Special Report

Online Teaching Strategies

10 Principles of Effective Online Teaching

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Seven Strategies to Promote Community in Online Courses

Brian Udermann, PhD

Over the years, I've had the pleasure of working with approximately 300 faculty who have developed and taught their first online course. One of the concerns I frequently hear from instructors considering teaching online is that they will lose the interaction and sense of community they have with their students when they teach face-to-face. That doesn't have to be the case; many online instructors successfully create a sense of community in their courses. There are a variety of definitions of community. Most include wording or phrases such as "having something in common," "feelings of being connected," "shared goals or aspirations," and "regular interaction." This article will explore seven strategies faculty can use to promote and increase community in the online environment.

1. You serve as the role model.

If instructors are wanting to promote community in their online courses one way to encourage that is modeling the behavior they would like to see in their students. This can start with a warm and enthusiastic welcome message. It can include responding to student questions promptly and respectfully. And, it can include the instructor sharing personal information about themselves so students have the chance to go beyond seeing their instructor as a content expert teaching the class and view them as a real person they can get to know and relate to. Additionally, if developing a sense of community is a goal for instructors, it is helpful if they let students know

that it is. Sometimes instructors get frustrated that students aren't meeting their expectations, when in reality, students might not be clear on what those expectations are.

2. Let students get to know you and each other.

One-way instructors can start to develop community early in a course is to use introduction or icebreaker activities. Having an introduction or icebreaker can set the tone for students engaging and interacting with one another and encourage social interactions right out of the gate. Many instructors use introductions, but they are sometimes repetitive and mundane, asking students to share things like their name, year in school, and their major. Consider jazzing up these early interactions by having students share their previous experience (or lack thereof) with course content, what they are looking forward to learning in the class, or a bit of personal information. I've used icebreakers for courses in the past where I would have students search out misconceptions or mistruths about content that would be covered in the class. That was a nice way to expose students to topics they would be delving into over the upcoming months.

3. Create a safe course environment.

Creating an online course environment in which students feel safe can have many benefits. It can help students be more engaged with their peers and instructor, it can lead to students being more open with their beliefs and values, and it

can provide a valuable lesson on how to have productive and respectful interactions with others who might hold opposing viewpoints. A safe course environment doesn't mean there won't be disagreements or differences of opinion, but it does mean that students will treat each other with respect if they do arise. Most online instructors share a set of course rules or expectations (netiquette) that governs behavior in the online classroom, and some instructors even have their students help create those expectations. Dealing with disruptive behavior (e.g., an inappropriate comment from a student) immediately is another way instructors can help ensure a safe learning environment.

4. Survey student interests.

Student interest surveys, sometimes called student interest inventories, can be used in online courses to promote relationship building and community. Questions on these surveys can elicit personal information (e.g., what hobbies or activities do you enjoy?), school related information (e.g., do you enjoy working in groups? why or why not?), and future goals and aspirations (e.g., where do you see yourself in five years?). Questions could even be related to what students might want to see covered in a course and could result in instructors altering their curriculum. This might help students feel more engaged and give

them a sense of ownership in a course. Survey results could be used to place students in groups for collaborative work or projects. And, knowing more about their students (e.g., what type of music they listen to, academic challenges they might have) could help instructors better interact and relate to them.

5. Build in opportunities for student to share their knowledge and experiences.

I've had the pleasure of working in higher education for more than twenty years now and believe this idea of building opportunities into courses for students to share their past experiences is greatly underutilized. I realized how powerful this could be when I was teaching an online health course about 10 years ago and learned a young lady in the class was going to go to Florida (she lived in Wisconsin) the next week to participate in a powerlifting national championship. It ended up she took first! The week after she won, we happened to be in a unit on muscular fitness and resistance training and I asked if she would share her knowledge on the topic through a discussion forum. She was excited and thrilled to do so and her expertise likely exceeded mine. Students come into our courses with a plethora of experiences, from their families, jobs, military, work, prior schooling, etc. Utilize those past experiences for the benefit of everyone in the class.

6. Create social opportunities for students.

In addition to having an introduction or icebreaker activity (covered in #2 above) building in opportunities for online students to interact socially can help promote a sense of community in class. One-way instructors do this is to have a discussion forum dedicated to personal interactions. Sometimes these forums or spaces are titled "Student Lounge," "Student Cafe," or "The Water Cooler" where students can interact and discuss non-course related topics. Topics could range from the weather to who won the big game the

night before to interesting current local, state, national, or global events. Some online instructors use social media groups such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn in their courses to encourage social interactions among students. Some online programs even go so far as to add all program alumni to these groups so current students can interact with prior students who are often out working in the discipline.

7. Build in multiple avenues for interaction and engagement.

If an instructor wishes to develop a sense of community in an online course, they will likely be more successful if they create a variety of opportunities for this to occur. These opportunities can be purposefully designed and integrated into the curriculum as an instructor is developing a class. In addition to some of the things already mentioned in this article (e.g., having an introduction or icebreaker activity, creating social spaces for students) other ways instructors can build in student-to-student interaction in a class might include online discussion forums, peer-review activities, collaborative work, and video conferencing. Also, these interactive opportunities could be spaced evenly throughout a course, so for example, if a student is taking a 15-week online course there is some interaction occurring every couple of weeks instead of all happening in the first 2-3 weeks of class.

Tips from the Pros: Retrieval Practice in Online Teaching

Michelle D. Miller

One of the best things about online education is the ease with which we can incorporate retrieval practice, also known as the testing effect, into our teaching. This is the well-established cognitive principle that attempting to get information out of memory, as we do when we are taking a test, greatly increases the chances we'll be able to remember that information in the future. To take full advantage of this powerful effect, we need to adopt the somewhat counterintuitive idea that quizzes and tests are parts of teaching and learning rather than something that happens after the teaching is done (Miller, 2011).

Systematic, repeated quizzing integrated into learning is hard to pull off in a face-to-face classroom, but it is easily done online. Brief quizzes can alternate with presentation of material and other types of learning activities as frequently as the instructor desires.

Even when quizzes are used for grading, a fast, frequent quizzing style enabled by technology can be a powerful support for student success. One recent study found that administering low-stakes tests several times per week using an online quizzing platform

> *Systematic, repeated quizzing integrated into learning is hard to pull off in a face-to-face classroom, but it is easily done online.*

improved learning and grades in an Introduction to Psychology course, a finding that is consistent with what we know about retrieval practice (Pennebaker, Gosling, Ferrell, Apfel, & Brzustiski, 2013).

The instructors in this project took advantage of an additional benefit of technology, the ability to personalize and modify quizzes across students. Questions that a given student answered wrong on one quiz would show up on a future one, encouraging students to do targeted review of material they didn't understand and further reinforcing learning for the hardest concepts. This kind of innovative, theory-driven application of technology for testing lets us use what we know about retrieval practice to help students learn more in less time.

Similar to the idea of getting students to spend more time retrieving and less time reviewing, there's the emphasis on practice that's well suited to fully online courses. A practice-oriented approach intentionally directs more student time toward applying information instead of watching presentation of content.

In mathematics, it's accepted practice to have problem sets coupled with on-demand help that keeps students moving forward in applying what they are supposed to be learning. However, we don't have to leave deliberate, guided practice as the sole province of math. In my online Building Memory Power course, students practice techniques for remembering different kinds of information by following along with a narrated demonstration, actually trying the techniques

with information I give them and then posting about what it was like to use the techniques. Rather than just reading about memory strategies, they try them and respond right away to report on the experience.

Immediate application is also easier with online teaching. At Northern Arizona University, my colleague Larry MacPhee teaches a fully online biology laboratory course, a challenging enterprise that has students doing hands-on activities with materials in their homes as well as fully online simulations. Just as in a traditional face-to-face biology laboratory course, these activities are intended to reinforce and illustrate the more abstract concepts being taught in the course. But in traditional face-to-face courses, lab activities and concepts tend to be widely separated in time and can come across as disjointed, separate experiences.

In an online course like MacPhee's, however, students can cycle from concept to activity and back again in a more immediate fashion. Within the structure of the online course, it's easy to backtrack to instructions and background as needed, and students don't have to wait for a lab meeting to apply concepts they've just read about. This leads to a more seamless integration of learning and doing, which in turn meshes with the mind's predisposition to take in what it needs when it needs it.

Retrieval practice, skills practice, and immediate application are three powerful ways to improve learning in an online course.

Convey Your Online Teaching Persona

Rob Kelly

In order to effectively establish and maintain an active learning community, the instructor must establish his or her teaching persona and maintain it throughout the course, says Bill Phillips, an instructional designer at the University of Central Florida. Unlike in a face-to-face classroom, one's persona in the online classroom needs to be deliberately incorporated into course design.

"The rules are different online. The online professor has to make a sincere effort to deliver or present an online teaching persona. It may come in different ways. From the way the online professor responds—in writing—to the entire class or the single student. It may be in the way the online professor expresses humor using emoticons or simply words. It might be in videos that introduce each week or chapter in the course," Phillips says.

In Phillips' view, one's online teaching persona is so closely linked to course design that it is "difficult if at all possible" to establish one's persona in a course designed by somebody else. "Teaching style and online teaching persona go hand in hand. No one teaches exactly like another. Adding your persona to a course you did not develop is a challenge."

As for the tools he recommends for projecting one's online teaching persona, "The introductory e-mail prior to the start of the course is a great way to begin to project your persona. It also begins the process of 'swift trust' (defined by Myerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) as "a concept relating to temporary teams, teams whose existence is formed around a clear purpose, common tasks within a finite life span.")

Using Web 2.0 tools and technologies also helps facilitate the persona. "I like to believe that synchronous and asynchronous video is the superior technology to deliver the online teaching" persona, Phillips says. "We are experimenting with different approaches to the introductory video … [and] of course, there are also tools like discussions, e-mail, synchronous and asynchronous meeting applications, and even audio in your PowerPoint presentations. Still photographs also carry a strong message. Adding a personal photograph to your course syllabus adds to the entire package."

Like other aspects of online instruction, it's important to determine what works and what doesn't work in one's courses in terms of instructional persona. "We don't recommend radical changes to online courses once you begin. That's going to create more turmoil. But it's important to be able to communicate with the students—whether it is synchronous via chat or perhaps by using a survey instrument—to get at the heart of what's going on."

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Designing Effective Team Projects in Online Courses

Stephanie Smith Budhai, PhD

Participating in team projects offers students the chance to develop interpersonal communication skills (Figueira & Leal, 2013), build relationships with classmates, and increase the level of collective competencies as each group member brings something different to the group. However, in the online environment where the majority of the work occurs asynchronously, students may resist having to work with others (Smith et al., 2011) on graded assignments.

Students often say that they do not like group other interactive course features. In a traditional class, you would see who the students are sitting next to and engaging with; do the same within the online class. Are there certain people who always respond to each other's discussion board responses? Have you noticed that some people work at the same organization? Get to know your students as much as possible within the online course and be very intentional in creating teams.

Keep groups small and odd. Every student is very busy with professional and personal

> ## In the online environment where the majority of the work occurs asynchronously, students may resist having to work with others on graded assignments.

work because they expect that they will have to contribute more than their teammates or that they will have difficulty scheduling times to meet with other group members. They also may be uneasy about being assigned an individual grade based on the work of the team.

After teaching fully online courses for the past five years, I offer seven best practices for teamwork in online courses:

Intentionally create teams. The best teams are formed when each member can bring something different to the group. Having three leaders may cause tension, as there would be no one willing to be led. At the same time, if there are no leaders present, it may be difficult for the group to form a vision for the project and get the work started. Get to know your online students and their preferences. This can come from a survey or preference inventory or through online discussion boards or

obligations, making scheduling to meet as a team difficult. One of the most attractive features of online courses for students is the ability to learn at times most convenient for the individual, without the requirement of being in class at certain times and days each week. The larger the teams, the more complicated scheduling can be. Teams, particularly in online courses where there are no regularly scheduled meetings, should be capped at approximately three students. Having an odd number also eliminates the potential of groups being split when forced to make a decision. I encourage teams to come to a unanimous decision, but this may not always be possible. Having an odd number guarantees that there will always be a majority in the event of a team vote. There will be times when, because of the overall number of students in the class, one group may need to consist of more than three

students, but in general, a team of three is more manageable and conducive to best practices in online teamwork.

Set clear expectations for individual contributions. Most assignments have general directions with a rubric explaining how the final product will be assessed. For team projects, it is imperative to go beyond this and identify individual contributions and expectations for each team member. A jigsaw approach could be employed in which the instructor divides the project into equal parts for each group member, so all members know exactly what they are expected to do. If the instructor wants each team member to contribute something to the entire project, those expectations should be laid out with a framework to help facilitate that dissemination process.

Create a virtual group space. All learning management systems (LMS) have tools and applications that serve teamwork well. Instructors should create a private virtual space for each team where they can connect with one another and share ideas. At a minimum, the shared virtual team space should include a discussion board, a file sharing area, and a space for live, real-time sessions or chat. Instructors should provide an overview of each feature of the virtual shared space and make suggestions for how it should be used. While this may seem intuitive for instructors, some students may not know how to best leverage the space or use the individual features. This can lead to underutilization of the shared virtual space and a less efficient process during the team project. Be sure that all students know how to access and use the virtual team space to support the team's work.

Monitor online group space. Do not wait for students to email you when issues arise. Make it known that you will be "present" within the virtual space, and consistently offer advice and feedback as the team progresses through the project. It is important to do this in a manner that is not overly intrusive. You are simply guiding the process and making adjustments as needed if the group requires individualized support. This is also helpful for teams who are not able to transparently navigate the process and communicate their needs. Monitoring of the online group space also builds faculty presence within the online course and presents another opportunity to engage with students virtually.

Develop a peer feedback system. The ability to provide and accept constructive feedback is part of being an adult. While this can be difficult and uncomfortable, it is an important part of the team project experience. In online courses especially, develop a template for peer feedback and share it with students prior to the project. The constructs on the template can be based on key interpersonal skills that you are expecting students to exhibit throughout the team project. Peer evaluations benefit students who make contributions (Dingel & Wei, 2014), and can help address students who do not fully participate in the collaborative experience. The knowledge that they will be evaluated by peers can motivate students to work more collaboratively with their team members.

Assign individual and team grades. It is important to assign both individual and team grades for the team assignments. Students should be assessed on the individual contributions they made as well as on how well they participate in the team components. Assigning individual grades requires a clear expectation for individual contributions and progress monitoring throughout the project. Assigning individual grades increases individual accountability and can make for a more positive collaborative experience.

Instead of eliminating effective pedagogical techniques present in traditional courses, such as team projects, online instructors must leverage technologies and best practices to include equal learning opportunities for students in online

courses.

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Ten Online Teaching Tips You May Not Have Heard

Noura Badawi, EdD

At a time when online institutions are in fierce competition for students, and accreditation agencies are taking a critical look at online course quality, it is becoming increasingly important for online instructors to ensure that they are exceeding expectations.

Students are also expecting more from their online courses. And while most of us know the importance of addressing students by name in the discussion board and offering students substantive feedback, there many more things we can do.

In this article, I outline 10 online teaching tips that may be less well-known but can lead to a more positive experience online.

1. Communicate Information Using Multiple Channels

If you have important information to convey to students, don't use just one channel of communication, use multiple. For example, instead of simply posting information only in the announcements area, or only in the feedback area, or sending it only via email, include the information in all three of these places. This will reduce the number of students saying they did not get the memo.

2. Sync School Email Account to Phone

Contact your institution's help desk for instructions on how to sync your school email account to your iPhone or Android. Not only will receiving email in multiple places reduce your likelihood of missing messages, it will also allow you to address urgent questions and concerns in a timely fashion. Students are often pleasantly surprised at my response time. However, it is important to set boundaries by letting students know when to expect a reply. For example, you can inform them that you normally respond within a 24-hour period, during regular business hours.

3. Text

If you can't reach a student via phone or email, try texting! It's harder to miss or ignore a text message. Also, students will appreciate

the fact that they can text you if they have a quick question. My students have thanked me numerous times for being accessible in this way. This tip comes with a caveat: While students will benefit from being able to text, it is also important to let them know upfront that it can take up to 24 hours for you to reply.

4. Create an Instagram account

Utilize social media to motivate and share information with students. Create an Instagram page just for students to include motivational quotes, memes, reminders, tips, etc. You might even include a photo or two of yourself, your kids, or pets! Most students enjoy getting to know their professor as a person.

5. Keep a Running List of Resources to Include in Feedback

Compile a list of helpful resources to send to students who are struggling in certain areas. For example, if a student submits a paper that illustrates he or she does not know how to use commas, don't just point out the mistake, but refer to your list of resources and include the appropriate resource in your feedback. A Word document, bookmarks folder, or desktop sticky note are great places to keep these resources handy.

6. Use Reflection Questions

Get students thinking more critically about their writing assignments by asking questions, such as:
• In what ways, if any, did writing this paper change your views about the topic?
• What did you find most challenging about writing about this topic?
• What do you still want to know about this topic?
• What did you enjoy most about writing this paper?
• What did you discover about this topic that

surprised you?

7. Create a Forum

If your Learning Management System allows, create a forum where students can go to find useful information and ask questions on a subject. For example, if you notice that most of your students struggle with APA, create a forum where they can easily locate resources on the subject and ask related questions.

8. Do a Welcome Call/Email

If you have time, call each student at the start of the term to say hello and find out what they hope to get out of the class. Most students will appreciate the time you take to do this. If time doesn't allow, send a private email, addressing each student by name, and asking a direct question to start a brief dialogue.

9. Promote the Rubric

Remind students of the grading rubric for the week's main assignment in announcements and email to make sure they know what they will be graded on to eliminate questions like "How long does the paper have to be?"

10. Reflect on Your Teaching

On a weekly or bi-weekly basis, ask yourself:
• What can be improved about my individual interactions with students?
• What more can I do to make this subject more engaging and memorable?
• What is lacking in my classroom?

What We Can Learn from Unsuccessful Online Students

Jennifer Patterson Lorenzetti

There are many studies that look at how online students differ from those in face-to-face classes in terms of performance, satisfaction, engagement, and other factors. It is well-known that online course completion rates tend to be lower than those for traditional classes. But relatively little is known about what the unsuccessful online student has to say about his or her own experience and how they would improve online learning. Yet these insights can be vital for distance educators.

Christy Hawkins is director of continuing and professional education at Thomas Nelson Community College. As part of her dissertation research, she conducted a pilot study of students ranging in age from 20-49 who had withdrawn from an online course. Most of these students had previously attempted multiple online courses, and about half were unsuccessful in all of their previous online attempts. This qualitative study sought student perspectives about their online courses, with results that fell into three main areas: course issues, student issues, and suggested improvements.

> *It is well-known that online course completion rates tend to be lower than those for traditional classes.*

Course issues

Course issues ran the gamut from issues that could appear in any course delivery modality to ones that were unique to the online format. For example, some students mentioned that the course was not engaging, admitting that they took the course to satisfy a requirement but felt the content was boring. Clearly, this type of mismatch of content with interest level could occur with a traditional course as well. Additionally, some students expressed a desire for faculty members with more expertise in the subject area to assist when the students were uncertain of the material.

However, most of the responses surrounded aspects of the online delivery format.

One student knew that she was an auditory learner and was distressed to discover that the course had no auditory components. Some students disliked the discussion format, reflecting on the poor quality of responses from other students or feeling that too many responses were required each week. At least one respondent was unhappy with the amount of sharing of personal information required in the online format, which this person would not voluntarily have done in a classroom setting.

Still other issues were specific to the online format and may point out some of the limitations of the way the course is delivered. Hawkins found "some desire for a self-paced course," and she also found a number of technical issues, like lost assignments or difficulty of downloading required software.

Student issues

Student issues divided down into time management concerns and lack of skills required

to succeed online. Regarding time management, some students reported a "failure to log on and do the work," Hawkins says. This was sometimes due to work and family constraints, and sometimes due to a priority placed on face-to-face courses.

The work and family issue is interesting because sometimes students will opt for an online class because they know they do not have time to commit to face-to-face meeting each week. However, the same issues that make traveling to class inconvenient will certainly make it difficult to give online study the necessary focus.

Interestingly, students also admitted to prioritizing face-to-face classes for a number of reasons. One student said, "I prioritize my brick-and-mortar classes over the online class…because I have to see the teacher's face." At least one student reported prioritizing face-to-face classes in a way that was strategic, and which might arguably have been a good decision for that person. That student reported, "I made a choice to keep my other classes that required less reading and withdrew from the online course so I could take it when I could be successful."

Additionally, some students simply did not have the skills needed to learn in an online setting. Most online classes require a great deal of reading comprehension ability, and some students need more instructor assistance. Here are nine more ways to improve online student retention:

1. "Faculty need to go above and beyond to demonstrate their expertise," Hawkins says. Faculty should use all the tools available to them online to be sure that students are able to be as confident in their instructor online as they would be in the traditional classroom.

2. Avoid making all the assignments reading. An online course that is simply written material placed online can be a boring one, and it can be difficult for students who do not have great reading comprehension skills. Video snippets,

chats with the instructor, and other ways to convey information can break up the tedium. "My teacher took the time to record little videos of his lectures, which really helped to engage me," one student reported.

3. Let students know if supplemental opportunities are available. Some instructors may wish to schedule time for synchronous online chats or face-to-face meetings. Let the students know this at registration time so those who know they need more interaction with the instructor can opt into those sections of the course.

4. "Be understanding when things happen," says Hawkins. Students will have family and work issues crop up and, within the bounds of institutional and course policy, it helps for an instructor to be understanding of these issues and help students work through them.

5. Provide good academic advising to the students. For example, Hawkins suggests students not take the hardest course in their discipline or program as their first online endeavor, so they are not struggling with learning how to study online while they confront challenging material.

6. Counsel students about technology. Hawkins notes that students studying online really need to have a computer at home or at the office that they can access on a daily basis in order to succeed in an online course. Depending on a library computer or the internet will not be sufficient.

7. Encourage or require students to complete an assessment to see if online learning is right for them before enrolling in an online section of the class.

8. Offer special computer lab hours staffed by online instructors who can help students learn to navigate and use the LMS in their online course.

9. Offer special sections of orientation courses (like University 101) for online students.

What Do Students Really Want from Online Instructors?

Brian Udermann, PhD

Over the past nine years, I've had the pleasure of seeing approximately 200 instructors at my institution develop and teach their first online course. I've witnessed instructors excited by the opportunity, but I've also observed many who were hesitant or even fearful of teaching online.

The instructors who were hesitant or fearful often would ask: "So, what's the secret to being a great online instructor?" I had the sense they were expecting an extensive or complex answer. Many times they were surprised by my response.

Much has been written about student satisfaction in online courses, and there certainly are a number of factors that can influence a student's experience as an online learner—institution, discipline, level of course, peers, home life, instructor, and so on. The ideas in this article have come from three sources: my 11 years of online teaching experience, hundreds of discussions with instructors about what has and hasn't worked in their online courses, and the research literature.

1. Easy-to-follow course design and navigation

Something that can be incredibly frustrating for students is entering their online course for the first time and being confused or not knowing how to get started. Confusion can quickly lead to frustration and a disgruntled and unhappy learner—not a great way to start a class. Learner confusion almost always means more emails and questions for the instructor as well.

Many instructors include a "Welcome—get started here" message in the news or announcements area in the learning management system, making it the first thing students see when they log in to their course for the first time. Students can then be directed to the syllabus, where they'll find additional information on the design and navigation of the course.

Easy navigation (presenting content and course activities in a consistent manner), whether by unit, week, chapter, or module, can foster a comfort level for students and help decrease confusion. Create hyperlinks from the syllabus, announcement page, or the content area within the course to minimize the number of clicks required to access content, to participate in discussion forums, to take quizzes, to upload

papers and assignments, and so on.

2. Clear expectations and directions for activities and assessments

Providing explicit directions for course activities and assessments, as well as letting students know exactly (or as close as possible) what will be expected of them, is another way to reduce learners' confusion. This ultimately results in a better course experience for both student and instructor. Instead of spending time and energy worrying whether they are completing an assignment the way an instructor wants, students can focus that energy on the assignment itself. To help accomplish this, many online instructors provide their students with rubrics that students can use as a guide to help complete course assignments. The expectations an instructor shares with students could be related to netiquette, academic integrity, the quality of participation in online discussion forums, meeting deadlines, and so on.

I sometimes hear instructors comment about how they feel they shouldn't have to coddle their online learners or spell everything out for them. After all, online learners are supposed to take more responsibility for their learning—right?

Well, research shows that in addition to improving satisfaction levels, giving clear directions and expectations in online courses improves learning and helps keep online learners more engaged with an instructor and other students in the class. What instructor wouldn't want to be known for helping to facilitate that outcome?

3. Reasonably quick responses to students' questions

This point may seem incredibly basic, but I would say it rates high on the list of items that are important to online learners. In the nine years I've served as the director of online education at my institution, I've received more student complaints about this topic than any other: "I contacted my instructor with a question five days ago and

haven't heard back yet."

We all like to receive timely responses when we ask a question, whether it's directed to a colleague, a supervisor, or the cable company. Students are no different! Recently I received an email question from a parent of a student at my institution about the cost of taking a single online course. I responded and copied someone at our cashier's office, who also responded to the parent. These replies occurred within a few hours of receiving the question. The parent's response: "Thanks for the helpful information and done in such an amazingly timely manner!"

I think there is a misconception that online learners expect 24/7 access to their instructors. It has been my experience, and the experience of a vast majority of instructors I talk to, that if an instructor sets clear response expectations (e.g., I will respond to emails within 24 hours if I receive them on a weekday), most students will respect that. An online instructor does not need to be available 24/7 to be successful—and should not be!

4. Instructors who make their presence known

One-way instructors can make their presence known to students is by regularly communicating with them. This communication might start with an email a week or two prior to the start of the class to introduce themselves and give students information about the course. It could include a video introduction or course orientation. Subsequent emails could include regular course updates and announcements summarizing how class members did on a particular assignment or activity. And most students greatly appreciate receiving reminders about due dates of upcoming assignments.

Students like to know their instructor's perspective on course content. This could be shared in the form of written lecture narratives, podcasts, voice-over PowerPoints, or videos. Online courses

can be text heavy, and I've learned that many students enjoy both hearing and seeing their instructor—even in online courses. Students are pretty savvy, and many realize when instructors simply share publisher-created content rather than offering their own viewpoint on the concepts and principles covered in the class.

Other ways instructors can improve their presence in online courses is to provide prompt and meaningful feedback and to participate in online discussion forums (both could be stand-alone topics of future columns). Presence is important. We survey our online students for feedback, and I have seen comments range from "I assume the instructor got paid for teaching this course, but it felt like I never interacted with him" to "I felt like I interacted more and got to know my professor better in this online course than in my face-to-face courses."

Many research articles and book chapters have been dedicated to student satisfaction in online courses. At a minimum, if instructors set clear expectations and provide detailed directions for activities and assessments, create courses that are well designed and easy to navigate, respond to student questions in a timely manner, and make their presence known, they will likely experience success and satisfaction in their online teaching experiences. This should be reassuring to instructors who are hesitant about venturing into online teaching.

The Art and Science of Successful Online Discussions

Stephanie Maher Palenque and Meredith DeCosta, PhD

Faculty use asynchronous discussions to extend and enhance instructional practices in the online classroom. It is widely reported that online discussions play an integral role in facilitating students' learning, as well as fostering dialogue, critical thinking, and reflective inquiry (Kayler & Weller, 2007; Morris, Finnegan, & Sz-Shyan, 2005). Despite faculty's knowledge that discussion forums can serve as a useful learning tool, online discussions are not easy to establish and manage.

> *It has been suggested that, if well facilitated, online discussions may allow for more in-depth and thoughtful learning than is possible in a face-to-face setting.*

The Science of Online Discussions

Our working knowledge regarding distance education suggests that productive discussions are essential to learning in an asynchronous online environment. Online discussions effectively take the place of face-to-face classroom discussion. It has even been suggested that, if well facilitated, online discussions may allow for more in-depth and thoughtful learning than is possible in a face-to-face setting (Hawkes, 2006). Gao, Wang, and Sun (2009) contend that in a productive online discussion,

it is essential for participants to embrace the following four dispositions:

1. Discuss to comprehend. Cognitive efforts such as questioning, interpreting, elaborating, or relating information to prior knowledge should be the focus in any productive discussion. According to cognitive psychologists, students are more likely to understand and retain information when they participate in these cognitive activities (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013).

2. Discuss to critique. Conflicting perspectives of students should be developed and examined in any productive discussion. Knowledge acquisition originates from cognitive conflicts from social interactions. These conflicts not only occur between students but also between an individual's existing knowledge and new information encountered in discussions with other students. The real learning takes place when students re-examine their original positions on an issue and explore new resolutions. (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013).

3. Discuss to construct knowledge. Gao, Zhang, and Franklin (2013) suggest that a productive discussion should offer students ample opportunities for interaction and collaboration with classmates. From a social constructivist perspective, individuals do not learn in isolation. It is only through this interaction that a richer understanding of the topic will take place.

4. Discuss to share. Productive learning takes place when students are part of a larger, active community. A community of learners, which represents the ideal discussion forum environment, is one in which students embrace a sense of belonging, support each other, develop shared values, and enjoy their shared identity (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013).

The Art of Online Discussions

Along with science comes its partner: art. People who aren't familiar with online teaching and learning will often ask, "Is it possible to mirror intellectual conversations held with students in a ground classroom in the online environment?" and "Can we engage in the subtleties of face-to-face dialogue in the online classroom?" Our answer is, "Yes." Although students in the online classroom are separated by time and space, thoughtfully formulated discussions can close this gap. The following represent strategies to transform you into an online discussion forum artist:

1. Touch all students in the forum. In most conversations, we acknowledge all participants, even those who are not speaking, by making eye contact, nodding, and responding as needed. The same applies to an online discussion. All students contribute in some way to the forum during a course; it is the teacher's responsibility to acknowledge their efforts. Recognition can include a congratulatory post, a note of thanks, or a question or scenario designed to further thinking.

2. Know what each student needs. What students say (and do not say) in the forum communicates their comfort level in the course. A student who actively participates in the forums may need the instructor to elevate thinking by artfully challenging perceptions and impressions. A student who expresses confusion about the content in the forums may benefit from a Classroom Assessment Technique (Angelo & Cross, 1993) to help the instructor gauge the point of confusion and reveal gaps in the student's current knowledge.

3. Be mindful of possibilities. Postings are not one size fits all. As online instructors, we risk hindering progress when we only award credit for posts that are lengthy, particularly at the undergraduate level. We always try not to penalize students who opt to take a brief turn in the conversation as long as the post is substantive, of merit, and adds to the discussion.

4. Know when to lead and when to be led. There are times we want to guide the discussion and times when we should allow students to carry the weight. One common mistake instructors make in the online classroom is to attempt to drive every conversation. Occasionally students may need to take charge in order to learn the material.

Science and art are natural partners – both are a means of investigation of the world around us. When instructors make a concerted effort to balance both the science and art of facilitating a productive, enriching online discussion among a community of learners, the rewards are abundant.

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Using Bridge Questions to Teach Technical Content Online

Stefan A. Perun, PhD, and Edward A. Liva

Courses with a great deal of technical content for application in practice such as law, business, or STEM courses are oftentimes designed in what amounts to an information delivery method. The professor provides the necessary information for students to memorize and repeat back in the course assessments.

Indeed, the online environment makes disseminating recorded lectures and written material fast and convenient, and students readily expect to be tested on the materials provided. Even in course designs with synchronous components, professors may lecture or answer questions, yet seldom observe how students are synthesizing or interacting with the course material. Moreover, delivering large amounts of content and assessing students' recall of that content misses a central piece of a student-centered pedagogy, namely ensuring that students achieve a deep understanding of the content.

One way to augment online course designs that would help students practice applying technical knowledge is using bridge questions. Bridge questions require students to solve a practical problem or case by applying the content of the course to a real-world problem. The questions bridge the gap between the course's technical content and situations where the content can

be applied. There are many ways to use bridge questions in online course designs, but here are two basic approaches.

First, in courses with a synchronous component, students could be given bridge questions at the outset of a module or week that they know will be the basis of the synchronous

dent-one-answer approach. However, students would likely be more engaged and learn much more if the professor structured the requirement as a collaborative activity with everyone working on the bridge questions together. In larger classes, the professor might consider breaking the class into smaller groups. In either case, the goal is

The bridge questions should be designed to facilitate students' application of the technical content to a practical situation.

session or office hours discussion. In order to participate in "class" that week, students would have to find the answers to the questions and/or the tools to solve the problem(s) presented in the reading and/or required videos.

This approach engages students in the readings and/or videos in an active way. That is, instead of passively consuming the content, taking notes, and trying to remember everything, students are actively on the lookout for answers to their problems. It also allows professors to structure the synchronous sessions around solving problems that all the students are working on; professors would just raise the bridge questions to start class and ask students for their answers and explanations of how they arrived at their answers using the course material. Other variations might include small group work sessions before class or in class. In any variation, the professor will be able to readily identify misunderstandings students have about the material and/or its application and intervene to help students.

Second, in courses with a mostly asynchronous design, the same concept applies but the bridge questions would be answered as an asynchronous requirement (e.g., discussion board, Yellowdig, Office 365 collaboration, etc.). Using an asynchro-nous design, the discussion responses could be structured in the more traditional one-stu-

to have students collaborate on the responses to the bridge questions, and the professor would keep the discussion focused on answering the questions/solving the problems, identifying misunderstandings, and guiding students to a more expert application of the material.

In either approach, the bridge questions should be designed to facilitate students' application of the technical content to a practical situation. In this way, students will both master the intricacies of the content and learn the nuances of the rules by applying them to relevant fact patterns. Depending on the subject matter of the course, the model answers can be structured as recorded explanations from the professor, synchronous discussions in a class session, printed narratives, formulas, or diagrams. In all cases, the objective is to reinforce comprehension through experience and application.

A final note on using bridge questions; the students' independent and collaborative work on them should be graded, otherwise they may wait until others solve the problems for them. In courses with synchronous components, this can be accomplished as a participation grade. In asynchronous designs, graded participation should be clearly defined activities that hold students accountable for engaging the bridge questions in meaningful ways.

A Mini Guide for Fixing Anything That Can Go Wrong in the Online Classroom

Errol Craig Sull

How nice it is when we teach an online course from beginning to end, with no errors, no problems, and no emergencies! Ah, but this is the stuff of fiction, for in reality each online instructor will encounter difficulties in his or her course. How each is handled can determine a good or poor outcome.

What follows are the top five suggestions for handling all possible problems, followed by the three most common genres of problems, and how to respond to the most common three in each category:

The five most important approaches to fixing problems

1. Don't panic. Cools heads need to prevail with any online teaching crisis—your world will not end. Using a computer introduces more opportunities for mishaps and problems. Thousands of online instructors have come before you, and each has encountered his or her share of mistakes. Keep this in mind, and it will place any online teaching problems you encounter in a better perspective. Work methodically and smartly to overcome the situation—it will happen, and you'll gain valuable experience for future classes.

2. Have a Plan B folder ready. While we cannot anticipate all problems we'll encounter while teaching our online classes, there are many possible scenarios we can list. These come from personal experience, colleagues, and professional development activities. As you come across these problems, develop a list of what you would do in case each happened to you. Include any contact information needed for each scenario. Having a Plan B prepared can help minimize initial distress.

3. Communicate about the problem. It's admirable to want to go it alone in correcting any unexpected problem, but since the problem usually affects others as well, you should let them know about it. Also, you just may not have the skills or ability to right the situation on your own. Keep a complete list of email addresses, phone numbers; and Twitter, instant messaging, and Facebook contact information handy. Be sure to contact your students.

4. Know how to repair any resulting damage. Take immediate steps to do any necessary damage control. This can include allowing extra time for submission of assignments, waiving of late submission penalties, reworking and/or adding assignments, and calling students. And be sure to add the steps you took to your Plan B folder: the

problem may not happen again, but if it does it's nice to have all the steps you took in print, so the situation can be handled smoothly.

5. Don't let it get you down. The thoughts of negative evaluations, extra time needed to correct the problem, and a less-than-satisfying teaching experience are possible post-incident outcomes. But don't let these linger. They will wear on your ability to teach. Understand some things are out of your control. Also, if you have an overall stellar teaching record it becomes a wonderful insurance policy.

The three areas of problems in online courses—and how to resolve the three most common problems in each:

Your course

• **Course or school website down.** This happens at any school that offers online courses. The reasons are many, and the website can be down for a short time or a day or more. Have student phone numbers (and other contact information) available to give them an update on the situation and provide reassurance. When the website comes back, post a general announcement to the class about any changes that might have to be made as a result of the problem (Remember that you might not be able to reach all students when the site is down).

• **Loss of Internet.** The same approaches apply here as when a school or course website is down with one exception: loss of Internet connectivity is usually localized to the online instructor, so an immediate call to the supervisor might be necessary (depending on how long the Internet will be down) to explain the problem.

• **Links and/or software not working.** Even a thorough run-through of everything prior to the beginning of the course does not guarantee that all links and software will remain error-free throughout the course. Have all contacts to

the school's IT department handy, and when something is not working, immediately contact the department. Also, let your supervisor know and post a general announcement to the class (and make any necessary adjustments to the course).

Your students

• **Controlling and/or angry students.** These students can disrupt an otherwise harmonious online class and must be addressed immediately. Begin with individual emails (and, when applicable, general postings in class reminding of course decorum). When these don't yield the desired results, call the disruptive student.

Whether you communicate via text or voice, always be positive, upbeat, and polite. Be sure to let the student know you value his or her presence, and your primary goal is a great learning experience for the student. And when such a situation still cannot be resolved, or it is resolved but you deem it necessary, let your supervisor know.

• **Hesitant and/or shy students.** There are many possible reasons for students to hang back and not participate in discussions or to give a minimal effort. Positive encouragement is the key to drawing these students out. One of the

best ways is to acknowledge and congratulate the student on something positive the student posted in a discussion or wrote on an assignment. An email or a phone call can reveal some personal situation in the student's life that is affecting his

sure to let your supervisor know so arrangements can be made. Sometimes, you may need a few days away from the course—let your supervisor know—and perhaps you can maintain the course on autopilot for this time. Should you tell your

In the online environment where the majority of the work occurs asynchronously, students may resist having to work with others on graded assignments.

or her involvement. Assure the student that you will work with him or her in getting through the course.

• **Students who are absent or who don't submit assignments on time.** The two major reasons for these occurrences are students who don't care much for the course or school and students who have personal situations that affect their ability to meet deadlines. While you can't change every student's behavior, individualized emails—and especially phone calls—can go a long way toward resolving the absences/tardiness. Also, keep an upbeat, interested, and enthusiastic tone in the course. It helps make students feel more at ease.

Your personal life

• **Major negative life events.** Deaths, illnesses, relationship problems, loss of full-time employment are just a few examples of the negative situations that can distract us from our online teaching duties. Of course, the show must go on. If you cannot work through the problem be

students about the event? It's up to you to decide how much to reveal, but often it's enough to say, "a personal situation that must be addressed" is fine.

• **New responsibilities.** A new child, added work duties, and additional school studies can impact one's time, and if not managed properly these can disrupt your online teaching. To minimize the disruption, be sure to use solid time management and organizational techniques. Also, see if there is anything in your life that can temporarily be put on hold to allow for a bit more time.

• **Travel.** When traveling, be sure you will have the connectivity and the time needed to teach the course. Make sure your laptop, tablet, or other device is in top form before travel, and let the students know how your trip might change your schedule.

REMEMBER: Pencil points break, copiers go down, cars get flat tires, and food spoils—it's how we react to such situations that helps determine a smooth or bumpy day in our lives.

The Faculty Focus newsletter is a free resource that publishes articles on effective teaching strategies for both the college classroom and online course.