

Four Platforms For Teaching Online Discussed: NOVA Southeastern University, University Of Maryland University College, Strayer University, And The University Of Phoenix

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Abstract

Teaching online is a growing phenomenon with challenges and differences that need to be discussed. This paper addresses selected challenges and differences. The paper is based on selected literature and the authors' experience and expertise in teaching online. The four platforms compared are those used by the University of Phoenix, the University of Maryland University College, Strayer University, and NOVA Southeastern University. Comparing the programs revealed definite differences. Areas compared include the following: application process, interview process, technology training, mentoring, course length, class size, teaching location, teaching styles, exam process, team teaching and learning, syllabi, and other issues.

Teaching via the Internet (online) is a growing phenomenon. Cook (2000) states that “[d]istance education ... is growing exponentially, and, at times, the decision to offer a course at a distance is made with little, if any, instructional input” (para. 7). Vrasidas & McIsaac (1999) stated that “[o]nline education has captured the interest of educators at all levels. Teachers are being asked to adapt their courses for Internet delivery, while students are being promised more flexible learning formats. As a result, both teachers and learners are questioning how they can benefit from education delivered online” (p. 22). Grenier and Metes (1995) state that “...higher education – academia – should take heed of the virtual phenomenon. The unprecedented needs for continuous, specialized learning can provide ... opportunity to take on a new and exciting role: that of the ‘learning stakeholder’ in virtual operations ... [and] move beyond dependence on curriculum and faculty and to deliver the capability for virtual workers to easily access the competencies that can add value to a continuous learning situation” (p. xii). This paper addresses the issue of how the process of teaching accounting online exists in the 21st century. Teaching online has various cultures just as teaching face-to-face reflects cultures of different universities. Beamers and Varner (2001) contend that “[w]hen you understand a cultures’ priorities lie along the dimensions of value, you can begin to make informed guesses about what messages mean” (p. 127). This paper provides a comparative outline of four online programs to further an understanding of their dimensions of value. The University of Phoenix (UOP), NOVA Southeastern University (NOVA), Strayer University (SU), and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) are compared regarding online education. This report is based on the authors’ experience and expertise plus selected literature. Areas of difference are reported.

Readers with comments or questions are encouraged to contact the authors via email.

The paper is organized in the following order: application process, interview process, teacher training, mentoring, course length, class size, teaching location, course components, traditional and computer-enhanced classroom, and an assortment of other issues.

Application Process

Other than SU, the universities follow Salmon’s (2000) approach and select faculty “...on the basis of their suitability rather than their geographic location” (p. 41). Salmon (2000) summarizes the teacher’s competencies as follows: confident, constructive, developmental, facilitating, knowledge sharing, and creative (p. 40). In searching for faculty with these and other competencies, the four universities use the Chronicle of Higher Education to advertise. Advertisements appear in the Higher Education Jobs web page (www.higheredjobs.com). Each of the four universities has a web page as follows: www.umuc.edu, www.nova.edu, www.strayer.edu, and www.phoenix.edu. The UMUC and NOVA web sites appear to regularly update employment opportunities. Job descriptions and the application process are detailed. The SU web page has limited information about opportunities for faculty employment. SU faculties, typically, teach at the online campus (located in Virginia) and must live within driving distance. The UOP has an online application process. Details regarding the UOP process are discussed next, followed by brief comments about the other three universities.

UOP

The application process typically begins with a letter from an individual expressing interest in becoming an online instructor. A recruiter is assigned to assist the applicant through the application process. The applicant is asked to forward a resume and a telephone interview is arranged. The recruiter explains the UOP online program in further detail and gains a better understanding of the applicant's interest in online teaching. The applicant is then invited to download an application package consisting of an application form, official transcript authorizations, reference letter requests, and course approval templates. A course approval template is required for each course the applicant plans to teach. The template describes a specific course and lists the applicant's academic and professional background that qualifies the person to teach that course. It is recommended that from five to eight course approval templates be submitted with the application packet.

After receipt of all required forms and supporting documents, the applicant is given a CD and instructions for configuring the applicant's computer for online communication with UOP. As UOP uses Microsoft Outlook Express for its online classroom environment, applicants are required to complete a brief tutorial along with a proficiency test before proceeding to the online training component.

NOVA, SU, UMUC

A letter of application can be e-mailed or sent via regular mail. The transcripts, letters of recommendation, and any other required documentation are typically accepted via regular mail. However, e-mailed letters of recommendation are sometimes accepted. Table One summarizes whether the university uses online or e-mail for initial application submissions.

Table One
Application Process Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Online	Yes	No	No	Yes
E-mail	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Once the application and documents have been received and reviewed, an interview is scheduled as is discussed next.

Interview Process

Traditional programs rarely (if ever) hire faculty (part-time or full-time) without actually meeting the person face-to-face. The UOP and NOVA do not required face-to-face interviews. The interview is completed via telephone. The UMUC uses both models, while SU requires a face-to-face interview. The UMUC hires some faculty who do not live in the geographic area, while SU faculty must live within driving distance to the online campus. Table Two compares the interviewing process for the four universities.

Table Two
Interview Process Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Telephone	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Face-to-Face	No	Yes	Yes	No

Once the interview is completed and the faculty person has accepted employment, the need for and process of training faculty to teach online is initiated as is discussed next.

Technology Training Process Compared

Instructors are hired with the documented ability to teach the subject matter. The training addresses the technical aspects of the online teaching platform. NOVA Southeastern requires no formal pre-requisite faculty training for online teaching. The platform is proprietary and user friendly. Table Three compares the training process used by the four universities.

Table Three
Technical Training Process Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Class	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Test & Certificate	No	Yes	Yes	No

SU requires online faculty to teach on campus. Training occurs before teaching begins and throughout the teaching experience. The initial training takes between two and four hours. Since teaching actually occurs at the online campus, the faculty has access to technical experts throughout the synchronous teaching. SU uses Blackboard and Horizon Live in combination for the teaching platform.

The UMUC requires completion of a five-week training course. The course requires an average of ten hours per week with two face-to-face sessions (assuming the person is in the geographic area). Upon successful completion of the training and one online course, the faculty person receives compensation for completing the training. WebTycho is the platform used.

After completing the UOP application requirements and passing the online proficiency test, applicants become faculty candidates and begin four weeks of online training. Approximately twelve faculty candidates are assigned to a training class along with a facilitator. The online training exercise has two two-week phases. The first phase consists of completing individual and group tasks assigned by the facili-

tator. Most communication is accomplished through a main newsgroup. Notes posted to the main newsgroup are visible to all participants. This type of newsgroup is similar to a chat room. The facilitator typically starts a discussion by posing a question in the main newsgroup. Candidates respond and discussion ensues. For group projects, candidates are divided into small groups, given an assignment, and communicate through a separate newsgroup restricted for their use. The purpose of these exercises is to give the faculty candidate a simulation of the online-student experience. During the second two-week phase of the faculty training, faculty candidates observe an online class. The faculty candidate facilitator gives the candidates specific observation assignments to cover certain aspects of the course. Faculty candidates discuss their observations in the main newsgroup. After four weeks of training, the facilitator evaluates the faculty candidates. After successfully completing the training exercise, faculty candidates move to the mentorship-training component. Mentoring is discussed in the next section of the paper.

Mentoring Compared

During this phase of training, the UOP faculty candidate teaches an online class with the assistance of a mentor. The mentor acts as a resource for the faculty candidate. The mentor has online experience and can offer practical advice about problems encountered during the course. The syllabus, lectures, and one-to-one correspondence with students are sent to the mentor for review. The mentor provides feedback on specific assignments, and posts a weekly mentor-feedback form for the benefit of the faculty candidate. At the end of the course, the mentor submits a final evaluation, and the faculty candidate submits a “mentee”-feedback form. The following table compares mentoring at the four universities.

Table Four
Mentoring Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Mentor	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Evaluation by Mentor	No	No	No	Yes

The UMUC assigns a manager to each set of sections of a course rather than to an individual. An individual teaching two different courses and would have two managers. The manager serves more as administrative support for the students than for the teacher (other than relieving the teacher of knowing administrative details). The manager reviews the classroom to determine whether the teacher is following UMUC policies and practices. If there is doubt, then the manager e-mails a statement of concern or advice to the teacher. This is especially helpful for new teachers.

SU has no formal supervision of instructors. However, policies and practices are available. At the beginning of each term, a meeting between the Dean and the faculty is held to review policies and practices. Mentors are assigned as a first point of contact when teachers have questions.

NOVA does not assign mentors or have meetings. The administrator reviews classrooms and provides feedback on an informal basis.

The mentoring (or lack there of) occurs over the length of the course, which is presented next.

Course Length Compared

Table Five summarizes the basic course lengths, which are as short as six weeks to as long as 14 weeks. The 14-week courses mirror the typical practice at most traditional programs. Concern surrounds the idea of the six-week classes covering the same content as the 14-week courses. Covering 14 weeks of content in 12 or 10 weeks seems to be handled by students and teachers alike. Everyone seems to “bite the

bullet” or “tighten the belt” or “hang on for the ride”. The six-week courses that cover the traditional 14 weeks of content go beyond clichés. The details of the learning and teaching challenges are beyond the scope of this report. The demand exists for the course and they are delivered.

Table Five
Course Length Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Six weeks	Yes	No	No	Yes
10 weeks	Yes	Yes	No	No
12 weeks	No	No	Yes	No
14 weeks	No	No	Yes	No

However, class size does reflect a partial response to the class length. Class size is discussed next.

Class Size

Class size seems correlated to course length. The six-week courses are typically restricted to 10 or fewer students. For UOP, the students have both the teacher and the teacher’s mentor for support through the six-week courses.

Table Six
Typical Class Size Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
10 or less	Yes	No	No	Yes
25-30	No	Yes	Yes	No

Few or many students, the students attend to class requirements from anywhere. The next section of this report addresses where the teachers are located while teaching.

Teaching Location

For UOP and UMUC and NOVA, the teachers attend to class requirements from anywhere. However, SU teachers are restricted geographically. SU teachers must come to the online campus that is located in Virginia. Until recently, the software and technical support demands exceeded the typical teacher’s capabilities. SU online courses are synchronous with real-time lectures and interaction between faculty and students. Each teacher is in a cubicle with a headset and computer. The teacher lectures to and interacts with students. The other three platforms are asynchronous. The teachers teach any time from any where as summarized in Table Seven below.

Table Seven
Teaching Location Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Campus	No	Yes	No	No
Any where	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Location of the teaching can affect the teaching style as is discussed next.

Teaching Styles

As mentioned in the previous section, SU is the only platform that offers online synchronous classes. While the three asynchronous platforms do not seem to have plans for synchronous courses, SU is rapidly moving into the asynchronous arena. Demand for SU courses is outstripping the capability of the existing hardware and software. Teachers are being trained to teach synchronously using their own hardware and SU provided software. However, teachers must be able to drive to the online campus in Virginia if they encounter any difficulty offering a course on a particular day at a particular time.

**Table Eight
Teaching Styles Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)**

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Synchronous Class	No	Yes	No	No
Synchronous Chat	Yes	No	No	No
Bulletin Board	Yes	No	No	No
Conferences like Bulletin Board	No	No	Yes	No

While none of the other platforms are synchronous, NOVA does require a minimum of three synchronous class chats with the teacher and all of the students present. SU synchronous sessions include auditory capability with the teacher talking and the students listening. The students can type questions, comments, or other responses as appropriate. The NOVA chats are strictly typing on the part of the teacher and students. The synchronous chat times are typically decided upon after the courses begins with the hope of finding mutually convenient times to suit everyone.

Chat sessions can be archived in the classroom bulletin board. Use of the bulletin board is required by NOVA and optional for the other three platforms. UMUC does not require use of a class bulletin board, but conferences are required. They are similar to bulletin board experiences. In the conference area, UMUC teacher are encouraged to post summaries and/or lecture-type material reflecting the teacher’s perspective. These postings can be typed or voice (using PureVoice software). The voice messages need to five or fewer minutes in duration due to the limits of the students hardware and software.

In this teaching style section, whether the teacher controls textbook selection is discussed briefly. In most traditional programs, part-time teachers do not control or participate in the textbook selection. The same is true for these four online programs.

Except for SU, the faculty must follow a prescribed syllabus. SU gives the part-time faculty considerable flexibility regarding the syllabus. Additional discussion of UOP practices is presented next.

UOP: The Course

Most courses cover a six-week time period. Instructors are contracted electronically as to their availability and willingness to teach a particular course. Upon acceptance by the faculty, textbooks and other supplementary materials are shipped directly to the instructor approximately two weeks prior to the start of the course. The instructor downloads a course module. The module is a detailed outline of the course and includes the following:

1. Course Description.

2. Course Objectives.
3. Weekly reading, question, exercise, and problem assignments.
4. Discussion Questions.
5. Grading Scheme.
6. Group Case and Weekly Group Assignments.
7. Faculty Notes and Suggestions.
8. Final Exam.

Students also download the course module. The student version does not include the faculty notes or the final exam.

The instructor prepares a syllabus from the course module. As a practical matter, the instructor starts with the course module, personalizes it, makes some minor content modifications, adjusts the grading scale, and establishes assignment due dates.

Next, weekly lectures are prepared. These documents contain the instructor's explanation of the week's course material along with sample exercises, personal experience notes, suggestions and tips for assignments, and a daily assignment schedule for the week. These lectures resemble the lectures given in a conventional classroom. Weekly lectures are posted to a course materials newsgroup on the day prior to the start of each week.

At the beginning of each week, the instructor will post to the main newsgroup a series of discussion questions concerning the course material covered that week. The instructor facilitates the discussion with comments reinforcing critical points or posing additional questions to move the discussion to a higher level. At the end of each week, students submit a two or three page summary of what was learned during the week.

The class is divided into small groups of three to four students for group assignments. The group assignment is usually a large case that requires the group to analyze portions of the case each week. The final group project is a paper that incorporates the weekly group assignments.

During the sixth and final week, a final exam is due along with the final group paper. Table Nine summarizes the midterm and final exam process for the four platforms. SU is the only program that requires a proctored final exam. The logistics of this practice are complicated. Fortunately, SU administrators manage the process. Students who are beyond driving distance to one of SU's many traditional campus (all located in the Greater Washington DC, Virginia, and Maryland area) must find a proctor who is acceptable to SU.

Table Nine
Exam Process Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Midterm proctored	No	No	No	No
Final proctored	No	Yes	No	No

Having the final exam proctored is an attempt to assure that the result is individual and not the product of a team effort. Team usage for teaching and learning is presented next.

Robbins and Finley (2000) state that the "Internet is the greatest team tool the world has ever seen" (p. 243). Teams are, at least, an option for three of the programs as related to students. Team teaching is only practiced at UMUC.

Table Ten
Team Usage Compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Team Teaching	No	No	Yes	No
Student Teams	No	Option	Yes	Yes

Senge (1990) states that computers "... are becoming a new type of 'practice field' for management teams, places where teams will learn how to learn together while engaging in their most important business issues ... [a]nd they will accomplish this by helping us rediscover the power of learning through play" (p. 315).

Putnam (2001) states that "... information technologies are changing our modes of working [learning], altering the structures ... blurring the lines traditionally set by time zones, national borders, and ... [t]hey're enabling us to work from remote locations while we stay in touch, electronically..." (p. 54). UMUC and UOP require students to work in teams. Students often try to impose the practices of team management used in traditional programs to the online experience. This frustrates the students who are in dramatically different time zones. The traditional approach includes synchronous meetings. Once the online students get comfortable with asynchronous meetings, the team process becomes more effective. It is debatable whether the process is more efficient.

Use of teams seems to be a current priority in the professional world. Use of teams for teaching and learning in the online environment seems to reflect similar priorities. Other issues that warrant future research and discussion include those summarized in Table Eleven, which appears next.

Table Eleven
Other Issues to be compared
NOVA Southeastern (NOVA), Strayer University (SU),
University of Maryland University College (UMUC), And The University of Phoenix (UOP)

	Nova	Su	Umuc	Uop
Curriculum controlled by teacher	No	Yes	No	No
Grade distribution evaluated relative whether teach is re-hired	No	No	Yes	No
Voice e-mail	No	No	Yes	No
Pay	Per student	Per course	Per course	Per course

Salmon (2000) states that one should "[d]evelop and publish for all to see ... how much ... [teachers] are being paid ... so that there's a reasonable level of expectation about the frequency of online visits" (p. 44). NOVA pays part-time online faculty based on a formula of a per student stipend times the number of students who complete 70 percent of the course. SU and UMUC pay per course. In some programs, UMUC pays an overload stipend when the class size exceeds 30. In addition to future research and discussion items, this report includes the following brief comparison of the online platforms to computer-enhanced traditional classrooms as is presented next.

Computer-Enhanced Traditional Classrooms

Salmon (2000) found that some advocates for the traditional classroom regard "...the lack of non-verbal and visual clues in online interaction ... as an inadequacy that can result in a sense of depersonalization and hence negative feelings" (p. 28). Salmon (2000) also found that "[o]thers consider the lack of face-to-face interactions to be a freedom and prefer that participants are undistracted by pictures of or the accents of participants, or by social games" (p.28). Excellent teaching/learning can occur in either online or traditional classrooms. Both suit the visual learner. The online platform is not as well suited (yet) for the auditory learner (except for SU). Both online and traditional (with and without computer enhancements) serve the needs of both teachers and learners. McDermott (2001) states that online education is "... 'just in time' training, analogous to a 'just in time' inventory system, it facilitates continuous access to the most current data and allows individuals more control over their learning process" (p. 30). Both online and traditional classrooms appear to be viable for years to come. This is a rich area for future research.

Conclusions

Root-Bernstein and Root-Bernstein (1999) state that "[t]he problem with divorcing what and how in education is that knowing about things is not the same as understanding them" (p. 20). While the four platforms reflect philosophical values of their schools, they each meet the needs of teachers and learners. Some specific thoughts from the UOP perspective are presented next.

UOP: Reflections

Completing a typical fifteen-week course in a six-week time period is a difficult assignment, regardless of the method of delivery. The workload is intense and there appears to be little time for reflection.

The students are responding daily to discussion questions, posting homework assignments several times per week, working on group assignments, and posting weekly summaries. The instructor is facilitating the discussion, monitoring the group assignments, grading assignments, and responding to inquiries in the main newsgroup and privately. It is not uncommon for an instructor to receive fifty notes per day requiring some sort of response or action. If not prepared, this load can seem overwhelming.

Because all activities are graded, it is important for the instructor to devise a scheme of communicating and recording grades for each assignment. Labeling correspondence as week 1 participation, week 2 problem assignments, etc. seems to be quite useful in organizing correspondence. Spreadsheet software seems to work quite well in recording individual grades and compiling an overall score.

Most things that happen in a conventional classroom are likely to occur in the electronic classroom. As with any class, participation varies. Some people simply communicate more than others. Some people have the ability to communicate their ideas clearly with few words. Others speak in volumes and have little to say.

The "human" side of the conventional classroom seems to transfer seamlessly to the electronic classroom. The medium is electronic; the players (faculty and students) are human. Personalities will come through, student needs will arise, and faculty encouragement and support is still required.

Senge (1990) wrote that "...computers are making it possible to integrate learning about complex team interactions with learning about complex business interactions ... [as they allow] groups to reflect on, expose, test, and improve the mental models upon which they rely in facing difficult problems" (p. 315). Kerslake (2001) states that "flexibility in work arrangements can empower individuals with the control to integrate and overlap work responsibilities and personal/family responsibilities in time and space, helping staff to achieve a healthy work and personal life balance" (p. 30). Computers and online education enhances the flexibility. Taylor (2001) said "... new technologies present a challenge for instructors and students alike and require a new approach to teaching and learning" (p. 14). 

Summary

Beamer and Varner (2001) state that "...learning about a culture is an ongoing experience" (p. 122) Online education has a culture of its own. This paper reports key cultural components of four different systems along with general comparison to traditional face-to-face classrooms with and/or without technology enhancements. The paper presented more than ten variables compared across four online platforms. Comparisons of the application and training processes are presented along with the interview process. Various other aspects are compared with an overall conclusion that each platform (along with the traditional classroom) meets the needs of certain teachers and students.

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