

TIPS AND TRICKS FOR TEACHING ONLINE: HOW TO TEACH LIKE A PRO!

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Abstract

This paper summarizes some of the best ideas and practices gathered from successful online instructors and recent literature. Suggestions include good online class design, syllabus development, and online class facilitation offering hints for success for both new and experienced online instructors.

Teaching online is a little like gardening. Students, like plants, need a healthy and fertile environment if they are going to mature and thrive in their online courses. It takes planning, preparation, hard work, and enough knowledge to know what to do (and what not to do) in order to see the labor yield an abundant harvest. Online instruction is new to many instructors in higher education, and for good reason. In just the last few years, it has grown from an academic experiment to a recognized distance learning modality. In fact, even traditional classes have embraced many of the teaching methods online education has popularized.

Because of this relatively new instructional methodology, many online instructors may feel a bit like a novice gardener. They understand the basic concepts, but are eager to discover new tips or tricks from fellow colleagues. In most cases, if two or more online instructors are together in a social situation, the discussion will soon shift to war stories and proudly offered pieces of advice. This paper offers many of those tips and tricks, gathered not from the local Sunday afternoon garden club, but from conversations and interviews with online instructors, current literature, conferences, and email listservs, along with personal experiences.

Teaching online shares similarities to teaching in the classroom; however, even the best traditional instructors may still find that teaching in an online environment can lead to feelings of inadequacy and being ill-prepared. Providing training and tools for ePedagogy is the key to overcoming feelings of insufficiency. Preparation is needed to instill instructor confidence as well as create successful outcomes in the online classroom. Even experienced online instructors will find helpful and timesaving ideas from tips shared from other instructors.

VanSickle (2003) recognized that the new online instructor should understand how the Internet has changed student expectations. These student expectations, described by Lansdell (2001), included increased levels of feedback, increased attention, and additional resources to help them learn (as cited in VanSickle, 2003). In response to meeting these expectations, new and alternative methods of instruction and online class facilitation have evolved which support student cohesiveness as well as encourage learning. To successfully challenge the online student, an increased amount of communication is required between the instructor and the student (White, 2000).

Multiple methods for online instruction are utilized throughout academe. One method, commonly described as the online learning community approach, has become preeminent in online instruction. Boettcher and Conrad (1999) define an online learning community as a community that “consists of learners who support and assist each other, make decisions synergistically, and communicate with peers on a variety of topics beyond those assigned” (p. 88). For this paper, the following is assumed of the online course:

- The course meets online during a regularly defined semester or quarter.
- The course is broken up into learning modules or content chunks.
- Student participation is required within a set time period – each content module is presented with a given start and end time.
- Learning takes place as students synthesize the prepared material and interact in the class discussions with peers and the instructor(s).

Four stages are necessary for successful gardening and four stages are necessary for successful online teaching. A good gardener will prepare the soil for planting early; sow the seed; nurture the seedling to maturity, then harvest the crop reflecting on a productive season. A good online instructor will follow the same basic path: develop and structure the learning environment, introduce the material, encourage academic and intellectual growth, and finally, evaluate the effectiveness as he/she watches the students depart with an understanding and appreciation of the subject that will hopefully remain with them for a lifetime.

Preparing the Soil—Develop and Structure the Learning Environment

The first step in online instruction occurs long before the seeds are planted. It takes significant planning and preparation as Brewer, DeJonge, and Stout (2001) suggest, how the online course is designed “can either facilitate or impede the learning process” (p. 12). Much of this groundwork centers on designing the course syllabus. Preparation of the syllabus enriches the soil, providing a fertile and prepared environment for learning to occur.

Within the syllabus, student expectations should be clearly defined along well-written directions relating to course activities. Ko and Rossen (2004) relate the syllabus to a course contract and observe that new online instructors do not include enough information in their syllabi. These expectations should be stated in the opening orientation material as well as in the course syllabus. The preparation includes clearly defining these elements within the syllabus: contact methods, course objectives, attendance requirements, late work policies, the course schedule, orientation aids, grading scales and rubrics, communication practices, and technology policies.

Contact Information

Of course, the typical items should be included in the syllabus such as office times, contact information, and preferred modes of contacts. However, unlike a traditional course, instructors should be very clear about online office hours or hours of unavailability. For instance, if church attendance on Sunday mornings occurs regularly, it would be appropriate to inform the students in the syllabus of the offline time on Sunday mornings. Boettcher and Conrad (1999) suggest that an online instructor not be available twenty-four hours a day to the student but to establish a framework for turnaround response. This framework should offer recommendations for how long a student should expect to wait before repeating an email request that has gone

unanswered. Jarmon (1999) also states that instructors should set the expectations for the students regarding response time and let the students know how quickly to expect a response.

On the other hand, if there are times the instructor will definitely be online, he/she could include a “fastback” time or online office hours. A fastback time is a time period when students can expect a quicker than normal email response, usually within the hour, but often as soon as the message is received. Many instructors offer online office hours where they enter into the class chatroom and wait for questions. It is often reported by instructors that students underutilize this time, choosing to send email as their questions arise, rather than waiting until a prescribed time in the future. An alternative to the using virtual office hour time for academic questions can be to use the room for social conversation. A virtual social experience helps create a closer bond with both the instructor and with others with in the course, furthering the strength of the learning community. This is a form of the “cyber sandbox” described by Palloff and Pratt (1999). The cyber sandbox is defined as a generic discussion or bulletin board area for students to just hang out and talk about movies or jobs or whatever their interests are. The creation of a social outlet not only helps to keep regular class discussion areas on topic, but Palloff and Pratt (1999) observed that “the sharing of our lives, including our travels, our observations, our emotions, and who we are as people is deliberately brought into the classroom in an effort to promote group cohesion and connection” (p. 78).

Course Objectives

Well-defined course objectives are an important element in any course syllabus. Clearly stated objectives are even more important in online courses as students do not have the opportunity to participate in the opening day syllabus discussions so common in many traditional courses (Jarmon, 1999). The communication of course objectives is also important because in an online course, much of the responsibility for learning is placed upon the student. Failure to properly inform the student of the course objectives leaves them feeling confused and puzzled about where each assignment, and moreover, the entire course is headed.

Attendance Requirements

Attendance requirements should be clearly stated, as attendance is necessary for courses that utilize online learning communities. Palloff and Pratt (2001) advise, “If clear guidelines are not presented, students can become confused and disorganized and the learning process will suffer” (p. 28). The online learning community requires that students take active roles in helping each other learn (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999). If a student is absent, they have not only cheated themselves but also those in their learning community.

Participation requirements must be defined for an online course. Ko and Rossen (2004) recognize “if students aren’t graded, the majority won’t actively participate” (p. 67). Some students think that if they take an online course, they can take a vacation and still catch up with their coursework upon their return or do a few modules ahead of time before they leave. While online courses do allow for flexibility, students must participate. So if instructors want good participation, the participation requirements must be identified. Students may ask if they can post ahead of the other students or take the course on a self-paced schedule. Because of the prevalence of this question, online instructors should have a policy regarding early posting and have it clearly stated in the syllabus.

Participation in online courses is inherently different from traditional courses. Students do not automatically understand how to participate in online courses. Course assignment and participation requirements should be thoroughly discussed in the syllabus as well as within the assignments themselves. Where possible, assignments should be grouped into categories to help provide context to the nature of the assignments. These categories often include class discussion, web searches, quizzes, and reading assignments, etc. A good suggestion is to identify each type of assignment with consistent icons. Some online instructors have found that creating a sample discussion model increases students' understanding of the participation requirements necessary for credit in the course.

Late Work Policy

The instructor should create a policy for late assignment submissions and missed exams. Again, students who are not actively participating in the learning community are not assisting other students. Because of this interdependence, many instructors have a “no late work accepted policy,” while others assign reduced or half-credit. Other instructors create alternative assignments or exams for past due work or tests. To facilitate ease of grading, these alternative assignments could be offered at the end of the course for all those who missed assignments during the normal time period.

Course Schedule

One of the most important elements of an online course syllabus is the course schedule. The course schedule should list beginning dates and due dates for each module, the assigned reading, the assessment, and other activities. The course schedule becomes the map for the student and should be placed in the course syllabus, inside the course material, and redundantly throughout the course. In fact, Ko and Rossen (2004) recommend, “In an online environment, redundancy is often better than elegant succinctness” (p.76). If the website or course management system allows linking from the syllabus, then link each module of course content to the course schedule making it readily available to the student. Instructors should provide the course schedule in a printable format along with a digital format. Students should be encouraged to print out their course schedules and keep them handy.

Along with the course schedule, each module of content should contain a checklist for the student to use for objective completion. This should also be print ready, as some students need to print their materials and read them offline. Course content that presents an easy to find and understandable assignment checklist will save numerous emails from students inquiring about due dates and pleas for deadline extensions.

Orientation Aids

An orientation note or hints for success for the student should be written and available for the student (Jarmon, 1999). This is a note for the student, reminding them of hints for time management or and good study practice. Another helpful suggestion is to create a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) area for students to use in locating self-help answers to questions (Jarmon, 1999). This allows the students to look for information first before emailing the instructor. As questions are asked over time and as answers are provided, a comprehensive FAQ will emerge. McCormack and Jones (1999) suggests the FAQ page could not only “reduce the

number of questions at the start of the semester” (p. 2) but throughout the duration of the course. If a chatroom is used for virtual office hours, the questions discussed should also be added to the course FAQ.

Grading Scales/Rubrics

Grading scales and rubrics should be defined for each assignment. If the courseware management system allows, each assignment could be linked to the rubric for clarity. When group assignments are utilized, instructors should use a grading rubric for the students to grade each other individually as well as the entire group. This helps encourage those students who do not participate equally and provides for equity in the grading of group work. It is also helpful if the instructor assigns groups or teams the first time. The class should get to know each other before group self-selection is allowed.

Communication Practices

An inbox consistently full of email will be overwhelming to any instructor. Therefore, it is important to include in the syllabus elements for class behavior, guidelines for posting to the discussion boards, email protocols, and digital file submission procedures. Establishing email protocols and other communication guidelines will assist the instructor in online classroom management. Many instructors require the course session number in the subject line so that the email related to the course can be filtered to a separate mailbox. Students may be asked or required to use their institutional email address so that instructors are not confused by changes in address mid-term or are required to deal with bounced mail from full inboxes on students’ free email accounts.

An instructor can create individual email sub-folders for each of the online students. Once email has been answered and or graded, the email can be filed away immediately providing for a record of all course correspondence. Another tip for instructors is to read their mail backwards, from newest received to oldest. In many cases, students may have already solved their problems and earlier questions then become irrelevant.

Technology Policy

A technology policy should be stated in the syllabus that directs students to a helpdesk or other resource other than the instructor for technology problems. Additionally, instructors should encourage students to create drafts of postings or assignments in a word processor and save them before posting to the discussion board. This will minimize spelling and grammar mistakes and provide a backup copy for the student in case of a technical glitch during posting. It is also a good idea to encourage students to save all of their work on a computer hard drive and to a removable device, such as a floppy disk or USB drive. Saving their work to a USB flash drive allows the student portability if their systems go down. They can then take their files with them and use the computer of a family member or friend, or any publicly accessible computer, such as libraries or cybercafes, in the event of a technical problem at their home.

Sow the Seed – Opening the course

The second step for successful online teaching is opening the course and the initiation of instruction. An enthusiastic and engaging opening week of class is a great way to start off the course. This time of seed germination is a fragile period; disruptions or unnecessary interferences may set a tone that stifles learning during the remainder of the course. It is important to create a good initial impression that will help develop the learning community and begin to nurture the students to maturity. This opening of the course is highlighted by sending a welcoming email and announcement, initiating class-wide introductions, encouraging students to read the syllabus, and establishing a tone of excellence.

Welcome Email and Announcement

Moore, Winograd and Lange (2001) offer several tips for the first session of class: send a welcome email that invites the students to join the class, telephone students who don't appear in the classroom the first week, and duplicate your welcome email in a class announcement if the course management system offers this ability. The announcement should encourage students to check their email for the initial course email of welcome. The first week should not require many assignments but allow the time for students to post introductions and get to know each other. Any technical issues should be dealt with immediately, including offering access to helpdesk support if available.

Introductions

The instructor should spend time getting to know the students individually the first week of class and encourage the students to do the same. An introductory discussion inviting the participants to introduce themselves and to share something in particular with the group is a successful strategy for building the learning community. The instructor should participate heavily in this discussion (being careful not to dominate it) and should respond to one or two things in the introductory posting of each student. Ko and Rossen (2004) suggest the “initial postings in the discussion forum, your first messages sent to all by email or listserv, or the greeting you post on your course home page will do much to set the tone and expectations for your course. These ‘first words’ can also provide models of online communication for your students” (p. 189).

Offering an icebreaker in the first session, such as “share your silliest moment in college” or “name the animal you most identify with,” can help alleviate the nervousness students experience and provide insight relating to the personalities of their fellow students. Several good icebreakers that also provide an instructor with a basic student learning inventory include the VARK learning styles (<http://www.vark-learn.com/english/index.asp>) and the Keirsey temperament sorter (<http://www.keirsey.com>). The Kingdomality profiler (<http://www.kingdomality.com>) provides not only a Medieval vocational assessment but also is fun and generates discussion possibilities. Each of these websites offers instant results, and the students can post their results and a short paragraph if they agree or disagree. Countless other sites allow students to discover their commonalities and similarities as well and can be found with a simple Internet search.

Emphasize the Syllabus

A great hint for the first session of class is to create a syllabus quiz or scavenger hunt that “teaches students how to navigate your course” (Schweizer, 1999, p. 11). Then, offering bonus points to assess syllabus comprehension is a successful way of engaging the student in the first session of class. Encouraging students to review the syllabus in a more thorough process can alleviate confusion later in the course as they familiarize themselves with the course requirements.

Establish a Tone of Excellence

The first several weeks also set the tone for academic participation. Instructors should grade discussions/assignments stringently in the first few assignment cycles. Establish a tone of excellence early and encourage students to do their best. “Students want to receive timely and personal feedback” (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999, p. 97) early in an online course. They may not be able to assess their progress as easily online as they would in a traditional course (Boaz, 1999). It is also helpful to remind the students of these expectations throughout the course. It is always easier to lessen the workload later than to increase it.

Nurture the Growth – Nurturing the Learning Community

The third step of teaching online is to nurture the learning community. The learning community must be established and then become self-sufficient. The learning community, like a garden, must be cultivated. This cultivation occurs when an instructor provides ample communication, facilitates the discussion board, treats each student as an individual, adds emotion and belonging, responds quickly to questions, models required behavior, creates appropriately sized groups, and clearly outlines expectations for group activities.

Provide Ample Communication

Online students are eager for communication. Lack of instructor-student communication early on will create a negative learning community thus disabling the learning process. Instructors should use class-wide announcements, group emails, and chat archives to facilitate accessible, public communication in the online course. As the course grows, students should be encouraged to facilitate the discussion and assume some of the roles previously controlled by the instructor.

Communication must be both reflective and proactive. Many courses use class-wide journals or summaries to bring closure to modules. Sending out class-wide summation/introduction/transitional emails at the end of each module, wrapping up the previous content, and introducing the next module provide for a sense of transition. Reminding the students of requirements for the current module, such as projects or exam dates, is very helpful to the students. It takes about ten minutes a week for either of these tasks, yet the benefit provided is far more valuable. Proactive communication yields fewer questions, saving dozens of hours answering the questions individually.

Instructors should keep their interaction with the class as open as possible. Using the “Course Announcement” area frequently for reminders and duplicate important information in emails will increase open communication. It is also important to communicate to the class each time grades are posted. This creates a “don’t call me, I’ll call you” communication pattern for

grade information. Within that communication, remind students to contact the instructor if a grade is missing. This puts the responsibility back with the student for finding and submitting any missing work.

Facilitate the Discussion Board

Bischoff (2000) suggests, “The key to online education’s effectiveness lies in large part with the facilitator” (p. 58). Likewise, for the threaded discussion to be successful, the instructor should become a facilitator and review the discussions without controlling them. Many online instructors have found what many gardeners realize: at times, hands-on action produces results but in many cases, too much activity can be as harmful as none at all. This particular role of the facilitator in the online classroom can be difficult for a traditional instructor to accept. A traditional instructor may be accustomed to dominating or controlling the discussion through lecture, but in an online class, all students have equal opportunity to participate in the discussion and often do outside of the instructor’s influence. It takes a good deal of time for some traditional faculty to feel truly comfortable in allowing the discussion to take place outside the classroom and without their intervention, but that is fine—experience will eventually guide them.

For good discussion board facilitation, the instructor should randomly and selectively reply to students and provide prompt explanations or further comments regarding the topic of discussion. The instructor or facilitator should provide feedback in the discussion even if it is merely a “cheerleading” comment, redirection, or guideline submission. The instructor should intervene when the discussion seems to be struggling or headed the wrong way (Palloff & Pratt, 2001) but should not over-participate in the discussion, as this will be considered stifling and restrictive. However, the instructor should prompt absentee students or “lurkers” with an outside communication, whether it is a gentle reminder email or a telephone call. According to Bischoff, (2000), “A phone call may prove more timely and effective” (p. 70) in helping a student engage in the discussion.

Many instructors will assign assistant facilitators and summarizers for each discussion session, providing different opportunities for student involvement. Other instructors use “coaching teams” made up of students or tutors as the first line of support, then invite the students to ask the instructor for clarification or further assistance. If good online facilitation of the discussion does occur, the “discussion will end in acceptance of different opinions, respect for well-supported beliefs, and improved problem-solving skills” (Brewer, DeJonge, & Stout, 2001, p. 109)

Treat Each Student as an Individual

All instructors should try “to treat their students as unique” (White, 2000, p.11). A simple technique is to use the students’ preferred names or nicknames in all correspondence. It is also important to try and add positive emotion and visual clues to the course. The online environment can be limiting when the communication is mostly text-based. This serves the same purpose as nodding a head in agreement or offering a welcoming smile as would occur in a traditional course.

Add Emotion and Belonging

When online learning is facilitated incorrectly, the students can feel isolated and cheated out of a valuable learning experience. This could lead to feelings of separation and disappointment and would probably hamper the success in learning. White (2000) advises that “a positive emotional climate can serve as a frame of reference for online students activities and will therefore shape individual expectancies, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors throughout a program” (p. 7). Since there are no visual clues in the online classroom, one suggestion for communication is to type out the emotion expressed in parentheses (*smile*) or to include emoticons, such as :-) for happiness or :-0 for surprise or dismay. It is also possible to describe you body language in the email. Salmon (2002) offers this example: “When I read your message, I jumped for joy” (p. 150). This descriptive effort shows the students the instructor’s personality, which in turn, stimulates the online community. It is also beneficial, as Hiss (2000) suggests, for online instructors to keep their sense of humor.

Respond Quickly

Time delays in a threaded discussion can also be frustrating for students. This is especially true if the response was misunderstood and the students have attempted to clarify. Online instructors should try to post daily or at least on a regular schedule that has been communicated the students. Some instructors create homework discussion threads for content support, which provides a forum for students to help each other.

Model Behavior

Instructors, who want to engage students in collaborative group work, must first understand that certain social skills are necessary for successful group work. These skills can be established at the onset of the course when the learning community is formed and students recognize that the online classroom is a safe place to interact. These skills should be modeled by the instructor early in the course and outlined in the course syllabus. For example, if a two paragraph introduction is expected, then the instructor should model that in their own introduction to the class in the opening discussion.

Create Appropriately Sized Groups

Most students enjoy the online social interaction and find that it encourages their learning experience. Independently minded students may even enjoy working within the group because of the asynchronous nature of the course and may participate more readily than in the face-to-face classroom. In creating the groups, Ko and Rossen (2004) recommend that instructors divide students into groups instead of allowing students to pick their own groups. Students may find it difficult to meet online and form groups quickly. Many instructors search through the introductory material looking for commonalities among students for grouping. Finding common elements such as a love for dogs or a shared hobby will help hasten the group cohesion.

The instructor should not make the group sizes too large or too small. The most effective group size appears to be four students per group. Utilizing these suggestions, the group work should begin easily as to promote as positive learning experience in the online classroom. The actual process for completing the project should be outlined by the instructor, but the final outcome should be the group’s responsibility.

Clearly Outline Expectations for Group Activities

The instructor should offer a grading rubric (that is also stated in the syllabus) for both individual member grades as well as for overall group grades. Group collaborative suggestions in the traditional classroom are simply executed by having the students turn to their partners and share ideas. When this happens online, it is more difficult for students to initially set up the contacts because of the lack of proximity and familiarity with other students. Email communication makes this both possible and efficient in the online environment.

The following suggested activities for successful group learning were included in Heidi Schweizer's (1999) book *Designing and Teaching an On-line Course*:

- **Group Identity** – Ask the group members to create a group name.
- **Which One is False** – A group activity for which each member of the group is asked to come up with three statements about himself (two true and one false), share them with each other on-line and try to figure out which one is false. This serves as a fun way to get to know each other and begin to develop a more personal relationship.
- **Assign Roles and Responsibilities** – By assigning roles, the group begins to depend on each other to see the value of sharing the load.
 - **Encourager** – emails instructor on group cooperation.
 - **Summarizer** – writes up group decisions and edits group work.
 - **Checker** is responsible for checking on whether group members understand main concepts.
 - **Technician** is available to other group members for technical advice or assistance.

(p. 59)

Other suggestions for group work in the online classroom can include role playing, online debates, case studies with evaluation, and discovery roles in which the instructor sets up puzzles or open-ended questions for hypothesis.

Harvest—Plan For the Next Semester

The final stage of online instruction is assessment. To watch learning take place in the minds of students is a rewarding experience. It is why many instructors choose to teach in relatively lower paying positions rather than work in the more lucrative for-profit world. Just like gardeners in autumn, it is a time of reflection and satisfaction for a job well done. The tiny seeds sown early in the season are actively growing and producing. It is at this stage that instructors should evaluate the course objectives to be assured the students have accomplished each goal. What worked well and what needs to be improved for next season? This can be accomplished by keeping a journal and by soliciting feedback on instruction and on course content.

Keep a Journal

Self-examination and contemplative thought are successful approaches for course improvement. A recommended practice is to keep a journal while teaching a course that records items that should be redesigned or altered the next time the course is taught. The instructor should make notes of assignments that worked well and those that struggled while critically evaluating the effectiveness of the content and instruction.

Solicit Feedback on Instruction

Student feedback improves the instructor's teaching. A good place to gather the feedback is inside the course management system. It is helpful to survey for student feedback during the course, not just at the end with course evaluations. The instructor can develop a discussion thread for students to post feedback anonymously about the course, including possible suggestions for improvement. If a student does offer feedback, the instructor should acknowledge the feedback and be appreciative for the remarks.

Feedback instruments should provide the students with a way to communicate what they like the best and the least about the instruction of the course. If possible, mid-course changes in responses to students' comments will allow students to feel empowered through taking an active role in their education.

Solicit Feedback on Course Content

All online instructors should look for possible course revisions. Course content should never stay static. Moore, Winograd, and Lange (2001) propose that "because online course design and teaching are so new, evaluating the effectiveness of your course and then refining it based on the results of that evaluation become imperative" (p. 12.3). If using end-of-course summary feedback, the instructor must receive this feedback in time to reevaluate the course for the next semester and add suggested changes, if necessary. Another possibility is an end-of-session discussion regarding the focus of the next session, thus allowing for minor course revisions even as the course continues to be taught.

Conclusion

Online teaching has brought a new modality to education for teaching at a distance. It has also brought frustration and anxiety to the online instructors. Moore, Winograd, and Lange (2001) remark "One faculty member who had only just finished her course online said it was like diving into a great chasm, blindfolded" (p. 11.3). Instructors who are comfortable with the traditional methods for teaching in the classroom struggle to engage students over the Internet. While many of the same techniques apply, teaching online requires additional techniques for success. These techniques are similar to the same steps a gardener takes to develop a garden. In the online classroom, the ground is prepared with a carefully designed syllabus and policies, the seed is planted in the first session of class, and the learning community is nurtured to grow and become self-sufficient. These steps yield students who are engaged and working toward completion of the learning objectives. By utilizing these effective strategies for teaching online, an instructor will be successful in engaging the online learner, nurturing a successful learning community, and alleviating the frustration and fear that goes along with teaching online.

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