

# Rewards and Challenges of Teaching Online

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## Abstract

*The present century has seen steady increase in online K-12 student enrollment because of which there is an increased demand of teachers that have the competencies and skill sets to teach on this platform. The purpose of this study was to understand the extent to which teachers find the K-12 online setting a challenging or rewarding experience This understanding would then enable the development of programs (as deemed fit) to address the professional development needs of these teachers.*

## Key words

*Rewards, Challenges, Online Teaching, Professional Development, Motivation, Student Engagement.*

## Introduction

Teaching online without being equipped with effective teaching strategies and pedagogical foundations is very frustrating for virtual teachers (Brennan, 2003). However, even though the challenge of online teaching at times leads to professional frustration, there is no doubt that the resolution of frustration, and the resultant fruits of hard-work are the rewards associated with this setting. Online teachers do face a disorientation phase (Mezirow, 1991), but they are transformed through this challenging environment by critical reflection, which not only affords them the opportunity to grow as teachers, but allows them to experience positive change in their students' academic achievement upon graduation. The culmination of all these transformations at various levels (in both the teacher and the student) is a very rewarding experience. This paper seeks to identify the challenges and rewards of teaching in an online setting in order to support the K-12 online teachers in their professional practice.

## Purpose of The Study

There are certain misconceptions associated with online instruction. One of them is that 'teaching is teaching,' meaning that the skill sets needed in the face-to-face environment are transferable to online teaching without any adjustments. However, this is far from the truth (Davis & Rose, 2007). Online pedagogy requires different competencies and skill sets than traditional teaching (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Jaffee, 2003; Sieber, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to understand the extent to which teachers find the K-12 online setting a challenging or rewarding experience. This understanding would then enable the development of programs (as deemed fit) to address the professional development needs of these teachers. The overarching research questions formulated for this study were:

1. What do participating teachers report are the ways to prepare and support online teachers?
2. What elements should be included in the design of a professional development program for K-12 online teachers?

To gather the qualitative data for the interpretative study of the above-mentioned overarching research questions, the following questions were used:

1. Based on your professional experience what are the challenges of teaching online?
2. Based on your professional experience what are the rewards of teaching on online?

The first question is directly related to the challenges and rewards of teaching online as it relates to the ways in which the teachers teaching in an online setting need preparation and support. The teachers that responded to the survey were K-12 teachers teaching

in an online setting and they have experienced firsthand what challenges, frustrations and disorienting dilemmas faced in this setting. The transformative process may have been challenging, but this process might have been rewarding at many levels; as teacher, as a learner, as a transformative learner going through the rigors of trial and error to accomplish a teacher persona, and most of all a person who accepts challenges and therefore accepts graciously the rewards.

## Theoretical Framework

*Andragogy in Practice Framework* (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998) and transformative learning theory were the theoretical frameworks that guided this study. The theory of andragogy was expounded by Knowles in 1970 with the idea of differentiating adult learning from the way a child learns. The four core assumptions that Knowles promoted are (1980):

- Self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed human being;
- A growing reservoir of experience becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning;
- Readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their social roles;
- Time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly, their orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of performance-centeredness. Adults are concerned about developing increased competence to achieve their full potential in life and about the immediate application of knowledge and skills.

Knowles et al. (1998) added two more assumptions to the aforementioned list, one of which was placed in the first position on the list, and the other which was placed at the end of the list:

- Adults need to know why they need to learn something before learning it.
- The motivation for adult learners is internal rather than external.

In *Andragogy in Practice Framework*, Knowles et al. (1998) claimed that adult learning is more effective when a learner is self-motivated and takes responsibility of his/her learning. Knowles et al. (1998) further stated that self-directed adult learners enter into learning with a mind-set that it's their own choice so the level of motivation is higher. Younger learners depend more on more knowledgeable others Vygotsky (1978) to structure and plan their learning experiences. Adult learners also bring to the table their past experiences that may prove to be a rich resource both for the faculty and other fellow learners, where in the case of the younger learners this additive experience is not present. According to

Mezirow (1991), transformative learning is not about just acquiring knowledge, but making meaning of what a person experiences. Mezirow (1991a) words it as, “making sense of or giving coherence to our experiences” (p.11). In the transformative process, people take ownership of their learning through critical thinking when they face disorienting dilemmas, rather than unquestioningly accepting the frames of reference through life experiences. This applies very pertinently to challenges faced by teachers in the online learning setting. When online teachers start teaching, they encounter many challenges that serve as disorienting dilemmas, which spurs them to reflect on their teaching and then align their teaching to suit the unique needs of the online student. Mezirow (2003) further explains that “transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (p. 58).

#### **Andragogy and implications for professional development.**

The implications for promoting this model to develop professional development would place emphasis on principles that guide and form adult learning. The focus of andragogy as mentioned above is the self-directed nature of learning, in which adult learners their past experiences, thus aiming at performance-centeredness by stressing the immediacy of application, as opposed to the postponed application model used in most pedagogies. Unlike children who need time to develop an understanding of the value of learning, these individuals have already passed through most of their formal educational phases in which they are directed by others to acquire information and knowledge. Instead, they are attempting to develop specific knowledge for a clear, self-directed purpose and a goal-oriented result. At this stage too, they still need the guidance of an instructor to acquire new knowledge.

Design of professional development for adult learners must take into account the higher performance level that they operate on, compared to that of K-12 learners. Adult learners must be able to perceive the curriculum’s immediate value to their practice in order to ensure a high that they are motivated at a higher level.

The curriculum must reflect and be customized to the particular issues that these professionals need to address most of all. This applies very pertinently to challenges faced by teachers in the online learning setting. When online teachers start teaching, they encounter many challenges that serve as disorienting dilemmas, which spurs them to reflect on their teaching and then align their teaching to suit the unique needs of the online student. Mezirow (2003) further explains that “transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (p. 58).

#### **Method**

The researcher used basic interpretive qualitative methods to “uncover and interpret” (Merriam, 2002, p. 39) the experiences of online teachers. This study was conducted as a basic interpretive qualitative study that focused on the professional development needs of K-12 online teachers in Ohio. In qualitative research, one “seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and world views of the people involved, or a combination of these” (Merriam, 2009, p. 6). This was accomplished through collecting online K-12 teacher responses with the help of two above mentioned qualitative questions which would

help the K-12 online teachers to refine their own professional practice. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) point out that qualitative research focuses on the interpretation of phenomena in their natural settings in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative data were collected with a set of open-ended questions by which teachers reported their lived experiences, transformative processes, and learned teaching practice.

#### **The Survey**

This study was guided by the following publications: a) National Standards for Quality Online Teaching (2008) by the North American Council for online Learning [NACOL]; b) Standards for Quality Online Teaching (2006) by the National Education Association [NEA]; and c) Guide to teaching Online Classes (2007) by the Southern Regional Educational Board [SREB]. The survey instrument was designed keeping in mind the above mentioned documents.

#### **Participants and Data Collection Procedures**

##### **Demographic Data**

The survey instrument (Survey Monkey, an online survey development company, was chosen to host this study), gathered the demographic information that included gender, age, area of specialization, as well as specific data related to the characteristics of the online schools represented by the participants respondents were predominantly female (N= 71, 72%) while 27 (28%) were males. Their age ranged from 23 to 68 years, with a mean age of 45.70, and a median age of 45. The group (27 teachers) that had the most representation was within the 36–45 years range. The academic subjects taught by the teachers who participated were : English language arts (N=18, 18.36%), mathematics (N=17, 17.34%), social studies (N=16, 16.32%), special education (N=17, 17.34%), science (N=10, 10.2%), foreign language (N=11, 11.22%), early childhood education (N=7, 7.14%), art (N=5, 5.10%), music (N=3, 3.06%), and health and physical education (N=3, 3.06%). Fourteen responses (28%) identified the following content areas: family and consumer services (N=1, 1.02%), life skills (N=1, 1.02%), educational leadership (N=1, 1.02%), educational technology (N=1, 1.02%), credit recovery (N=1, 1.02%), graduation coach (N=1, 1.02%), electives (N=1, 1.02%), and school administration (N=1, 1.02%). Six other teachers reported elementary school subjects (N=4, 4.08%) and reading (N=2, 2.04%). Two of the options provided to participants “gifted” and “speech” did not get selected at all.

The participants for this study were teachers in fully online K-12 schools in the state of Ohio, found on the state Department of Education website. The survey was emailed to all the online schools in Ohio, as many as 126 responses were collected, but only (98) K-12 online teachers were included in the study because (28) of them had not clicked the consent button.

The contact information of potential participating teachers was obtained either from school web pages or coordinated by school officials upon acceptance of the request for access to their teaching staff members. The letter of access covered all the details of the study as well as the information about the IRB process, while ensuring that anonymity of the respondents and their respective institutions were maintained.

A total of 98 (n=98) K-12 online teachers from Ohio participated in this study. The respondents completed an online survey that hosted qualitative research questions, two of which were pertinently based

on the challenges and rewards that online teachers faced by these teachers.

**Data Analysis & Coding**

For qualitative analysis purposes, data were gathered through two open-ended questions pertinent to the challenges and rewards of teaching online. Appropriate analysis methodology involved making sense of data as they come in, thus allowing for interpretation to be a process of organization, reduction, consolidation, comparison, and reconfiguration. A content analysis strategy was used to interpret the data as patterns emerged after reading and re-reading the responses carefully, leading to labeling and categorization of codes by using interactive methods. When using open-ended questions, respondents answered by using their own words (Bradburn & Sudman, 1988). Rejaet al. (2003) support the use of open-ended questions: “one is to discover the responses that individuals give spontaneously; the other is to avoid the bias that may result from suggesting responses to individuals” (p.159). Bradburn and Sudman (1988) also believe that responses obtained from closed questions are “more relevant and compatible” (p. 147), whereas open-ended questions produce “fuller and deeper responses” (p.147) that is very useful because they allow respondents to explain information that is otherwise simply quantified. The open-ended questions allowed the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding about participants’ perceptions regarding specific competencies, skill sets, and professional development needs. Coding represents the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and then put back together in new ways that the researcher sees the data or wants it represented. Gibbs (2010) defined coding as a way of attaching names or ideas represented by names to pieces of texts in transcripts. Coding is a process of making notations next to the data that may be important, while open coding is the arrangement of data into as many possible coding segments as one thinks may be useful for data analysis. Open coding is a very useful process, as it makes the researcher look expansively at the data and helps one to develop very general assumptions. After the process of coding the data, the codes were re-examined for redundancy and relevance. The researcher went through the process of reviewing the codes in such a way as to eliminate the repetitive codes by either dropping them or combining them. Meanwhile, the process of thinking of the grouping of codes was on-going. Through this process categories were created, as aptly described by Saldana (2013): “As you code or recode, expect or rather strive for your categories to become more refined...there may be some rearrangement and reclassification of coded data into different and even new categories” (p.11).

In data analysis, categories have conceptual power because they are able to pull together groups of concepts. Thinking through the process practically, categorising consists of going through all concepts and asking questions, such as ‘What is this concept about?’ or ‘Is this concept similar or different from the one before or after?’ Merriam (2009) refers to this initial process as thinking “as if you are having a conversation with the data” (p.178). This process tries to make sense of the raw data by making little notes and queries in the margin. Categories are discovered when concepts are compared against one another, and concepts become characteristic components of a category if they relate to each other within that category – otherwise known as subcategories. If a concept seems not to pertain to an already identified category, it should be left aside and it may potentially become the entry

to a new category as data analysis continues. As discussed in Merriam (2009), the categories should be exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, conceptually congruent, and responsive to the purpose of the study.

After the process of coding the data, the codes were re-examined for redundancy and relevance. The final analysis was “reached by differentiating and combining data retrieved based upon the reflections one makes about the information collected” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.56). The themes thus generated gave an in-depth understanding of the competencies and skill sets associated with online teaching as well as the professional development needs and design.

**Findings**

This type of qualitative data helped in developing an in-depth understanding about participants’ perceptions regarding the challenges and rewards of teaching online, from which to form recommendations for future research, and practice. The first open-ended question pertaining to teacher preparation and professional development generated the following results:

Q 1. Based on your professional experience what are the challenges of teaching on online?

Table 1 (a): Coded Responses for (a) Challenges

Codes	Examples	Responses	Percentage
Teacher-student communication	Lack of communication (by phone, text, emails etc.).	27	37%
Student Engagement	To stay engaged, personal engagement	14	19.17%
Motivation	Lack of motivation	9	12.33%
Administrative Issues	Lack of communication about issues related to training, PD	8	11%
Family Issues	Choice & Priority	6	8.28%
Attendance	Students don’t sign-in	5	6.84%
Tech glitches	Technical issues	4	5.48%

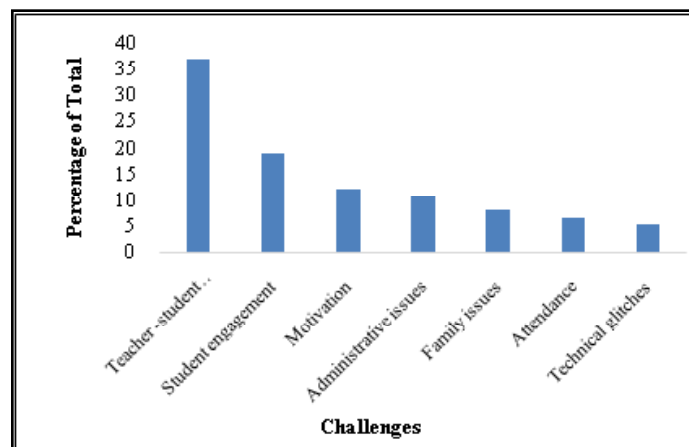


Fig. 31 (a): Challenges of Teaching Online.

A total of 73 responses were gathered for Question 1. The most cited challenge for teaching in an online setting was teacher-

student communication (27, 37%). As one teacher responded, “The biggest challenge is communication” (M-10).

Student engagement (14, 19.17%) followed and was described as, “The biggest challenge faced by online teachers is getting students to buy-in and then stay engaged” (M-16).

Challenges: “...not having face-to-face contact. Aspects of intonation and emotion are not incorporated when interacting with the students. Sometimes students do not communicate effectively, which can compound learning difficulties and incomprehension” (M-9)

The other responses cited were motivation (9, 12.33%) as reported: “Challenges - getting students motivated to log into the class and do the work without googling all the answers” (M-13). This was followed by administrative issues(8,11%), attendance(5, 6.84%), technology glitches(4, 5.48%), and family issues (6, 8.28%). As one teacher wrote:

There are many challenges to online teaching. One of the greatest is the lack of priority that most families who choose online education for their children. While there are a few families who truly understand the expectations and hold their children accountable, most do not. Unfortunately I feel that there needs to be major legislative overhaul in this area. While choice is good, when parents are choosing something that is not appropriate for their children the children suffer. (M-34)

Q.2. Based on your professional experience what are the rewards of teaching on online?

Table 2 (b): Coded Responses for (b) Rewards

Codes	Examples	Responses	Percentage
Student success in non-traditional setting.	Graduation, success with assignment completion, helping at-risk students succeed, meeting needs of non-traditional students, students take responsibility of their learning, education completion. Turning earlier failures into success.	37	51%
Flexibility	Timing/ schedule, teaching one on one, faith.	19	26.03%
Teacher empowerment, confidence	Seeing students grow and prosper.	14	19.17%
Reaching out to student in different geographical locations	In different geographical locations.	6	8.28%

Note. Totals do not add up to a 100% due to multiple responses.



Fig. 2. (b) : Rewards of Teaching Online.

A total of 73 responses were gathered for Question 2. The most cited reward for teaching in an online setting was student success in non-traditional settings (37, 51%). One teacher expressed this as:

Rewards are those who do take this serious are able to get their education and graduate and make something of their lives, those are the students who have bought in to the system and will be rewarded for their hard work, allows them to get an education in a nontraditional way where they would have struggled or failed at (M-02).

Yet another wrote:

The rewards of teaching online are centered around helping at risk students learn and succeed. Often, the students in an online situation have struggled in traditional school, and are at risk of dropping out. Providing students with a safe environment in which to grow and develop is a reward that I feel affects future generations (M-19).

The other responses cited were teacher satisfaction (14, 19.17%), which was described as, “Rewards - seeing them prosper and grow to love the topic of the course!” (M-66), followed by flexibility (19, 26.03%). One teacher described flexibility as, “The autonomy and the ability to make my own schedule” (M-58). Reaching out students in different geographic locations (6, 8.28%) was also cited: “One reward would be meeting students from all over the country and the world” (M-59).

### Discussion

Research points to the presence of different challenges manifested in the online teaching environment, some of which are time, content, communication issues, student motivation, and professional development issues (Archaambault,2010; Roy, 2015; Lowes, 2005; Rice & Dawley, 2007). The most challenging aspect reported by online teachers (Roy, 2015) is the communication with students and consequently student engagement and motivation. The online teachers do not meet their students face-to-face to observe them, talk to them and interact with them on a daily basis, as traditional teachers do. In their study, McIssac, Blocher, Mahes, and Vrasidas (1999) identified interaction as the most important learning activity in a distance learning environment. The framework used was Moore’s (1989), which is based on three interaction types: learner-instructor interaction, learner-learner interaction, and learner-content interaction. A fourth interaction, the learner-interface interaction, was later added (Hillman et al., 1994).



The online environment lacks real-time, audio-visual cues and therefore depends heavily upon text-based communication and interaction. This deficiency can be dealt with by instructors by creating learning communities and promoting social presence through interaction. A study by McIssacet al. (1999) outlined some suggestions for online instructors: provide immediate feedback, participate in discussions, promote interaction and social presence, and use collaborative learning strategies through computer-mediated communication (CMC). Applying these strategies would foster the above mentioned interactions, thereby creating a dynamic learning space.

In addition to being technologically competent and fostering interactions, Conceicao (2006) indicated that a successful online instructor is also an instructional designer, facilitator, catalyst, and learner. The role of the instructor at the beginning of the course is that of an instructional designer. This role is very important in terms of online education, as it is here that the instructor has to keep in mind many modalities in terms of curriculum content, delivery strategies, teaching methods, and teacher-student and student-student communication and interaction. Teaching online effectively requires understanding the opportunities and limitations of the virtual environment. Instead of being 'a sage on the stage', online instructors have to understand that they are 'a guide on the side' (Grow, 1996; Palmer, 1998). To be able to apply this concept, the teacher must first know how to construct an online teaching environment that directs students from a less controlling position, opposite of the role necessary in a crowded, traditional, face-to-face classroom. Conceicao (2006) further stated that "successful online teaching depends on design and facilitation of instruction through the use of effective teaching strategies, including some strategies that are appropriate for any teaching learning environment and some are particularly critical for online environment" (p.8). In her later work, Conceicao (2007) also asserted that the designer of the online course "needs to re-think the learner role, the teacher role and the design of instruction in this new environment" (p.5). Therefore, face-to-face teaching skills are not immediately transferable in an online context, and teachers need to be aware of this dynamic of online teaching.

In their qualitative study, Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter (2001) delineated three roles for online instructors: a) the cognitive role, related to mental processes of learning, information storage, and thinking; b) the affective role, related to relationships building among students, instructors, and consequently the classroom environments; and c) the managerial role, related to class and course management.

Their analysis revealed the specific faculty roles related to cognitive, affective and managerial activities. For example, the managerial role required greater attention to detail, more structure, and additional student monitoring in online teaching. After the online teacher had been able to engage students, this role ceded prominence to the cognitive role. Coppola et al. (2001) stated that the cognitive role, "which relates to mental processes of learning, information storage, and thinking" (p. 9), became more complex as learning for an instructor developed into a two-way process: a learning that engaged instructors in a deeper level of mental processing both in terms of editing the questions posed to the students and editing the responses from the students. While reading a student's questions, an instructor had time to think rather than seeking an immediacy of response, which is sought in a face-to-face setting. This also gave time to the instructor to guide students to other relevant sources, which they may read and subsequently

respond to. Both the instructor and students then thought, reasoned, and critically analyzed the content at hand.

The instructors found that the affective role manifested itself differently in the online setting, due to the lack of facial expressions, eye-contact, voice qualities and body movement. The instructors always felt a barrier associated with not being able to get through to quite an extent with their students in an online setting which consequently impeded communication. The affective role found entirely new modes of expression in spite of lack of non-verbal expressions in terms of intimacy created with a sense of connectedness in a virtual classroom. However, Coppola et al. (2001) noted that many teachers reported achieving greater sense of intimacy and connectedness with their students, especially when exchanging ideas and information in a virtual classroom. Students opened up with the teacher in a virtual classroom format because they were interacting with the teacher on an individual level rather than sharing space with other students. This gave both the teacher and the student a safe space to open up, creating greater connectedness. Some faculty also noted that there was more formality in the online class, due to the lack of face-to-face interactions that are a basis of the relational aspect of teacher-student interactions. These teacher-student interactions will pave the way for better engagement with the content in the online learning environment.

The response from this study's question on rewards also adds to the understanding of what matters the most to online teachers: to help students succeed in non-traditional settings. As one teacher responded, the online setting was "a way to reach at risk students and for everyone to work at their own pace" (M-33). Another teacher explained that "Providing students with a safe environment in which to grow and develop is a reward that I feel affects future generations" (M-19). Most of the reported rewards were related to student needs (78%) in terms of meeting students' needs, and only 26% teachers stated that they enjoyed the flexibility the online environment afforded. Another rewarding feature that the teachers reported was that the online environment gives them the opportunity of reaching out beyond geographical boundaries (8.25%). As one teacher responded, "One reward would be meeting students from all over the country and the world" (N-59). Another rewarding aspect of teaching that teachers reported was an increase in teacher confidence and empowerment in terms of teacher growth (19.17%), after meeting the aforementioned challenges.

Additionally, the combination of these roles and teacher qualities that help in the fulfillment of these roles gives the online instructor a new online persona, which may be different from the one typically developed in traditional classrooms. Most of the instructors reported that the teaching persona was still at the transitional stage. An understanding of the shift in teacher roles would help the teacher in transitioning from the traditional teaching mindset (persona) to the virtual mindset (persona). The challenges faced by teachers teaching in an environment in an online learning may result in teachers not being able to meet student needs as expected from them in terms of student expectations.

A lack of this kind may not serve the purpose of online learning as this platform serves a student population that has specific needs. The challenges of teaching online as reported by the teachers could be mitigated in professional development sessions wherein specific areas of need are identified and then addressed. The teacher qualities that the teachers reported helped in online settings were: relationship building to motivate students (communication with students and family, positive feedback, understanding students' needs, finding

the key that motivates students, patience, welcoming, flexibility, ever present in a student's life), understanding the uniqueness of the online environment, time-management, understanding diverse cultures and socio-economic status, patience, and organizational skills (Roy, 2015). The ongoing professional development sessions, mentorships, and the initiative of the teacher to be a self-directed learner will help online teachers face the challenges of teaching online, as well as experiencing the rewards of this unique setting.

### Recommendations : Online teacher as a bridge

All these teacher qualities can be addressed in professional development sessions for online teachers, wherein the teachers understand the foundational aspects of online learning and the competencies attached therein. This emerging theme 'teacher qualities', and the listed qualities can help the online teachers to act as a 'bridge' for online students. The other adjectives used in the literature for an online teacher are facilitator, instructional designer, process facilitator, advisor, catalyst, e-moderator, etc. (Conceicao, 2006; Goodyear et al., 2001; Salmon, 2002). However, the word 'bridge' is used in this paper to introduce the concept that defines the distance between students and teachers as well as among content, students, and teachers, which is due to the unique characteristics of online environments. Whereas in person, the teacher is often the main conduit of knowledge and content, the online classroom allows students the choice to access content without the teacher's involvement, if they so choose. Therefore, it becomes pertinent that the online teacher effectively creates a social presence, and serves as a bridge between the different interactions that the online environment affords, helping to navigate the distance and making student-content, student-student, and student-teacher and student-interface interactions function smoothly. The bridge metaphor is useful because an online teacher is a "connector" of students, resources, and the "connector" in terms of other gaps that are a part of this unique learning experience (technological challenges and barriers, administrative issues, parents, community and other spaces). This distance can only be navigated when the online teachers are equipped with foundational training focused architecture of virtual learning settings in which they can serve as a bridge to:

- Connect content, students, and instructional environments. As one respondent demonstrates, "The learning environment is another important consideration. We've learned that most students do better when there is someone who is immediately available to offer help with concepts. Many high school students are not proactive with their education so they need constant mentoring, support and guidance. The technology portion of the job seemed to be relatively easy to learn. Learning how to adapt the online lesson into a truly supportive in class-lesson is a little tricky" (N-44).
- Bring together students, parents, and online institutions to track student progress. One other respondent highlights this: "The most important recommendation I have for an online teacher preparation is to communicate with students and family in regards to progress and grades" (N-26)
- Fill the gap between teacher and student in an online setting when the latter is disengaged due to lack of face-to-face interactions. As one participant emphasizes, "COMUNICATION at all costs. We do not physically see all of our students, therefore, we need to be in constant contact with our students. Appropriate feedback is essential as well"

(N-49).

- Understand and connect the diverse student body. One participant explains this: "Our school is across the state of Ohio. In one classroom, I have students from all areas (Urban Rural, Suburban) and socioeconomic (poverty-riches) and multiple religions (Muslim, Jehovah Witnesses, Christianity, Catholic, etc). I can see it being important to understand all cultures and environments" (N-39).
- Serve as a motivational connection between online teachers and students, leading to relationship building and consequently increased student engagement. One respondent expresses this as, "Be patient and positive. Too many on-line students are here as a last resort and are often planning on dropping out. Positive interactions and encouragement can lead to little successes and before they know it, the students are zipping through material that they would have believed to be beyond their capabilities" (N-60).

### Conclusion

Online teaching is a relatively new field for which research is still at its nascent stage. Consequently, there is a need to study the challenges and the rewards the teachers face in this field. Such lines of inquiry dealing with the effectiveness of online teachers would inform institutions that have adopted online learning about pre-requisite competencies and skill sets. There is ample research on best practices in online learning in the field of higher education, much of which can be applied to K-12 teachers. However, the demands of teaching at the K-12 level are different enough to warrant more research into this specific area. The challenges faced by online teachers would provide an insight into designing professional development programs for online teachers, whereas the rewards may serve as ongoing resource for better professional practices.

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