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 Education

Virtual virtuosos

More teachers are learning how to teach online

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Oct. 9, 2010 | [\(1\) Comments](#)

Teaching without being able to see a student's puzzled face or immediately answer a question can be a challenge even for a veteran of the education profession.

And, when that environment is a virtual school, tackling the technological proficiency requirements can be a hurdle, as well.

"You have to be very creative with the technology and your lesson presentation," said Trina Michalsen, who teaches language arts and math to middle schoolers at the Northern Ozaukee School District's Wisconsin Virtual Learning school.

As virtual classes with all of the instruction taking place over computers have become more popular in Wisconsin, training teachers on how to employ new online instructional techniques also has become more prevalent.

The effort has been helped by a new state law that required teachers to get [30 hours of professional development](#) by July 1 to teach fully online courses to students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Schools and colleges have responded by offering in-house training programs, complete certificates and graduate school credits.

"It takes something special to teach online," said Dennis O'Connor, program adviser for the University of Wisconsin-Stout's [E-learning and Online Teaching Graduate Certificate Program](#). "If you're not a strong instructor, it's easy to document. There's certainly a lot of folks out there that don't do it right."

Stout's program allows credentialed teachers to earn master's degree credits through individual classes or a complete five-course program, featuring such classes as how to assess students and design lessons for virtual schooling. All instruction takes place online so that the teachers get an idea of what it's like to be a student in such an environment, O'Connor said.

Program participants range from kindergarten teachers through technical college instructors.

"All schools are realizing online education is vital to their survival," O'Connor said.

With all of the offerings, online teachers like Michalsen also can choose to receive their training from a variety of sources.

In addition to working on an [online teaching certificate from Marian University](#), Michalsen participates in professional development offered by her school.

Northern Ozaukee Superintendent Bill Harbron said the school has held regular in-service sessions for teachers, with two days a month set aside over the past year. But he likes the idea of education schools also incorporating classes on online learning into teacher training.

"We're providing it on an ongoing basis, but all of a sudden, if you can have a candidate pool that already knows how to work in that environment, then you can use your professional development for other things," he said.

Blogs and wikis

Michalsen, who came to her current job after six years of teaching in a traditional brick and mortar school, said her classes at Marian have taught her such skills as how to have her students use blogs and collaborative websites known as "wikis" in meaningful ways.

"I think that you have to be creative as an online teacher and learn those little tools and tricks," she said.

Valerie Schmitz, director of the Kettle Moraine School District's [Global Online Academy of Learning](#), said one of the biggest hurdles that experienced teachers encounter in transitioning online is how to communicate in a virtual classroom. Learning to use the multimedia tools available on computers, such as videos and other visual sources, also is a critical step for educators to stage engaging lessons, she said.

Schmitz's school is offering courses this year as a team plans its conversion to a charter school that brings students together virtually from around the world for project-based lessons. She's also in charge of teaching a 45-hour class in online learning to Kettle Moraine teachers, who can receive three graduate credits from the class.

She said she likes that teachers have to take such classes before teaching online in Wisconsin.

"To prepare our teachers for designing instruction for a different medium is very helpful for them," Schmitz said. "I think they feel prepared and they leave the course with almost a framework to build their own classes."

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