



Published on *Inside Higher Ed*
(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)

[Home](#) > 7 guidelines for effective teaching online

7 guidelines for effective teaching online

Submitted by Sharon O'Malley on July 12, 2017 - 3:00am

Inside Digital Learning asked four authors of books about online education for their expert advice on how instructors and their institutions can excel in virtual course instruction. The authors agreed that the online classroom is different enough from the traditional one that faculty members and adjuncts need to create courses for digital delivery that are substantially different from those they teach on campus. And they said teaching online requires an even keener focus on student engagement than the face-to-face model does.

“Years ago, we used to say the danger of online courses was they were just going to become electronic correspondence courses,” said Rita-Marie Conrad, who along with Judith V. Boettcher, wrote *The Online Teaching Survival Guide* [1]. “That’s still a danger. As each new wave of instructors comes into this environment, there’s still that misunderstanding that this is a new environment.”

However, institutions and professors should be encouraging residential students to take classes online. “[Colleges] don’t provide an online experience to every undergraduate student, but we’re doing them a disservice,” said Elliot King, co-author of *Best Practices in Online Program Development* [2] and the upcoming *Best Practices in Planning Strategically for Online Education* [3].

More and more, employers are offering professional development courses online, he noted. “Learning online is different from face-to-face, and [graduates] won’t have any experience. If the college wants students to be lifelong learners, give them the opportunity to” take virtual courses.”

In addition to Conrad, Boettcher and Elliott, *Inside Digital Learning* spoke with Marjorie Vai, author of *Essentials of Online Course Design* [4] and editor of Routledge’s *Essentials*

of Online Learning [5] series.

Here are the authors' top tips for creating engaging and successful online education:

Make It a Group Effort

Even an instructor who has taught the same course dozens of times in an on-campus classroom will spend many extra hours figuring out how to teach it online, said Conrad, a lecturer at University of California, Berkeley. So colleges and universities should offer them some sort of compensation, like a lighter teaching load the first semester or extra pay.

In addition, Conrad added, faculty members need training in how to design and teach an online course. "Too often, faculty try to lay the technology on top of the face-to-face course, and that does not work well," she said. "It doesn't work for the students, and it doesn't work for the faculty."

Focus on 'Active' Learning

Instructors often rely on long lectures to fill the time in a traditional class meeting. But even the most dynamic lecturers cannot get away with that online, Conrad said.

To engage students who are not in the room during a lesson, the course should mix spurts of discussions, collaboration, video and audio clips, and hands-on exercises with text and possibly brief video lectures, Conrad suggested.

"It's not a lecture classroom online," she said. "It's an active learning classroom online." And she said this blend of teaching and learning tools is new to many professors who have not created active learning environments in their face-to-face classrooms.

'Chunk' the Lessons

Long lectures probably aren't the best way to engage a face-to-face class – and are even more ineffective online, said Vai, an e-learning consultant and former chair of the English language studies department at the New School in New York.

"The student should be engaged," she said, "so no pages of text or an hour-long video." She recommended presenting information in 10-minute "chunks" and agreed with

Conrad about the importance of varying the format.

Vai also suggested designing lessons with ample white space; breaking up text with photographs so students can see examples of what is in the text; and incorporating color into section titles.

Keep Group Sizes Small

In a traditional classroom or lecture hall, some students never participate in discussions or ask questions, usually because they are either shy or are not engaged. Online, said King, academic director of Loyola University Maryland's master's program in emerging media, that participation is required, but can be equally intimidating if students are expected to engage with dozens of classmates.

King recommended a cap of 20 to 30 students in online classes. And he has advised professors to break those students into groups of no more than 10 for purposes of discussions, collaboration, peer critiques and group activities.

"It's much easier for them to coordinate their time when there are fewer students," King said. "Everyone has to participate, but the barriers go down because they're only participating with 10 students."

Be Present

"No matter where teaching and learning take place, the importance of the faculty member being there and being mentally present with the students is the most important thing they can do," said Boettcher, of Designing for Learning, her Tallahassee, Fla.-based elearning consulting firm.

That doesn't mean simply responding to questions that students post online. Boettcher said instructors should have a "social presence" in their online classrooms, and encourage students to do the same. She suggested faculty members post their bios in the classroom and also do "some cocktail-party sharing" by telling students which books they are reading and the topic of their research. They also can post photos of themselves working on their laptop at a coffee shop or mention something interesting that happened over the weekend.

“Students should have a well-rounded idea of who [their professors are] as people,” Boettcher said.

Parse Your Time

All of the authors agreed that instructor presence is critical to student success in a virtual class. Still, noted Conrad: “Online courses can really consume you; I know this from experience.”

Responding to every discussion board post by every student in an online class “will crush you,” King agreed. “Manage your time in a reasonable way. Don’t be available 24/7. Don’t turn your class into a one-on-one interaction with 30 students.”

Conrad agreed. “Institutions think a faculty member needs to respond to everything” each student posts online. “That’s not the way it is.”

Conrad, who said she “picks and chooses” what she responds to, noted that if the instructor comments on every post, students tend to write their posts for the instructor, and not for other students. Online discussions, she said, should be between students.

Still, she said, the instructor “cannot simply let a course run itself. You’re there as much as you are in a regular classroom. But that doesn’t mean you’re in the course 24/7. Pick and choose where you insert your voice.”

Embrace Multi-media Assignments

Students who enroll in virtual courses usually are at least somewhat facile with technology, King noted, saying professors should leverage that by allowing them to use digital tools for their assignments.

While it’s quicker to grade papers than to review student-produced PowerPoint presentations or videos, King said, “a lot of students express themselves better that way.”

Digital Learning [6]

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2017/07/12/7-guidelines-effective-teaching-online>

Links

[1] <http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-1119147689.html>

[2] <https://www.routledge.com/Best-Practices-in-Online-Program-Development-Teaching-and-Learning-in/King-Alperstein/p/book/9780415724449>

[3] <https://www.routledge.com/Best-Practices-in-Planning-Strategically-for-Online-Educational-Programs/King-Alperstein/p/book/9781138936195>

[4] <http://essentialsofonlinecoursedesign.com>

[5] <http://essentialsofonlinecoursedesign.com/feature-5/>

[6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/digital-learning>