



John Baumann currently teaches courses in the folklore department at the University of Oregon, Eugene, and teaches online courses as part of the master of science in environmental studies program for Green Mountain College in Poultney, Vermont. Baumann taught full-time at Warren Wilson College near Asheville, North Carolina, before taking a tenure-track dual appointment position in religious studies and environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. He left the University of Wisconsin in 2007 to move his family back home to Eugene, Oregon. His major field of research is religion and ecology, with an emphasis on contemporary Native American cultural, political, and environmental issues. He has published numerous articles and was until recently an active member of the American Academy of Religion both nationally and regionally.

Considering the Value of Online Education

Two years ago I taught my first online class. It was designed to boost the offerings of the department in which I was teaching at the University of Oregon and to create more cash flow, though the official reasons included allowing out-of-state students and busy student-athletes the opportunity to take the course. These latter reasons were not true for the vast majority of the enrolled students. Most were freshman or sophomores who were on campus taking other classes. A few of the forty or so students were overseas, but they were the exception. Entering the course, I was nervous and excited, not unlike my students. What role was I supposed to take in terms of guiding discussions? How could I get them involved? Did I need to arrange proctored tests or just allow open book approaches? How does this Blackboard thing work anyhow?

I've been teaching since 1997, when I was looking for ways to reduce my master's program tuition. I taught regularly throughout my PhD program and got a teaching job directly after graduation. I taught for seven years at two different colleges, then left full-time academia to move closer to family and friends and raise my son in the place that felt more like home than anywhere I'd been — Eugene, Oregon. I had followed the growing interest in online education with fascination and trepidation, wondering if the rumors of the demise of formalized traditional classroom education had any merit, yet seeing the promise in new models that included high-tech long-distance classrooms and computer-based distance learning. Mainstream media articles simultaneously trumpeted the accessibility advantage of online courses (especially for nontraditional students trying to adapt to an increasingly challenging economic environment) while decrying the possible corrosive effects on higher education as a whole — with online courses often considered less rigorous than their physical classroom counterparts. The promise

of bringing high-quality education to locations without traditional college or university access, with courses tailored to one's interests, is tempered by the public's perception of online education as inescapably less "real" than classroom-based courses. My family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances are almost uniform in their responses to my admission that I teach online courses, beginning with raised eyebrows and a questioning of the value of such an approach, and ending with a hope that my efforts will lead to more "real" teaching jobs.

Distance education is divisive. I have two friends who teach at a local community college who strongly disparage distance education whenever the topic comes up, even though they know I'm part of it. They see online courses as a cost-cutting measure by the college, as a threat to their employment, and as a "dumbing down" of traditional education. They feel it is for students who want an easy workload and for teachers who aren't good enough to be in a traditional classroom. As a seasoned classroom teacher who is very comfortable in a live setting, I consider online teaching to be more of a challenge.

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