

Exploiting Online Opportunities

Liz England explains how to find your voice in online teacher education



Online teacher education is growing fast, especially for teachers of English as the use of English spreads across the world. Paloff and Pratt, 2001, define online education as: “An approach to teaching and learning that utilizes Internet technologies to communicate and collaborate in an educational context.”

With its strong history and tradition as an international profession and scholarly discipline, TESOL is a natural field of study to embrace online approaches for instruction.

Like any innovation, online training represents great opportunities and great challenges. There are currently no recognized standards for online TESOL and no guidelines for institutions to follow in order to address faculty load, instructional quality, or assessment of learning. Some universities have even abused faculty and students in online programs in efforts to replace traditional with online programs to reduce instructional costs and resources. There is an urgent need to address the problems of online TESOL and to work more effectively toward establishing standards of quality for professional preparation programs for TESOL.

For many who seek high quality professional preparation, online opportunities are a good alternative to traditional TESOL graduate training; some online programs are richer, more flexible, and more widely available than more traditional modes of professional development, especially for international students.

A View from the Trenches

Each morning, I go to work. Yes, directors of online programs do go to work in the morning. In fact, this “getting up and going to work” idea is one of the misconceptions about online TESOL — that faculty

sit at home in their pajamas and work at their computers all day. In fact, TESOL faculty serve on committees and engage in the usual academic activities of any campus-based program.

When I go to work, I answer 20 or 30 e-mail messages. Many are inquiries from teachers or others who are interested in our program. Recently, I had an inquiry which was very revealing.

A teacher contacted me via e-mail who wanted to know more about our Master’s program in TESOL. She had the usual questions: cost, program length, how to apply. Then she asked the \$64,000 question: “I want to enroll in this program because I work full-time at one job, half-time at another; I have three kids and a demanding husband. So,” she continued, “as you can see, I don’t have time for a real Master’s in TESOL!”

This inquiry illustrates many of the challenges that face online graduate TESOL education — the first and most obvious is the perception that online TESOL is less demanding, less time-consuming, and more “friendly” to busy schedules than more traditional face-to-face TESOL programs.

The second is the fact that many students seek flexible, high-quality, “user-friendly” graduate education. Flexibility is a significant factor for those students who choose online TESOL.

The third issue is the fact that online TESOL may not be for everyone. Prospective students who think online programs are less rigorous than on-site programs are often disappointed. Still, some students are surprised to learn of high expectations, rigorous assignments, and course requirements that require original research and practicum work. Other programs have low expectations, quick and dirty assignments, “an easy A” atmosphere, or under-trained faculty. This latter group is