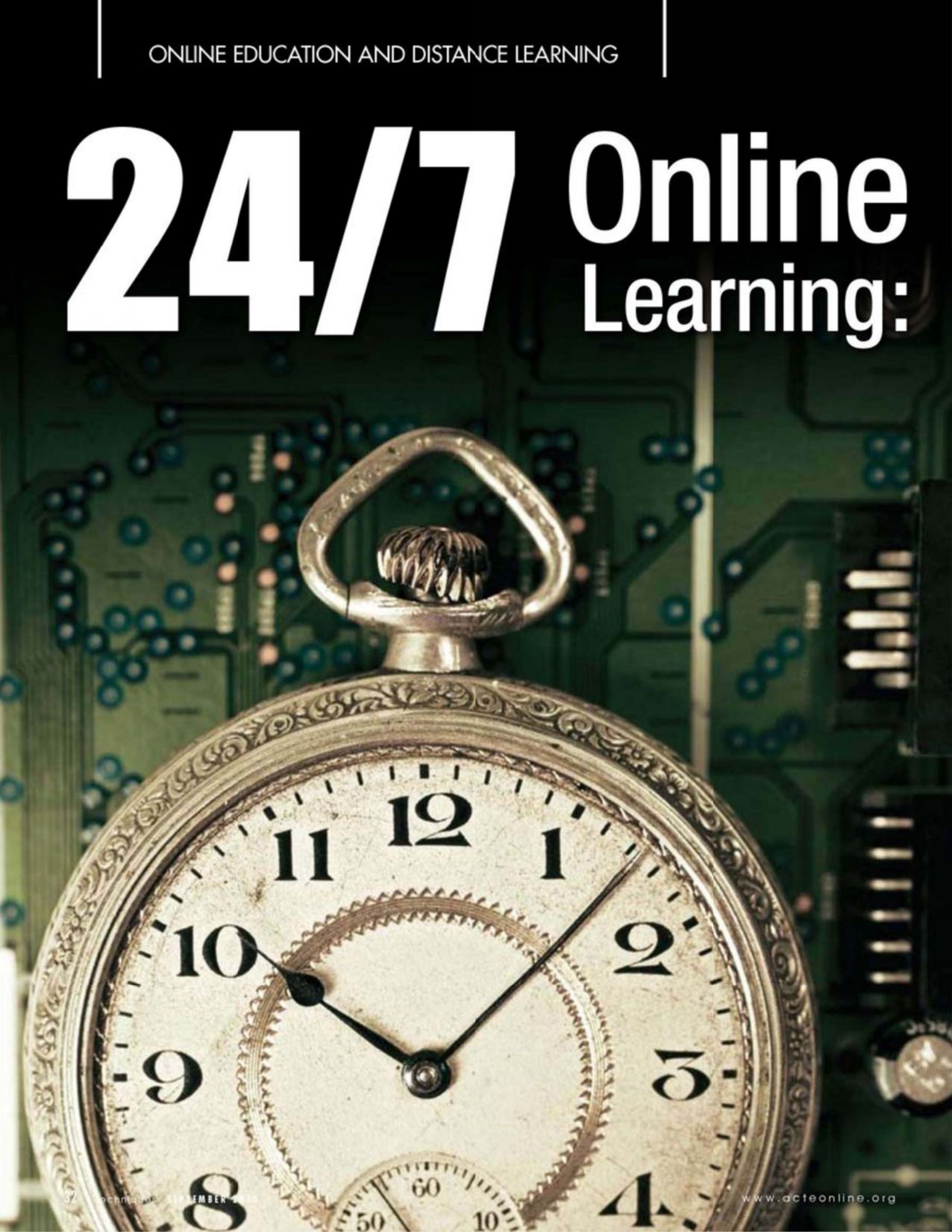
24/7 Online Learning:



Lessons Learned

BY JEFFREY W. BUTLER

It is evident that the more we believe, the more we can conquer. This is true especially in moving instructors and students into the world of online and blended learning environments. Believing that all students can succeed, and that all teachers can develop their craft and engage students online, is the foundation upon which our institution has built online learning. I have seen this firsthand at Auburn Career Center, and with the many other districts that we support with our Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) and online/blended academics, career and technical education (CTE), and professional development (PD) courses.

Our journey has been an evolutionary process through several years of not only growing with the changes in technologies and learning management systems, but also the development of staff and students in adopting new ways of learning. Those changes were both visionary and reactionary. Visionary from the standpoint of building the LMS, academic courses, and professional development and student training to make it happen. Reactionary in the belief that responsiveness and immediate change that may seem chaotic at first play an important role in identifying the weaknesses in the structure (*i.e.*, staff, students, curriculum and technology).

First, you must ask yourself why you are committed to online and blended learning. At Auburn we foresaw that 24/7 learning could be used to expand the classroom day without infringing upon CTE class time. Secondly, we saw the online learning option for our students as paramount for their success in college. It is a 21st century skill that is needed when students take online certification tests and college courses. At the Model Schools Conference in 2008, Bill Daggett noted that by 2019, 50 percent of all students will be taking online courses. This is the learning option for the future and it is a technology skill our students need reinforced. Though it may center on technology, learning online forces independent lifelong learning and builds important time-management skills. (Note that our students were already completing online certification testing: Career Technical National Certifications, OGT Prep, OSHA, National Career Readiness Certificate, Serve Safe, OCAP Testing/ End of Course Testing.)

The LMS Interface and Connectivity

We made the decision to go with Blackboard in 2004. Blackboard was being used in more than 65 percent of the universities, and if our students need to be prepared for college, it seemed right to provide the experience in the most popular LMS. We have stayed the course with Blackboard, seeing the advantages of a solid and secure LMS that can be managed efficiently by our career center, associated schools, and any others that wish to join our Northern Ohio consortium called Auburn Connect.

Staffing and Content Area Choices

It is important to establish a timeline for implementation. Identify lead teachers and choose whether you will design or buy the courses. There are many choices for courses now; we chose to build our courses using a consortium partnership approach with a few districts, thereby speeding course accessibility in early 2002. That was a while ago, but the question still must be whether you design or buy courses? Building courses yourself definitely strengthens the lead teachers, staff knowledge, and commitment to the final product. Courses are becoming a commodity, and some like Auburn's can be adopted as a foundation for your teachers' input and customization. That is the approach that seemed to work well for us. Once we created a course and got the instructor to customize and truly "own the course," the issue of who should keep the course material current and the

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linked content active diminished greatly. All of our courses can easily be adopted and changed by the instructor year after year—thereby actively growing with the instructor.

Preparing the Teachers for the Transition

To move instructors toward an online curriculum, we started with inservice training for all the staff. We broke the training into one- and two-hour blocks of hands-on training on the basics of Blackboard. We created and modified the course, and added Web links, audio and videos. Lastly, we personalized the curriculum, assessment and grade book. We learned very quickly that if the course is not mandated to be online, or if there is no expectation of an implementation date—the course will not happen. Clear expectations must be stated with the school's total commitment. Indirect incentives for the staff seem to help support adoption of online curriculum. Access to video equipment, iPods, iPod Touches, tablet PCs, or a newer computer lab or classroom help to keep them focused.

Delivery Style

In terms of online and blended delivery styles, we have challenged ourselves to use a variety of approaches: resource and remote classrooms, independent online learners, and team learning environments. To figure out what is best for your courses, ask why your district is moving in this direction. Is it to expand curriculum? Is it to further your district's mission? Is it a credit recovery option? Preparing students for future lifelong learning? Those questions will likely determine your approach.

Student/Parent Training and Connectivity

Successful student connectivity and access has to be a priority in planning. Our successful approach involved hosting a summer orientation for online learners and their parents. We created a scavenger hunt connectivity test during summer online orientation night. Both parents and students sat side by side sharing a single computer as they worked through the simple scavenger hunt. This provided confidence and an even level of understanding for both the parent and student. The scavenger hunt included all of the basic skills needed to be successful in the online course.

They were first asked to download the scavenger hunt instruction sheet of "clues." Then they were asked to open the document and rename it with the "student name," and save the document to the computer or flash drive. They worked through the 10 questions, played audio and video files, took a fun quiz, and submitted their document to the instructors. They also walked through a live demonstration of the online computer help desk so that both parents and students know that there are no barriers to successful access.

School techs are available 7:30 in the morning to 10:00 at night via a phone number; this has built trust amongst the staff and students that we are truly available to support the online learning endeavor. We ask that students have a working computer with broadband access either at home, at a library, or, if needed, the open computer labs at our technology learning center (open until 10:00 p.m.

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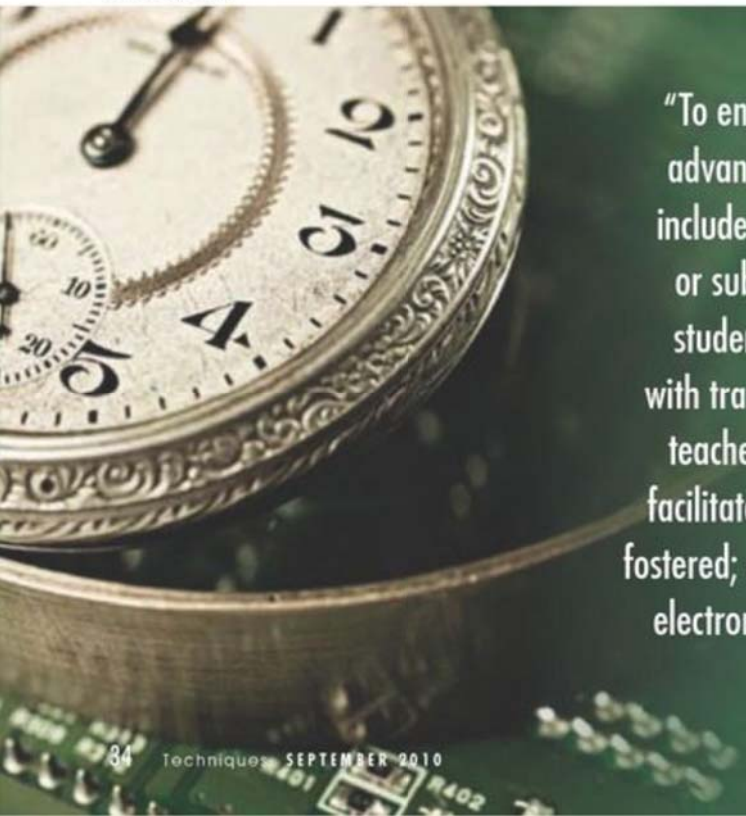

"To engage teachers in this endeavor, we must show the strong advantages of teaching and learning online. Some advantages include providing course continuity for absent students, teachers or substitute teachers; automatic access to tutorials; unlimited student access to review content prior to testing; compatibility with traditional scheduling; a complete course is prepared for new teachers; differentiated instruction and exponential learning is facilitated; virtual field trips are possible; multisensory learning is fostered; content can be customized for students' learning styles; and electronic feedback analyzes student involvement in the course."

daily). The customer service approach of our technology support staff has been a game changer for the staff, as well as the students as customers. The understanding that learning must not stop due to technology has brought customer service forward in the school. It is understood that online and blended learning demands both ongoing and immediate technology support.

Getting to the Root of Teacher Concerns

Teacher fears are very understandable. Put yourself in the situation of what teachers will be hearing for the first time: "Next year, you will be teaching your students in an online environment. You will begin with blended learning and possibly have some students totally online as well. You will need to learn the Blackboard LMS." Put in this position you would undoubtedly ask, "Why are we doing this change?" Now let's analyze their fears: "Is this an attempt at reducing staff? Can I actually teach this course online or blended? Do I believe in this? How will I do this and what is the support system?"

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It also promotes working in teams. We have seen our math instructors and CTE teachers work closely on embedded academics. Also, our academic teachers work together to share learning objectives and develop content.

Professional Development

Following the initial training, the ongoing support of the teachers and their continued development has come from a strategy of one-to-one, and face-to-face support—with both technical assistance and instructional strategies. We created a Peer Teaching Network and professional learning communities that also support our instructors.

We hosted a review of teacher experiences that included self-reflection after their first year teaching either an online or a blended class. They were asked: "What type of skills do you see students gaining through their online learning that they would not have gained in a traditional classroom? How has the access to online learning helped to facilitate your role as a teacher?" From these discussions we learned from teachers that:

- Classroom skills do not transfer—needed are participation points and motivational strategies.
- Collaborative team planning is necessary.
- There should be ongoing learning and instruction.
- It requires different teaching skills.
- A significant change in teacher role happens; they found themselves as facilitator, coordinator, and help desk.
- They realized their technical skills need to be improved.
- Their grading timeframes need to be no longer than 24-48 hours.
- Even though the curriculum is online, it still comes back to rigor, relevance and relationship.
- Students need to be self-directed and progress at their individual rate through the course.