TEACHING IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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Vast changes as well as new options for online learning help focus on learner needs and success. Students are individuals and there is a chance to review the existing standards and recommend changes to align educational experiences with the student’s goals and individual traits. At the same time, there is a need to acquire skills like problem solving along with the ability to explore, research, and take charge of one’s own learning. These are the desirable outcomes. The results presented in the research can help faculty wherever they might be most helpful for instructors with limited access to faculty support services and for faculty with little or no experience in online instructional environments and, likely, little time to prepare for online teaching. This is a useful resource as well for faculty who are planning a gradual transition from the face-to-face-only environment to blended or fully online environments. Even faculty already experienced in technology-rich environments will find practical tips for developing more expertise in effective teaching practices.

Faculty mentors are the directors of the learning experience. The faculty mentor is not a sage on the stage transmitting knowledge or a guide on the side. When the faculty member takes center stage, a learner may retreat and be more passive unless the faculty is encouraging interaction and engagement with the content every few minutes while also providing time for reflection and integration. An important goal is for students to be engaged with the content at the same level of intensity as the faculty mentor. Strategies that support this shift in responsibilities include assigning students roles in moderating forums; preparing concept explanations, summaries, and examples for other students; conducting peer reviewing activities; and occasionally assuming responsibility for being the forum moderator. The role of the faculty member in this learning experiences framework is to mentor, monitor, examine, affirm acquired knowledge, and challenge the thinking of students doing these types of teaching and learning activities.

The role of instructor should be that of mentor or supporter. In online courses, instructors should not be talking heads like they used to be in traditional courses. In this sense, presenting video clips of a lecturing instructor in an online course as the only source of information is a bad practice. This leaves the learner in a passive state. Such video clip resources can be utilized in a more active way. For example, learners and instructors can participate in online chat discussions after watching these video clip resources. In addition to facilitating online discussions, the instructors might focus on students’ learning. For example, they can send supporting e-mail messages to encourage learner participation in course activities. The online learning environments afford the opportunity to shift the role of instructors from “delivering” to “listening and supporting” (Judith V. Boettcher, Rita-Mari Conrad, 2016).

Another way of providing variety in your course design is to balance asynchronous activities with synchronous activities. When online courses were initially offered, they were almost totally asynchronous. In many ways, they represented a new generation of the correspondence distance learning courses so
widespread in the middle of the twentieth century. Now we have tools supporting entirely new generations of online and blended courses. We have social media tools and the “Internet of things” connecting everyone with everything. We have learning management and course management systems, real-time synchronous classrooms, massive open online courses, spontaneous collaboration tools, and an almost infinite number of web tools, smart phones, and wearables that support synchronous chat, video messaging, and more. These tools make it possible to do almost everything that we have been accustomed to doing in face-to-face classrooms, and discussions and events can be recorded and archived for later and multiple views. In addition, we can engage learners in more extensive collaborative and reflective activities, from anywhere, at any time we choose to be awake and communicating. Sometimes there is nothing better than a real-time interactive brainstorming and sharing discussion; other times, the requirement to think, plan, write, and reflect is what makes learning most effective for an individual. The variety of activities now possible makes it easy to create many types of effective learning experiences and environments. Many problem-based courses, such as financial, statistical, or engineering courses, use live classroom tools for interactive, real-time problem-solving.

Ask for Informal Feedback Early in the Term Early feedback surveys or informal discussions are effective in getting students to provide feedback on what is working well in a course and solicit suggestions and ideas on what might help them have a better course experience. Often early feedback can alert you to students having difficulty with something as fixable as access to materials, or some minor technology glitch.

All learners do not need to learn all course content; all learners do need to learn the core concepts. This core learning principle focuses on course content, usually described in the desired learning outcomes. These are the knowledge, skills, and perspectives to be learned, acquired, or developed. The essential idea here is that not all content is equal (Judith V. Boettcher, Rita-Mari Conrad, 2016).

Use a variety of large group, small group and individual work experiences

A learning community has more ways to develop when learners participate in a variety of learning experiences. Many students enjoy the opportunity to brainstorm concepts and work through assignments with one or two or more fellow students, particularly when they don’t gather in a physical space very often. At the same time many students really enjoy working and learning independently. Building in options and opportunities for students to work together and individually is a key characteristic of good learning design. Variety gives students ways of tapping into their own varied skills and abilities. For example, developing skills and knowledge can be more stimulating when students immerse themselves in course content by working through cases and challenging problems and discussing stimulating ideas with fellow students. Teams are particularly effective when students are working on complex case studies or scenarios for the first time.

Learning to establish and facilitate small groups, especially in an online environment, is a new skill for many instructors. However, a well-structured and purposeful small group experience can allow the online student to work intimately with a small group of people and experience success as a team member. Successful small group work offers the student a greater sense of community, can increase enthusiasm and motivation with coursework, and can also be used as a stepping stone to larger class projects during the overall progression of a course. Collaboration also addresses multiple learning styles, reduces online isolation, provides students opportunities to test out real-world practices, and it allows students to gain
competence in using teamwork, critical in the workplace. Groups can be organized in many ways and for a variety of purposes. In small groups, students are typically given a problem or task to solve as a team. Proponents of small groups suggest that this teaching approach mimics today’s specialized work environments where employees are often required to work as part of team toward achievement of a larger goal. In addition to learning content material, students also learn skills required of a team member such as brainstorming, problem solving, effective communication, team leadership, and team accountability. Through their work with team members, students can begin to identify and utilize their areas of strengths, while also learning to rely on and utilize the strengths of others toward the overall achievement of the task (Lisa Dawley, 2007).

Prepare Discussion Posts That Invite Responses, Questions, Discussions, and Reflections

One of the primary differences between the online and blended classroom and the classroom of the campus-based course is how students and faculty communicate and the range of tools that they use to do so. After all, we don’t see the students as often; rather, we get to know them by what they write and say in the discussion boards and their assignments and, to a lesser degree, in e-mail, phone, and collaborative online classrooms. The communication space that is the heart and soul of the online course community is the discussion board. This is the primary place where faculty talk to students and students talk to other students. This is also the place where students and faculty get to know one another, and the tool that helps a widely dispersed group of students and faculty become a learning community.

Discussions in an online course are the equivalent of class discussions in a face-to-face class. A key difference, of course, is that these discussions are asynchronous, meaning that students have time for thought and reflection. Another key difference is that discussions, blogs, and other tools require written or audio comments that are captured and become part of a course archive. Discussions are often designed for one of the following learning purposes:
- Provide a place for an open question-and-answer forum
- Encourage critical or creative thinking
- Reinforce domain or procedural processes
- Achieve social interaction and community building so learners get to know each other personally and intellectually
- Validate thinking and experiences
- Support students in their own reflections and inquiries

Here are a few hints for discussion postings culled from many conversations with experienced online faculty:
- Create open-ended questions that learners can explore and apply the concepts that they are learning.
- Model Socratic-type probing and follow-up questions: “Why do you think that?” “What is your reasoning?” “Is there an alternative strategy?”
- Ask clarifying questions that encourage students to think about what they know and don’t know.
- Stagger due dates of the responses, and consider a midpoint summary or encouraging comments.

Provide guidelines and instruction on responding to other students. For example, suggest a two-part response: “Say what you liked or agreed with or what resonated with you,” and “Conclude with a follow-up question such as what you are wondering about or curious about.”
Every learning experience includes the environment or context in which the learner interacts. This core learning principle completes the four elements of any learning experience: the environment in which the learner interacts with the content, knowledge, skill, fellow learners or expert. The environment might be simple, as in a learner using one resource independently, at home, or out and about while jogging or driving, or working in a popular “third place” (Oldenburg, 1999) such as a coffee shop. Alternatively, the environment might be more complex. Several learners may be gathered together working on problems or a project in a face-to-face study group, or several may be on a conference call or in a collaborative virtual setting. Or learners might be gathered at the same time in a virtual meeting place using a collaborative web place, sharing documents on cell phones or laptops. An instructor may or may not be present.

We Shape Our Tools, and Our Tools Shape Us.

The fact that we are shaped by our tools and that we shape our tools may appear at first to be a strange design and learning principle. The essence of this principle is that learning always occurs within a particular context that influences the learning. Simply put, learning tools make a difference. Where we learn and what we learn with makes a difference. Communication tools support information access and flow in real time, enabling current events, global perspectives, and far-flung resources to be brought into immediate and fresh relief. Every statement by a faculty member is subject to challenge or confirmation from a student as searching and verification tools are at their fingertips. This means that faculty need to adapt the course and the content to students who bring in ideas and content that might be quite unfamiliar to them, and to defend, support, and expand their own mental models.

Teachers are searching for tools and resources to save time and make their lives easier. Such a large part of your classroom time is taken up by the process of organizing students work and making sure your students are aware of all the upcoming assignments as a solution, several teachers have started using google classrooms to assist with classroom management. Google Classroom makes it very easy for all the teachers to provide a digital or hybrid learning classroom. Designed from the ground up with teacher feedback, the platform allows teachers to communicate with students, share innovative and technologically productive tools, and create creative projects and educational elements in their everyday lessons. Google Classroom streamlines the process of having students on the same page, connecting with others, and exchanging ideas through collaborative projects.

Google Apps (formerly known as Google Applications for Your Domain) is a built-in suite of Google purposes that consists of an email program, a WYSIWYG webpage editor, an online calendar, on the spot messaging customer with voice skills, and a web-based phrase processor cum spreadsheet software. Business organizations, instructional establishments, and even individuals can use the Google Apps provider for free (Emily Crawford, 2020).

Zoom is software available on multiple platforms such as Windows, Android, Mac, and iOS devices. It is the brainchild of Eric Yuan. This software is a videotelephony software even though there are other applications in the market. Still, this particular software takes precedence over others as it is smoother for Online meetings with multiple participants. The availability of this software on different platforms makes it easier for students to get access to online education. Zoom is not only used by teachers but also by people of different professions as it makes the discussions easier over long distances. Whether one participant is at home, other in-
office, and third, in the field, all three participants can easily hold a meeting to discuss any particular project over Zoom.

**Conclusion** Teaching online requires reconsideration of the previous methods of teaching and adjusting to the needs of students. These methods include the changing role of a teacher who, in turn, should be that of mentor or supporter, balancing asynchronous activities with synchronous activities, using a variety of large group, small group and individual work experiences. The most common and still efficient means of conducting online classes are Google classroom, Google Apps and Zoom.

### References:

[1] Emily Crawford (2020) Online teaching tools, USA