

Working Hard for a Living: Impressions of K-12 Online Educators

Leanna Archambault
Arizona State University

One of the recent changes to the education landscape has been the addition of online distance education, specifically the proliferation of virtual schools in K–12 settings. These programs allow students to complete entire levels of schooling via the Web. Clark (2001) defined a virtual school as “an educational organization that offers K–12 courses through Internet or Web-based methods” (p. 1). To incorporate this mode of education, various formats have emerged from a variety of sources, including state, local, private, and nonprofit agencies. The extent of online content offered within these types of schools varies. Although certain virtual schools have been created to include curriculum that is entirely online, others have incorporated specific distance education courses that are offered in addition to their traditional classes held in “brick and mortar” buildings (Roblyer & Marshall, 2002–2003). Due to different implementation models, many terms have emerged to describe different types of online distance education within virtual schooling, including “e-learning,” “hybrid courses,” “asynchronous learning,” and “Web- based learning,” adding to the confusion of researching this particular field. However, in a recent report regarding online distance education, Allen and Seaman (2006) developed specific definitions:

- Online: Course where most or all of the content is delivered online. At least 80% of seat time is replaced by online activity.
- Blended/hybrid: Between 30 and 79% of the content is delivered online. Courses blend online and face-to-face delivery.
- Web-facilitated: Between 1 and 29% of the content is delivered online. Course that uses Web-based technology to facilitate a face-to-face course.

Various forms of K-12 online education are growing at a rapid pace. Currently, 42 states have K-12 either supplemental and/or full-time online programs, and with the remaining states in the planning stages to offer online programs in the future (Watson & Ryan, 2007). This raises the question concerning the characteristics of the teachers in this field, the reasons they became involved with online teaching, and their overall experiences.

The purpose of this study was to gather data regarding the K-12 online teachers including how they came to teach in an online environment, the advantages to online teaching, and the challenges and pitfalls that are unique to online teaching. From the findings of this study, university and virtual schools can adapt their professional development programs to best meet the needs of K-12 online educators.

Methods

The population surveyed consisted of teachers throughout the United States who taught or had previously taught at least one online class with K-12 students in a state-sanctioned virtual school. Using Dillman's survey methodology, 1,795 potential respondents were emailed a prenotification of a survey containing the following open-ended questions:

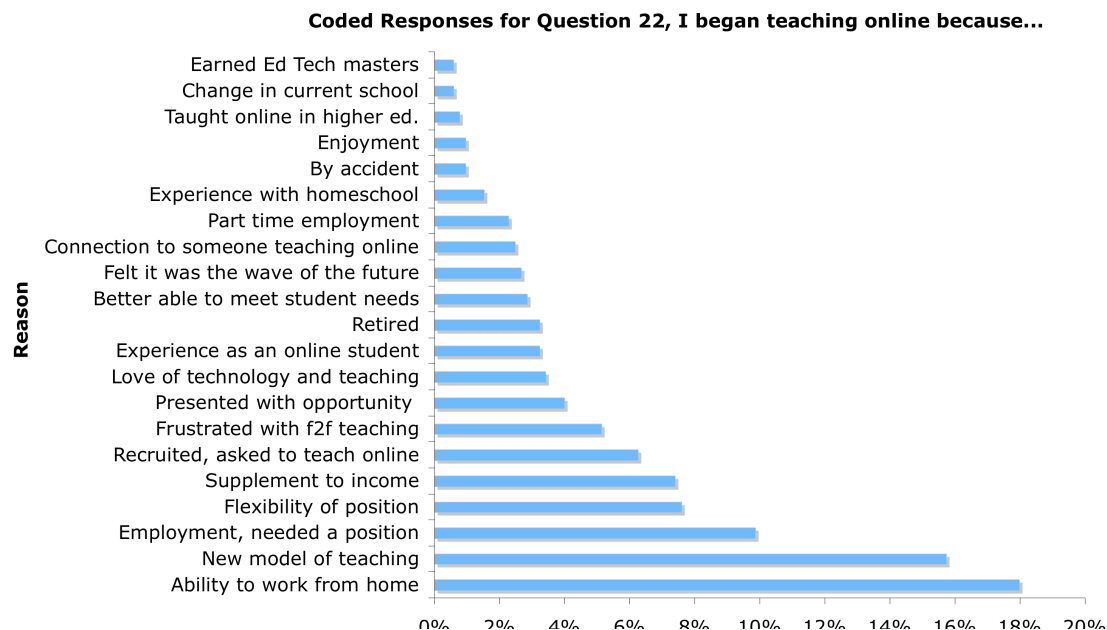
- Describe the career path that led you to teaching online.
- Was this type of teaching always a goal?
- What led you to your current position?
- Describe your overall experience with teaching online K-12 students.

A total of 596 responses from K-12 online teachers were gathered. This represented an overall response rate of 33%. Those responding to the survey represented 25 different states, with the majority of responses came from Pennsylvania (14.4%), Idaho (13.6%), Arizona (10.2%), and Nevada (9.1%).

A content analysis strategy was used to make sense of the resulting data. This included the development of a coding strategy as patterns emerged among the responses. The responses were then coded into manageable categories using an interactive coding method whereby new codes were added as necessary throughout the examination of the text. By reducing the responses to categories consisting of a word, set of words, or phrases, specific patterns became evident.

Results

Respondents were asked to complete an open-ended response regarding how they came to teach in the K-12 online environment. To encourage responses, participants were prompted with the sentence starter, I began teaching online because... to begin their answer. A total of 528 responses were gathered (Figure 1).



The majority of respondents (98, 19%) expressed their desire to teach online because of the ability to work from home due to having small children at home and still wanting to be able to continue to have a career and earn an income. These K-12 online teachers expressed the benefit of being able to teach from their homes, allowing them the freedom to be able to teach from a different location than their students.

Another major reason respondents reported for becoming involved with online teaching was the desire to participate in a new model of education (14%). Teachers in this category felt that this type of teaching was a new and innovative way of instruction that intrigued them. They were seeking a new challenge and a better way to connect with students. Teachers were drawn to the possibilities of online teaching and wanted to experience what online teaching was like. This theme was echoed by a total of 76 (14%) online educators seeking a new, innovative form of teaching.

Employment was a reason cited by 53 (10%) online teachers responding to the survey. Those citing this within their response included teachers who expressed the need for employment, saw the job opening, and applied for it. These teachers expressed difficulty finding a teaching position in a traditional environment, either in general: "jobs were tight," or due to a particular subject area: "Being in a tight field, social studies, I was happy to find a job."

Thirty-nine teachers (7%) cited flexibility as the major factor influencing them to pursue a career in online education. These teachers expressed the desire to not have a set work schedule. Specifically, they cited the ability to decide when and where work occurs.

Another 39 (7%) respondents expressed their desire to earn additional income by taking on an additional job, which is what their online teaching provides. This group of respondents also teaches in a traditional classroom and use their online teaching to supplement their salary. Six percent of teachers came to online education through being recruited by administrators, curriculum developers, or others already working within the field.

Twenty-nine (5%) teachers expressed their frustration with working in traditional school settings and therefore sought out employment within the online environment. This theme included those who were overwhelmed with the demands of traditional teaching including classroom management, administrative duties, not being able to meet individual student needs, a lack of respect, a lack of support, and school politics. Nineteen participants (4%) expressed that the reason they were teaching online was that the opportunity presented itself, and they thought it would be a good experience.

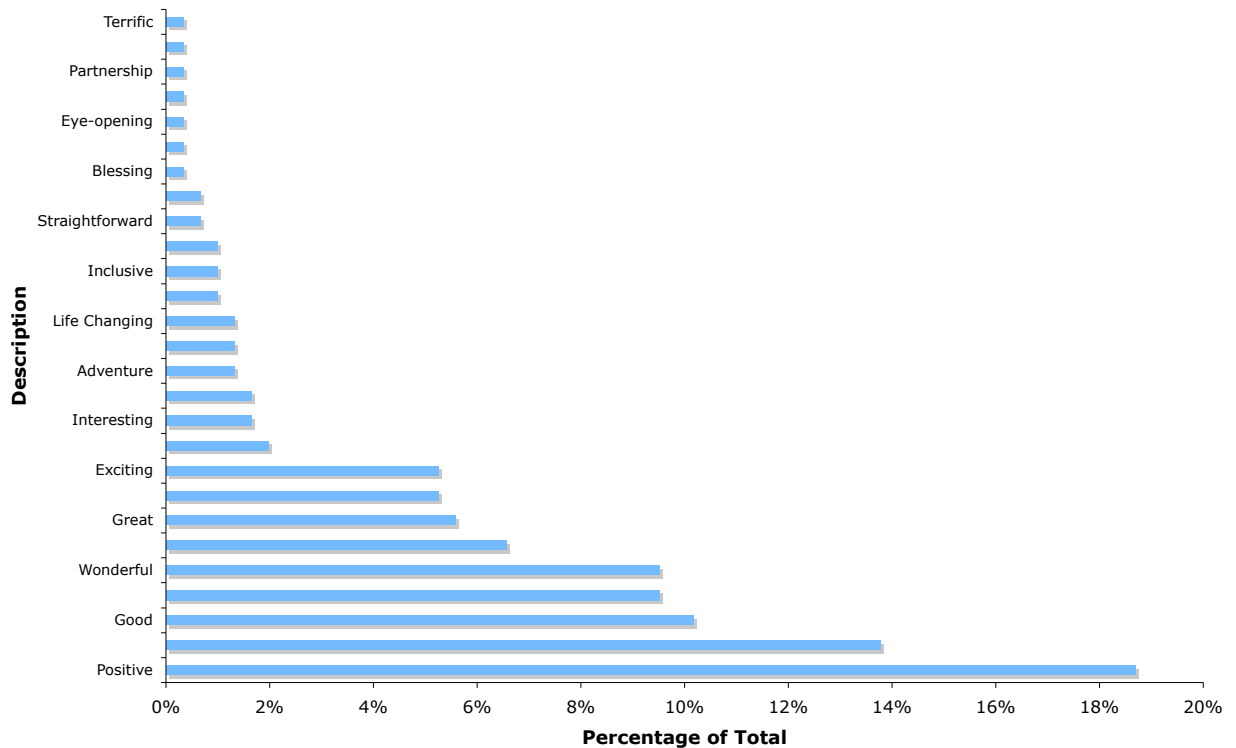
Fewer teachers (2%) reported encouragement from a friend/colleague who was teaching online regarding the benefits of doing so as a major reason in getting them involved with online education. In addition, 2% either started online teaching via a part time position that expanded, or they previously home schooled their own children and became interested in online teaching through that process.

Finally, a small number of teachers expressed a variety of reasons for becoming online educators, including chance circumstance (i.e. personal illness, helping another colleague who then quit, applying for a position and not knowing that it was online), the fact that teaching online sounded like it was fun and would be rewarding, or having taught online in a higher education setting. A handful of teachers reported that their school decided to add online courses, so they had become involved, or they had earned a master's degree in educational technology and wanted to put what they had learned into practice.

K-12 online teachers in this study were also asked about their overall experience with online distance education. Participants were presented with the sentence starter, My experience with online teaching can be described as....from which they could begin their answer. A total of 482 responses were gathered. Overall, 305 (63%) comments were positive toward their online teaching experience, and 38 (8%) were negative. Comments that were characterized as having both positive and negative elements accounting for 139 (29%) responses.

The majority of K-12 online teachers reported having a positive overall experience, sharing a number of benefits including not having to deal with the frustrating aspects of the traditional classroom such as classroom management (Figure 2).

Percentage of Responses to Overall Positive Experience



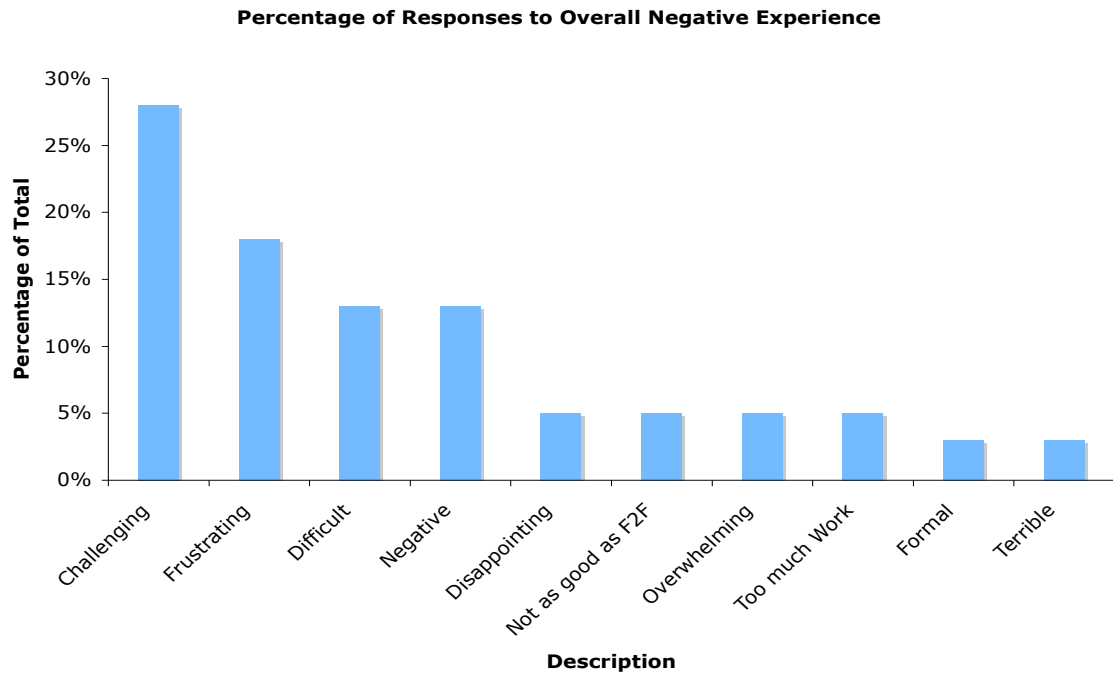
Within the positive category, there were 26 distinctions (59%) with overall impressions such as positive, rewarding, good, enjoyable, wonderful, fulfilling, great, excellent, and exciting. For example, as one teacher described her experience as “wonderful,” citing the ability to work with student individual and actually “teach”:

My experience with online teaching can be described as wonderful! I love teaching online. I am able to work with students on an individual level. I can assist them at the level they need. Also, the organization I work for believes that the student is at the center of all we do. Teacher training is amazing. I now expect so much more of myself and other educators. I wish all teachers could experience a situation like this. We are able to teach! What a great feeling.

Other teachers did not have a favorable experience with online teaching, expressing their frustration with the overwhelming nature of the position. This was described by one individual as disappointing:

My experience with online teaching can be described as disappointing due to lack of support, the number of errors in the curriculum, lack of student discipline to complete assignments at an appropriate time, low pay, difficult programs and lack of technical support, the number of different classes (5) made it difficult to prepare effectively, poor student effort to improve, lack of support from student's schools, no or little parent involvement, lack of application to AP Exams in May.

Other negative categories included challenging, frustrating, difficult, negative, not as good as face-to-face instruction, overwhelming, formal (inflexible), and terrible (Figure 3).



Four categories have elements of both positive and negative characteristics, and this “mixed” distinction accounted for 29% of responses. The four categories included challenging but rewarding (74, 56%,) learning experience or learning curve (42, 30%), mixed (17, 13%), rollercoaster (i.e., ups and downs) (4, 3%), and Similar to face-to-face teaching (2, 1%). Challenging but rewarding was a phrase used by many of the K-12 teachers, expressing both their concern about the position, including their position that it was time consuming, and not suited for all students, as well as the perceived benefits, such as the ability to work one-on-one with students and get to know them and their families better than they would in a traditional classroom. This was exemplified by one teacher’s response:

My experience with online teaching can be described as...challenging and rewarding. I have the opportunity to work with families who have an interest in their child’s education. I have found that to be refreshing. I also work with inner city students without worrying about teaching and living in the inner city. I find working with them to be very rewarding. There are many challenges though. I work harder now than ever before. No two years are ever the same.

Educational Importance

Building a profile of an online teacher from the current study consists of those who are willing and eager to pursue a new and innovative way of teaching that poses a unique set of benefits, especially being able to directly create and adapt content for use with students. This could explain the higher level of education (Archambault & Crippen, 2009), as these individuals seek out challenge and champion the learning process related to education, content-related areas, educational technology, and even distance education. In addition, in searching for a new way to engage, interact, and connect their content with students, this may imply that teachers had reached the pinnacle of their traditional teaching and sought a different challenge that also afforded them more flexibility, along with a greater focus on actual teaching.

This study has important implications for the field of online distance education and its teachers as well as for programs of teacher education who are, knowingly or unknowingly, preparing tomorrow's educators for the online classroom. Because preservice teachers may in fact become online teachers, education programs may want to consider requiring students to experience the nuances of taking an online course in order to expose them to an ever-increasing method of learning. As such, the goal of teacher education programs should be to include course work, field experiences, and assessments that provide a unique background in each of these domains to best prepare teachers to enter online, blended, and traditional educational environments.

Much of the research within K-12 online distance education to date has focused on elements of evaluation and quality, including student characteristics, student achievement, and predictive measures for student success in online environments (Cavanaugh et al., 2004; Rice, 2006; Roblyer & Marshall, 2002-2003). This study described the characteristics of K-12 online educators, including their motivations for becoming involved in the field and their overall experiences. Due to the growth of virtual schooling, the challenge of preparing well-qualified teachers to teach in Web-enhanced, blended, and online environments is of increasing significance. By understanding online teachers' experiences, both positive and negative, teacher education and professional development programs can adapt their content to reflect the necessary course work, field experiences, and assessments that best prepare teachers to enter educational environments of the 21st century.

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