

## The Days and Nights of an Online Trainer

By Lesley Darling

Online training: very hot topic. Major impact on how people learn. Changing how companies train employees . . . et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

In all the discussion about this new training-delivery method, we haven't heard much, if anything, about what effect online training will have on the trainers themselves.

If you picture a trainer in front of a classroom full of live people, you might want to rethink that image. Teaching in the online world is an entirely different animal. We talked to two people who are serious

online trainers. They each teach several online courses and have been in the online environment from Day One. Here's a look at their experiences.

### **The trainers**

#### **Mickey Dodson**

Home: Granada, Nicaragua

History: Software developer for 20 years; switched paths to become Web developer about five years ago. Currently owns classroom-training organization "Internet Seminar Service."

Online training experience: Has been teaching for SmartPlanet and others since 1998; became full-time online trainer soon after. Teaches topics such as intro to HTML, web page design, Website development.

Student base: individual consumers and corporate employees.

#### **Jeff Bankston**

Home: Atlanta, Ga.

History: In 1982, began training for Digital Equipment Corp.; has also worked with General Electric, National Security Agency, *PC Magazine's* pcmagnet forums on CompuServe starting in 1990. He has developed classes for General Electric Corp. and the National Security Agency. He is currently vice president of operations/senior network architect for BCI Associates, a small business consultancy.

Online training experience: Began training for Element K (formerly ZD Education) in 1990. Teaches networking topics such as Intro to SQL, Network Design and Implementation, NT Server Administration, Networking Essentials and Network+ certification courses.

Student base: primarily employees of corporate subscribers to Element K.

### **The class is the thing**

Both Dodson and Bankston teach introductory and higher-level courses, lasting anywhere from two to 12 weeks. In general, the courses have syllabus templates so, according to Bankston, "we know how 75 percent of the course will go. The other 25 percent is what's the most interesting."

Classes begin with a series of postings to the training site's message board. Dodson and Bankston post information about themselves and a general welcome to the class—what students should expect, how to get the most out of the class, topics, homework, additional materials.

"That's where I set the tone of the class," says Bankston.

Dodson also lets her students know up front that she's a woman. "With a first name like Mickey," she says, "I've had students in class for 12 weeks and they'd write a note saying 'Mr. Dodson, you're the best teacher!'"

Students often send introductory emails back. Bankston notes that he's had up to 100 messages per day during the opening weeks of a class. More typically, he sees around 40 questions and comments each day. At the end of class, students posts "usually taper down to 10 to 20 questions."

Students review their assigned course materials each week, and then post their questions and comments to the training site message board. Interestingly, interactions in online courses tend to be more in-depth. For one thing, the instructor has more time to reflect on the question and respond. Also, says Dodson, “I give a broader answer so the whole class can benefit.”

Bankston also conducts live chats in hosted site chatrooms, usually twice per course.

“Students really like that,” he says. “It’s the next best thing to having an instructor actually work on your network.”

### **Class dynamics**

Think controlling a roomful of 30 students is a handful? Try 500. That’s the average number of students in one of Dodson’s HTML classes. Typically, she says, only around 50 to 60 students participate actively—which means they regularly post assignments, comments and questions.

Making the online classroom “real” is a conscious process, says Dodson. Feedback and interactivity are the keys. In most online classes, for instance, the first weeks are active, and activity decreases as the weeks progress.

“In my classes, activity increases as the class goes on,” she says. “That’s because I give feedback, my TAs give feedback, and I encourage students to visit one another’s pages and comment on them. As the students get involved, they build a classroom community. I’ve seen them respond to the interactivity, I see it in their course evaluations.”

Dodson also uses the “personal touch” and her sense of humor to increase the comfort level. “I make a point of remembering active students, and I say hello when they come back for another course. And I try to lighten things up if they get frustrated.”

The topics that Bankston teaches “can be dry,” he admits. “But when you get a spunky, interactive class, it’s a ball. Online, I see more sharing of information among students because there’s less competition. Instead of taking a note and keeping it to themselves, students post that note online.”

Reading personalities into emails becomes an art form for online instructors.

“You get a sense of students’ personalities,” says Bankston. “You see attitudes like, ‘I’ve been in this business for three years and designed more networks than God,’ versus ‘This is my first class and first network—please help me.’ This is typical of people from mixed backgrounds who have used simple networks. One person that grew up with one type of network is naturally biased against something new, but other students often chime in with that unique experience that may change a person’s beliefs.”

What may surprise people is that some of the same class control issues that crop up in live teaching come up in an online course—personality clashes, for example.

“We’ve occasionally had real flashpoints,” Bankston relates. “Someone on the class message board will say one kind of network server is better, and someone disagrees. It can go from there and go ballistic!” Fortunately, interactions such as that are rare events. “You have to put on your personnel management hat,” he says. “I’ll tell them that we can all learn together.”

Says Dodson, “I don’t allow any hot-dogging by people who take a class just to show off what they know. For instance, in my intro to HTML class, I point out that it’s an introductory course and that I and the TAs won’t comment on any page that doesn’t address the assignment.”

Both instructors use any conflicts as a catalyst for interaction and learning, while at the same time managing them carefully and coaching students on how to disagree online.

### ***Who's on line?***

Bankston and Dodson each see differences in the kinds of students they teach in their online courses.

Says Bankston, "I see a lot more inexperienced people, because online courses are an easy and cost-effective way for them to break into the field." Those kinds of students make the class "more dynamic. I have students asking all levels of questions because they're at different experience levels. That can make it tougher on the instructor because you sometimes assume a level of knowledge or access to technology that's not always there. If I see a pattern to their questions, I'll create additional lesson materials to help."

Dodson's experience with her students focuses on another interesting aspect of online learning: "My classes are filled with people from China, New Zealand, Australia." The classes, she says, "bring the world closer. These people become very close; they begin to help one another, call one another by their first names."

Cultural nuances in such situations are important. "I had a student from Malaysia," Dodson says. "He didn't post anything until three weeks into a course, when he offered a suggestion to another student's problem. He said he hadn't posted before because he was nervous about his English. I encouraged him—his answer was right on, and his English was perfect. He was posting for the rest of the class."

### ***Investing the time***

Dodson teaches seven classes, not all at the same time. For each class, she spends "two to three hours per day. If I have five classes going, I work about 12 hours a day. That's not often, however."

Both Dodson and Bankston follow a regular routine. Dodson's day begins around 5 a.m. (her preference, and not a mandatory!): "I get coffee and go online. I pick up my mail from the sites and from my teaching assistants. The TAs catch questions that I need to address immediately, or they alert me to sites that need to be looked at. Then I look through the questions and comments and respond to them." Sometimes the students are still in the classroom, and they're "shocked" when Dodson's answer pops up.

If any questions require her to do research, she saves the question and posts a message that she's working on it: "I want my students to know that their questions will be answered within five hours." Dodson goes offline, does any research she needs to and then repeats her visit to the classroom after lunch. In the afternoon, she often designs web pages that show the solution to student questions; she posts the pages to her own site so everyone can visit there and learn from one another's questions.

Finally, later in the evening, Dodson visit her classroom again—three times a day is her habit.

Bankston checks messages from his students in the early morning and evening in a procedure much like Dodson's. On average, per class, he spends about two or three hours a day online, which later tapers to about an hour per class. He says that he spends about the same amount of time offline preparing for his classes—about three to six hours per Sunday afternoon—as he would prepping for a live class.

Bankston also works offline to make his courses more informative.

"If I run across information during the course of a normal business day that would help out in the course, I take notes on it that I keep in a journal. At home, I'll create material that goes up on my website for the next class session."

### ***The best part***

Clearly, Dodson and Bankston find something rewarding about the life of an online instructor. And what they like seems to be the area in which they are in closest sync.

"I love to teach," says Dodson, "and I've always taught during my career. With online courses, I get to work from home. I don't have to go to an office and sit in a cubicle." Dodson also travels a good bit for

her “other” life as a seminar leader, and she still keeps up with her classes: “I can teach anywhere—whether I’m traveling or at the beach.”

She also finds rewards in the work itself: “I’ll have a student in a FrontPage class, for example, who doesn’t even know how to turn on a computer! Twelve weeks later, I visit the web page that’s his final assignment, and I’m awestruck by how good it is. I love that, because it’s something I gave that person—the chance to put his vision on the Internet.”

“The best part of online teaching is when you solve a special problem for a student,” Bankston says. “When you generate discussion that helps students understand and not be afraid of technology, that leads them to professional growth, there’s the sweet spot.”

He, too, travels a good deal in his “other” life with his consultancy: “Online courses give me the flexibility to connect while I’m traveling and still teach. It’s the same for my students; they can take a class any time and any place they want to.”

*Lesley Darling is chief learning officer at Element K ([www.elementk.com](http://www.elementk.com)), responsible for the overall online experience at the education Website. Darling has more than 10 years experience in the training industry and has delivered talks and presented at CTS, CTW, Brainshare, Influent and various vendor-specific conferences and events. She co-wrote “Training for Results,” an article published in Training Magazine.*

### Tips for online trainers

Because online training is relatively new, instructors who want to give it a try may not know all the ins and outs of the beast. Here are some tips:

- Be aware of how much time you'll need to spend *offline*. You still need to prepare for class, and you may need to create extra materials personalized for students. In addition, because you have time to respond, students expect more in-depth answers to their questions.
- Promote interaction among your students. Ask open-ended questions, just as you would in a live classroom setting. Send emails to students who aren't posting questions, but are visiting the message boards. Encourage students to answer one another's questions and respond to comments. This creates an environment where it's OK to make mistakes.
- Pay attention. Your answers are posted permanently, for all to see! Unlike a one-time live classroom workshop, if you feel your answer was lacking, you can go back and add a more informed response to the message thread.
- It's about the teaching. Remember, even though online training takes place in a high-tech setting and—at this point, at least—tends to be about technical topics, your stellar teaching skills are the most vital part of your online course.