A group of angry students at another university walked out of class because the professor used supplemental math problems (not in the textbook) to expand their expertise.

the suggestions we propose. Firewall strategies for ‘gotcha games’ are numerous. We believe a firm foundation for online teaching and learning is set through ethics policies as outlined above, carefully crafted syllabi that address diverse learning needs, and constructive teacher/student reflection. We can keep an authoritative air that conveys high (but reasonable) standards that students who want to learn can achieve with our encouragement.

Realistically, we wonder if, despite these proactive efforts, faculty may expect continued power struggles and unpleasantness over work and grades. But we can be student-centered without out acceding to unreasonable requests, diluting learning, or bending to “teach us less or we’ll get you” game. Let us seek some solid ground on which to stand in this academic culture war. Justifiably we must refuse to accept last year’s recycled assignments from this year’s students, and stand firm when mediocre students complain they don’t get the A they “paid for”. We can still hand hold, support, and encourage students (whether Generation X students or stressed out, full-time teachers) and preserve a reasonable pass rate that keeps and attracts students.

Another powerful firewall perspective is to keep a positive outlook towards the joys of teaching in cyberspace classrooms. It is very rewarding to work with online students who are engaged, responsible, excited about course content, and hunger for more learning. While it may involve

more faculty time, we think it is valuable to work with the most 'engaged' learners outside the boundaries of class in some type of mentoring framework. It is intellectually stimulating for us as professors and adds an important firewall to the distancing, "I miss the classroom," feeling that can occur with online teaching. Furthermore, we like to encourage a feeling of online community where classmates

We discovered, like others, that it is also helpful to consider individual needs and differences in learning styles when designing our courses

support and encourage each other and form partnerships of common interests and challenges. These are excellent antidotes to the culture wars.

Perhaps the ultimate firewall for faculty is to challenge themselves to make our courses awesome! Seek improvement by taking constructive feedback seriously, understanding the need for diverse learning styles, and including creative alternative assignments and assessments that add pizzazz. We like to encourage student reflection and responsibility, too. Our favorite question to help students reflect and mature as online learners is "What did you do to help yourself learn?" And for ourselves as faculty, "What would you do differently in your next online class to maximize learning?"

The Computer Ate My Homework and Other Excuses

Online teaching is not immune from that old "dog ate my homework" game. Adult students can be creative in their game playing. "Entitlement" is part of the game: "Whatever excuses I mutter, I'm entitled to second, third, fourth chances." We wonder: Are requests to accept late work and incomplete grades growing? On our campus, an increasing number of students are taking 12-18 credits while working FULL time, and expecting

faculty to accommodate for their "needs" and "emergencies"-or else (fill in the blank with complaint of choice). With "double-dipping" life choices, is it any surprise these students are "cranky" or in a constant state of panic and confusion? Some students' inability to complete even small tasks (such as sending an e-mail) has escalated to late night phone calls to instructor's homes, a trail of tears, and other tantrums or excuses such as: The journals I needed were all checked out, the network was busy, ERIC was not accessible,

my ISP (Internet Service Provider) is having trouble". These antics leave us wondering how we separate the real from the fictional excuses.

The Firewall

How do you tell if a student is "feeding you a line"? When do you show compassion and understanding? Did the student really have to go out of town for grandma's funeral? Did their hard drive really crash? A good response when suspecting an online excuse game is "Tell me more." Sometimes, the more your probe, the fishier the story smells. We have hardened to the point where we do not accept the "I didn't save and lost it all" syndrome because we stress: "save and save often" (or don't come crying). Lately, we have even thought of setting up a database of "students whose grandmothers died this semester," and similar excuses for all faculty to share. (You had five grandmother's die in your first two years of college!?!).

Adult students, however, are no less needing and deserving of support and sympathy than third-graders when a real emergency arises. Ultimately, we may never know if we have been told the truth. Certainly we may ask for doctor's notes or other verifications of 'emergencies.' We can check with colleagues to see if there is an estab-

lished "excuses" pattern. We can even ask the student what they would do if they were in our place. Will the student agree to a makeup plan? Should we rely on our experience spotting a Pinocchio or say no to all as a matter of principal? Often these are tough calls. We think the "excuses" game also includes the "sharing" and "recycling" of class projects and papers. The mythical departmental database of family deaths could also include the topics of papers.

Another firewall for the excuses game (as well as the fear of cheating) is to getting to know your online students through frequent communications, reflective journal assignments, discussion-forum interaction, etc. With experience you learn a students' writing style and mannerisms so you can detect if something is amiss. Again, communications with instructors teaching web courses can be important in reducing student cheating, consumer comparison shopping, and keeping the integrity of courses intact and on a high standard.

Shifting Blame

Unhappy online learners may not have any specific concern. Their discontent may simply be they "just don't like this class" or that they lack motivation. Thus, they may shift blame to the instructor to avoid personal responsibility or accountability or save face.

The Firewall

While most students understand they don't have to like everything in life, this Blame Game can be countered with a simple firewall of CHOICES on assignments. We discovered, like others, that it is also helpful to consider individual needs and differences in learning styles when designing our courses (Grasha and Yangarber-Hicks, 2000; Shaw, et al, 1999; Smith and Holliday, 1987). The data on learning styles also sheds light on the question: Why do some students really like a class and others do not? We have wondered why there is sometimes a

disparity of perceptions, especially on course evaluations. Besides individual differences in fear of, or affinity for a certain subjects, we suspect there are powerful factors that consciously or subconsciously attract or repel students to a learning environment or task. While many students are flexible learners, some are not willing to move from their comfort zone or misconceptions.

There are no right or wrong learning styles—just differences. For example, are YOU more interested in (A) people, (B) facts and theories, (C) problem solving, or (D) visionary thoughts? To pursue this question, you might enjoy visiting a Web site addressing learning styles set up by the Community College of Aurora, Colorado: <http://ciswebserver.cca.ccoes.edu/learn/definition.htm>. Additionally, Julane Crabtree, Mathematics Professor at Johnson County Community College (Overland Park, Kansas) uses a learning styles inventory to help her online students tackle math phobia: <http://www.jccc.net/~jcrabtre/WebWorkshop.html>.

Most importantly, incorporating assignment or project choices empowers learners and avoid power struggles that emerge when faculty insist upon “my way or the highway”. Choices may even remove student excuses for not doing or putting off assignments, because almost magically, learning becomes more engaging; often students do not even realize why. This does not mean that students should always have choices, or that they should not have to read (“not my learning style). Furthermore, “I like to listen to lectures & regurgitate” students may still not be pleased with classes where they are asked to assume more personal responsibility or classes with heavy reading and writing. The end result of differences in teaching and learning styles may indeed be poor teacher evaluations from those students with strong preferences and little flexibility. The game is: “I will put you down/blame you because I lack the effort to move out of my comfort zone to read, listen,

or study in a way that does not come naturally to me.” Thus, “quality” judgments about online teaching that sound like the “blame game” may be more of a reflection of the learner than the teacher.

Similar discussions arose as we worked on a college committee to examine online teaching evaluation. We listened to many faculty concerns about misplaced irritation that some students experience because they lacked basic technology skills or experienced other frustrations that faculty cannot control. Here are a few of the questions that may be of interest to other institutions:

- Please rate your ability to receive technical assistance from university technology support services. Example: promptness, quality of help, etc. [Very Low Low Medium High Very High]
- Please describe your experiences with (your college) related support services such as registration, library, textbook, materials, etc.
- What could our university do to make it easier for you to be a distance learner?
- Describe any frustrations or problems with technology in this course.
- Do you consider this an effective way to take this course?

In summary, firewall protection for the Blame Game may be as simple as 1, 2, 3. Let’s explain to students: (1) what “learning styles” are so that they understand why some tasks are more uncomfortable for them than others, (2) you do expect them to strive to succeed on a variety of assignments, and (3) in higher education, growth comes from stretching from one’s comfort zone. While we don’t have time to totally individualize classes, ‘choices’ form our firewall foundation for the ‘blame game’.

Rush to the Gold Fields

We have included this last game, played by “institutions”, because its implications for online faculty are critical. As many faculty are noticing,

universities are rushing to mine the online instruction gold field. In a recent survey the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) found the number of web courses increased by 72 percent from 1994-95 to 1997-98. NCES estimated 1.6 million students in 1998 enrolled in distance education. We hear a cry across the land—“There’s gold in them there web courses”—as institutions seek untapped markets for potential students (credit hour production = \$). Additionally, the use of adjunct cyberspace faculty, could significantly reduce personnel costs because they do not require office space; and online students typically don’t use the campus library, require a heated or cooled classroom, need a parking space, go to the health center, etc.

While we are delighted that our online courses often fill quickly, we wonder if faculty might become “roadkill” in this gold-paved information highway. Will online courses be snatched from faculty without their consent to be taught by others? Indeed, after spending countless hours giving birth to a “top quality” web course, the last thing we wish to hear is: “I’m giving ‘your web course’ to that new instructor to teach—you don’t mind sharing?” Will you want to turn “your baby” over to someone else or share sections with another instructor who had nothing to do with the course development? We think there is danger that shared web courses could be “watered down” or changed inappropriately.

The Firewall

Whoa! Perhaps it’s time to walk/not run to those gold fields. Current practices and course quality vary so greatly that the online courseware company Blackboard and the National Education Association studied the rapidly growing web-based instruction movement and developed benchmarks for universities that cover: (1) Teaching and Learning Standards, (2) Student Support

Standards, and (3) Evaluation and Assessment Standards (www.nea.org/). The N.E.A. has also released new data (Carr, 2001) indicating the higher costs of distance education. Additionally, the Regional Accrediting Commissions have released new Guidelines for Evaluation of Electronically Offered Degree Programs (Cook, 2001) that also provide standards for web courses: (1) Institutional Context and Commitment; (2) Curriculum and Instruction, (3) Faculty Support, (4) Student Support, and (5) Evaluation and Assessment at this site:<http://www.wiche.edu/telecom/resources/publications/Guidelines.PDF>

The competition for institutional survival has generated a proliferation of web courses that may endanger quality. In this rush to "get to the gold fields" faculty are often tossed into web course development (sink or swim) without adequate training or technical support. Thus, some courses are little more than independent study with students emailing projects at the semester end or instructors posting traditional class notes on the Internet. While these are not bad under some circumstances, we believe some students are growing disappointed with online learning, and if disenchantment continues, it could hurt Internet instruction at all institutions.

We hope faculty embarking into the world of web-based course design and instruction will communicate with university administrators to review and adopt quality standards for course development, instruction, technical support, and evaluation similar to those mentioned above. "Course ownership" for web courses is typically different than that from traditional classes. It would be unusual for a faculty member to be asked to "turn over" all notes, assignments, etc. for a standard course. However, web courses are typically housed on a university Web server, and often involve additional personnel and special software. Thus, the institutions often claim web course ownership. How-

ever, we feel that schools should definitely negotiate with the developer of any web course before they assign it to anybody else. To do otherwise would surely discourage the development of new Web courses and the extensive effort that is always required.

IMPLICATIONS AND ACTION

The challenges and opportunities facing online instructors are many. We hope that our discussion of 'Games Online Students Play' (and the protective Firewalls) provides a partial "Web Course Survival Guide" for both new and experienced online faculty. In addition to supporting and encouraging each other, keeping a sense of humor (under sometimes amazing circumstances) goes a long way! We never know who will be at the keyboard and what they will be up to! The biggest belly laugh we had about students who do not read instructions occurred at the beginning of this semester. One of the author's student's phoned frantically wanting to know: "What time does the class start? I have been sitting in front of my computer all morning and the class has not come on yet!" He knew it would be a long semester!

While joys of online teaching delight us, we'd be less than honest if we did not engage in meaningful conversations within our own departments, institutions, and across the country, to shed some light on the issues and frustrations that keep us awake at night. There is a rapidly changing landscape emerging nationally regarding design and delivery of instruction. Already, for-profit corporations, like the University of Phoenix and Jones University, have advertisements on television, in newspapers and magazines, and even on search engines. We wonder how long it will be before some entrepreneur appealing to student "consumerism" writes a best seller: "The Dummies Guide to Shopping for Online Courses"?

Indeed, the competition for students is fierce, with corporate America well

positioned to compete and beat public and private traditional universities. Can we compete with their financial, time, and talent resources in designing online instruction? Is online instruction actually more expensive than traditional instruction? Will educational values clash with profit-driven corporate cultural values? Stay tuned! In the meantime, be chilled by the words of Michael Milken when he stated to Arthur Levine, Columbia University Teachers College President: "You guys are in trouble-and we're going to eat your lunch" (Steffens, 2000).

REFERENCES

- Campus. (Spring, 1993). 4 (3), p. 6.
- Carr, S. (May 11, 2001). Union publishes guide citing high cost of distance education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 47 (35), p. A39.
- Cook, C. (February, 2001). Regional accrediting commissions: The watchdogs of quality assurance in distance education. *Syllabus*, 14 (7), p. 20; 56-57.
- Ernst, K. (1972). Games students play (and what to do about them): A transactional analysis of problems in schools among students...parents...teachers & administrators. Millbrae, CA: Celestial Arts.
- Grasha, A. F. and Yangerber-Hicks, Natalia. (Winter, 2000). Integrating teaching styles and learning styles with instructional technology. *College Teaching*, 48 (1), p. 2-10.
- Rintala, J. (1998). Computer technology in higher education: An experiment, not a solution. *Quest*, 50 (4), 366-378. EJ576392.
- Shaw, G. and Nigel, M. (December, 1999). The role of student learning styles, gender, attitudes, and perceptions of information and communication technology assisted learning. *Computers & Education*, 33 (4), p. 223-234.
- Smith, D. K. and Holliday, P. J. (Fall, 1987). Learning style and academic achievement. *Focus on Learning*

(Continued on page 57)