

**Study & Development Fellowship  
Winter 2012**

**Guidelines for Online Instruction  
Final Report  
July 16, 2012**

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## **Online teaching has its own skill set that differs from that of the classroom.**

I set out last Fall to develop guidelines for online instructors. This was not meant to infringe on the proper sphere and skills provided by The Centre for Open Learning and Educational Support. COLES has the ability to design online courses, and to assist any instructor to hone their teaching skills in multiple environments. The guidelines I proposed to create were specific to online instruction after a course has been designed and is ongoing. The best designed online course requires skills and techniques for presentation that differ from those used in the classroom. These proposed guidelines were to have two aspects: *practical techniques* and a *philosophy of online teaching*.

### **Practical Techniques**

The primary and necessary technique, if this it can be called, is to remember that the **online classroom is fundamentally different from a face to face class**. One cannot merely import the techniques of the traditional classroom to the virtual, online class. Teaching online requires a non-linear approach which incorporates the essential nature of the internet. By internet, I mean the proper use of this term: the world wide web, email, RSS feeds, blogs, ftp transfers, eBooks, multimedia and most importantly non-linear surfing for information. This gets to the basics of what education is - a thirst for knowledge and a thirst to expand one's intellectual and spiritual horizons. **Flexibility** is the key term to remember.

An online instructor cannot simply restrict accessibility to traditional lecture periods and an artificial weekly office hour. Be prepared to answer emails, or respond to discussion group postings at irregular times. **Online instruction requires more but shorter periods of contact with students** - individually, with groups and with the entire class.

Online instruction, however, does not require 24/7 duty, but does require that you be flexible in how and when you are available to students. The student sitting at a computer is in communication with classmates - and likely also to be surfing or tweeting, or on Facebook at the same time as working online at a course of studies. The student will quickly feel as though they were spinning alone in cyberspace without the frequent presence of an instructor. Answers to comments and questions should appear within a reasonable time after a question or comment is posted.

**Guidelines for availability can and should be set at the very start of a course**, and repeated now and then - but do not expect to restrict yourself to a 9-5, Monday - Friday week. Surprise your students once in a while by answering a question in the early morning or late night.

Create a community in your virtual classroom. There are endless techniques to do this - the above suggestion for answering student queries is a good start. What I mean here is to **let students see you as a person** - establish a style of instruction - use humour, or use erudition, in answering questions more fully, provide links, chat, - create an online personality for yourself that matches who you are. In other words, **be yourself**.

As in face to face courses, post grades as quickly as you can - but **if you are having trouble meeting an announced deadline, tell the students** - that is, use the main page of the course to keep students aware of what is happening - this is a distinct advantage over the traditional classroom where such announcements can be made only through email, or by waiting until the next class.

A small, practical corollary to this: **turn off the grade average feature for assignments until all grades are posted**. If you are in the habit of posting grades individually as you progress through a cyber stack of papers - students whose assignment have not yet been marked will start complaining and worrying about their work. This is a reasonable worry on

their part, as in cyber classrooms, students submit online, but have no way of being certain their assignment arrived.

**RSVP.** If a student sends an email, or posts a question on a public forum on the course site - and you do not have time to answer right away - **RSVP** - I reiterate it is not an unreasonable fear that a message sent was not received and is spinning lost somewhere in cyber space, or in someone else's in box because of an incorrect address. So at the very least, send a note saying thanks, and that you will get to the question as soon as possible.

## **A Philosophy of Online Teaching**

### **The Virtual Classroom is not the traditional Classroom.**

**The internet is by nature a non-linear environment that allows individuals to surf . The net is not read from beginning to end, but the individual dips into it at different points. The task of the online instructor is in a great sense, to guide this surfing in order to make meaning grow from the experience, and thus result in learning.**

**For a graphic example of a non-linear presentation from Hist2070DE World Religions in Historical Perspective, see Appendix 2.**

## The Fellowship Study

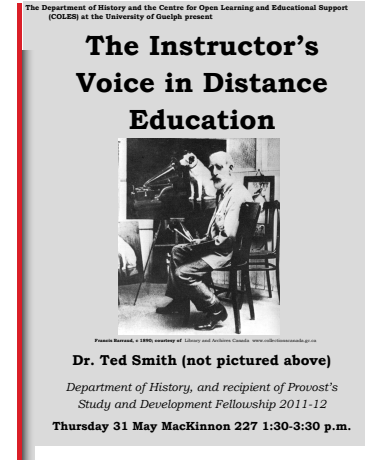
At the time I was offered the Fellowship, I developed a detailed plan of action (Appendix 3), but circumstances and deeper reflection caused a re-thinking of this plan. Briefly, I had proposed to assemble a bibliography of work already done on the techniques of online teaching, and to conduct a major survey of instructors, combined with an analysis of students taking online courses. I was apprised of the fact that COLES had plans in place already to survey instructors and students. At this point, I had also added the creation of a website presenting my results, but was also told that COLES had already planned the same.

The result of this further reflection was to produce a set of interactive online locations where instructors could access material on online teaching techniques, but more importantly, discuss and debate via a number of tools such techniques with each other.

My discussions with Richard Gorrie at COLES included a plan to place the interactive tools I designed linked to the COLES site, where they would live for the foreseeable future to grow or be pruned as expertise developed over time.

At present, I have begun a [WordPress blog](#), an interactive, editable [Prezi](#), and a [Facebook](#) page. There is an existing [linkedin group](#) for online instruction at the university level. These tools will be linked to the COLES site, and that department will supply an RSS feed, email listserv, and twitter links. While many of these sites are usually connected in the popular imagination with social media rather than serious scholarship, there is no reason they cannot be turned to more thoughtful and significant purposes such as online teaching.

On May 31, I headed a seminar for College of Arts online instructors called *The Instructor's Voice in Distance Education*. This was attended also by representatives of COLES - some Distance Education Specialists and Teaching Support personnel, as well as management. In my presentation I used the Prezi I had begun, to present my thinking on techniques, and I solicited debate and discussion on the nature of online teaching. Agreement was reached to set up an email listserv, and to post the Prezi and blog links on the COLES site, so instructors could continue discussion and proffer ideas and suggestions for improved distance education online. The session was filmed for later use.



**Here is the Prezi that I used and which flows from the presentation:**

<http://prezi.com/cxcl3k0cxq7g/the-instructors-voice/>

It is editable by any instructor, who can add ideas, or make comments in this holistic presentation tool.

**And here is the website/blog, which will also be linked to COLES:**

<http://notlimey.wordpress.com/>

The first page of the blog appears as Appendix 1 below.

Here is the Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/University-of-Guelph-GuelphHumber-Online-Instructors/284563624984060>

and the outside LinkedIn Group:

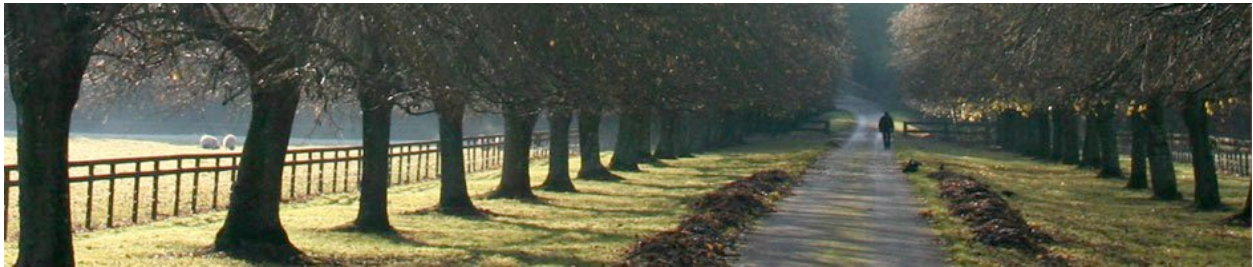
[http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=1631797&trk=anet\\_ug\\_hm](http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=1631797&trk=anet_ug_hm)

## Appendix 1: The Blog

The main page as at July 15, 2012

[notlimey](#)

Just another WordPress.com site



[Skip to content](#)

### [Final Report](#)

Posted on [July 16, 2012](#) by [notlimey](#)

The final report on my Fellowship is ready and only a few days late! I am going to attempt to post it on a page here – as soon as I read through the rather complex hoops WordPress requires of Mac users to create another page.

The key word for successful online teaching is: flexibility. Be non-linear not linear.

Remember, the internet is by nature a non-linear environment that allows individuals to surf – one does not read the net from beginning to end... but dips into it at different points. The task of the online instructor is in a great sense, to guide this surfing in order to make meaning grow from the experience.



**Here is a list of ideas that give a sense of the nature of online teaching as being non-linear, which came out of The Instructor's Voice seminar on May 31, 2012:**

**post industrial**

**a face not an interface**

**a community**

**be accessible**

**be flexible**

**be imaginative**

**your own voice**

**have a facebook page**

**have a blog**

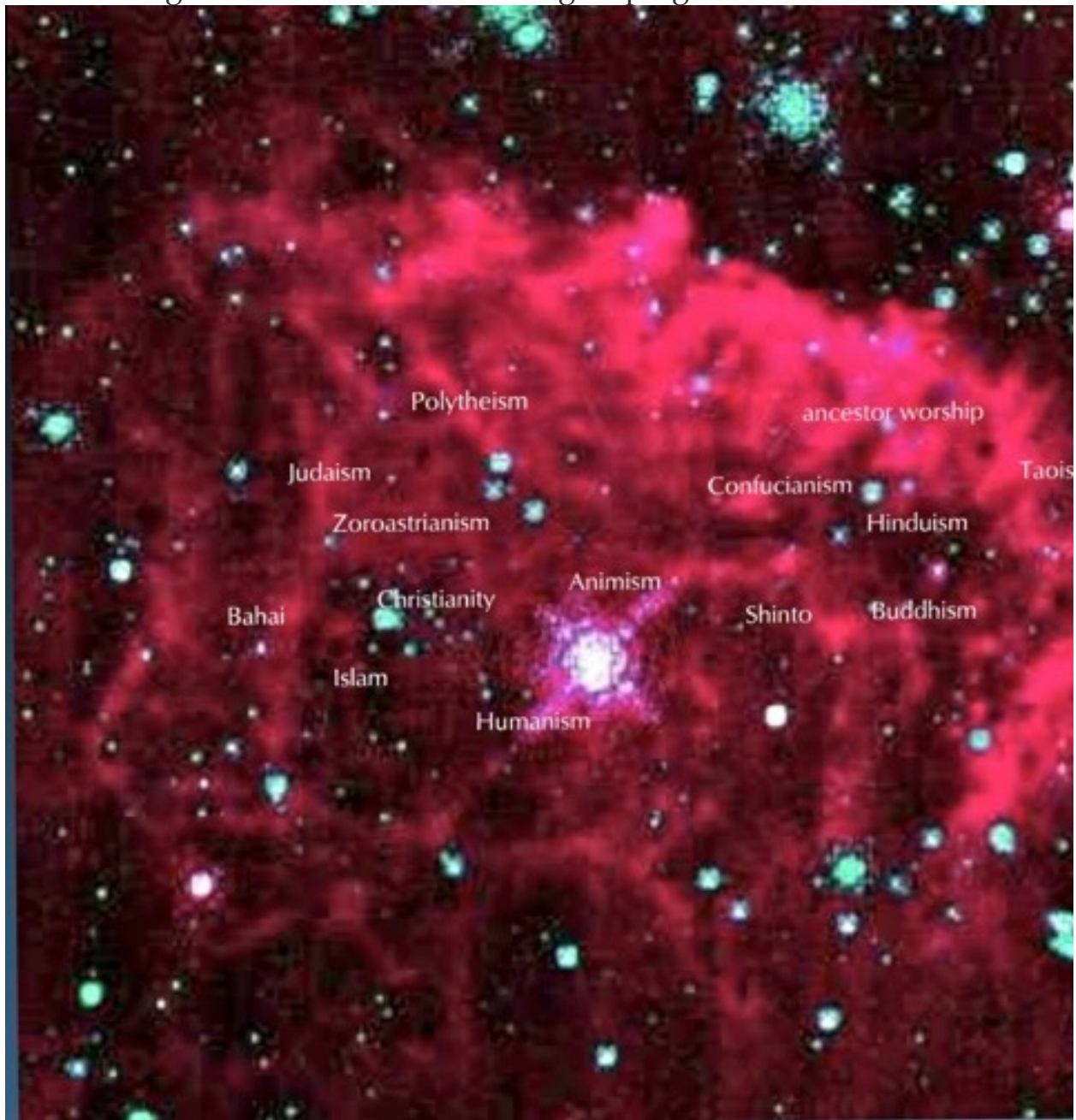
**tweet**

**allow students to surf**

**be yourself**

## Appendix 2: Non-linear teaching

Here is an example of non-linear teaching: a star field for my course World Religions in Historical Perspective. Students can click on any of the religions portrayed here to jump to detailed text on that religion. The various religions are shown in cultural groupings also.



## **Appendix 3: The Original Plan**

### **F11**

**Over the course of the period between the S11 and F11 semesters, and during the F11 term, I will do some preparatory work for the project:**

- 1. Survey the literature on teaching online [and at the same time assemble a bibliography for the use of online instructors]**
- 2. Survey the current online courses in the Humanities at the University of Guelph, to get a sense of the range of offerings and to consider whether teaching and offerings online are affected by the area of study in the Humanities**
- 3. Contact potential interviewees among Distance Learning Specialists and Instructors to obtain their agreement, and to schedule interviews to be held in the W12 semester. I intend to contact Peter Wolf, the Director of the Office of Open Learning and Dean Don Bruce of the College of Arts to apprise them of my project. Although not in my original proposal, I think now I should also arrange interviews with the technical team in the DE/Open Learning department.**
- 4. Gain advice on the preparation of online surveys - in this semester I do not propose to design the survey, but to get an idea of best practices.**

### **W12**

**In this semester the focussed work will occur. I expect that points 5, 6, 7 and 8 will occur over the first six weeks of the semester, and point 9, the report itself be written over the second half of term.**

- 1. Interview Distance Learning Specialists in the Course Design & Development Team, and technical support staff. These interviews**

**will be to enhance my theoretical understanding of online teaching techniques, and also to get a sense of the technical capabilities in terms of multimedia and interactive components.**

- 2. Interview instructors to get a sense of strengths and weaknesses they have perceived.**
  - 3. Preparation and implementation of the survey of students in terms of gender/  
major/year level/degree/open learners.**
  - 4. Preparation and implementation of the online survey of students to elicit their  
experience of online education**
- 9. Preparation of guidelines, and final report of advice, guidelines and bibliography of  
online learning material.**