

10 Things I've Learned About Teaching Online (Sep 09)

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I celebrated an anniversary recently. It's been five years since I taught my first online course.

When I first started to think about teaching online, I realized I had a lot to learn. I had never been an online student, nor did I know much about distance education. I just knew I wanted to be a part of something I felt would benefit those students who—for whatever reason—could not come to a traditional classroom setting. I wanted to help create quality courses for these students that would incorporate the kinds of activity and discussion that typically took place in a classroom-based course.

I wanted to share some of the lessons I've learned over the years about online teaching with other online instructors who are just starting out. There is so much I wish I had known when I first got started, and I can only hope some of my reflections will be helpful to those who might be questioning whether online teaching is right for them.

1. Teaching online is a lot of work.

I'm sometimes asked if I feel it takes more or less time to teach online, compared to teaching in the classroom.

Quite honestly, I don't feel I can answer that question. Online teaching does seem to take more time, but I've never systematically compared it to a classroom-based course.

Up front, it takes a great deal of time to put curricular materials together for an online class. I've spent as much as several weeks reshaping my classroom materials to work for online students. In some cases, activities that I have used effortlessly in the classroom couldn't be adapted at all for online use, such as hands-on activities; so instead, I created new but comparable activities.

I also sunk a lot of time into learning the classroom management system, which at the start of my online teaching was WebCT. How were we teachers going to use assessments with this system, or incorporate discussion? How was I going to grade my students, and how was I going to motivate them to participate in discussion? Countless decisions had to be made at the onset about just how the online course would be structured, operated, and maintained.

Although a lot of effort goes into planning the course and its web site, there's also the matter of the daily and weekly workload. In an online course, students will not necessarily be completing assignments at similar times each week. Instructors must communicate with students on their schedules, which means checking email on a regular basis and keeping up with student discussions that take place on virtual message boards.

Another issue with communication that new online instructors might overlook is that questions that can be answered verbally in the classroom require a written explanation in the online course, and sometimes, it takes more time to write out a sensible explanation than to say it.

If assignments are collected on a regular basis, the instructor needs to be able to grade things quickly and efficiently to ensure that students receive timely feedback, and grading papers and other

assignments electronically might take some time for the instructor to get used to. I try to respond to students' questions and concerns as quickly as I can. I use discussion in my courses, and with around 30 students per course, I need to be online daily so the workload does not become too overwhelming.

In some ways, I think the workload for an online course is similar to that of a face-to-face environment—but it *seems* like more work because it's not as concentrated. For example, in a classroom, an instructor may do the bulk of her work for the week while she is meeting with students, and if all students are together in one place, announcements can be made and questions can be answered for the entire class. In other words, a great deal of teaching can be done in one sitting. An activity (or several activities) can be completed during a single class period, and any issues related to that activity will be discussed in real time with the entire class. Then everybody moves onto the next thing simultaneously.

In the online setting, though, the workload is distributed. Students will likely be working at different times during the week, and their questions will trickle in accordingly. Plus, an activity that might take 20 minutes to complete in a classroom setting might take a few days to discuss online, especially if students are not able to be online together at the same time.

2. Students appreciate regular communication and timely feedback on their progress.

I teach statistics, so students often come to my courses feeling anxious about the subject matter. Students may also feel anxious at the thought of taking an online course, and it should be part of the instructor's job, as much as possible, to put students at ease right from the beginning.

I want them to know I'm there if they need help. I want them to know they will receive quick responses to any questions or concerns they have. I strive to create a supportive online community where students can be free to take risks in discussion, attempting to explain their understanding of challenging concepts and ideas. For this reason, it's crucial that the instructor have a presence online.

I try to let students know that I'm online often, and that I want to hear from them if they have questions or concerns. To set the tone, each semester starts with me asking the students to introduce themselves, and I always begin by posting my own introduction and a photo first. I also conscientiously respond to each introduction individually because I want the class to know that I'm interested in getting to know them, and by modeling ways to respond to posted messages, my students will begin to feel comfortable responding to each other in discussion areas.

Additionally, students should receive timely feedback about their progress in the course. In my courses, students typically work on group discussion assignments as well as various individual assignments, and because I expect them to submit these assignments at various times during the semester, it's only fair that they receive feedback as soon as possible.

Feedback helps students know what their strengths and weaknesses are and gives them time to ask questions and seek assistance before subsequent assignments are due. My teaching assistant and I strive to ensure that all students receive feedback on their work within one week of submitting it. Based on comments from previous students on the final course evaluation form, we know that they value our efforts to be involved in the course and to provide them with consistent and timely feedback.

Sadly, I've heard horror stories over the years from some online students about instructors being largely absent and students getting little or no feedback. I don't think situations like this are the norm, but the instructor who is not comfortable communicating with students electronically might need to think twice about teaching online!

3. Many great tools exist but aren't always necessary.

Many amazingly cool tools can be used in online courses, but it's important to balance what's necessary against what will make the site look impressive.

My approach has been to keep things simple. Video, audio, and animation all have their place, but I worry about the student who has technological barriers to accessing it all.

Yes, using flashy effects might make the web site look very appealing, and it's certainly important to keep up with technology, but if the tools don't work as you anticipate, or if students have difficulties using them, it may negatively affect the course material and students' ability to learn. Don't waste your valuable time preparing tools that will only frustrate and disenchant your students.

When I first started teaching online, I didn't use audio or video. At that time, I knew several students had dial-up connections (so did I for a time), and I worried about how difficult it might be for them to access large files. Plus, for me, it was easier to create lecture notes in text format because I tend to change them a lot each semester and tailor them to reflect what that particular class has done or is doing.

Slowly, I have started to add more technology, but I'm vigilant about indentifying what is absolutely necessary to achieve the learning goals.

I also think a lot about the time investment of using different tools. Recently, I worked closely with an instructional designer to create a series of video tutorials to teach students how to use a certain statistical software package. We spent a great deal of time creating the tutorials, and now, we might be able to use them for only one more year due to major changes in the newest version of the software itself.

4. Assignments and activities take more time online.

Assignments and activities that are adapted from a classroom setting to an online environment typically take more time to complete.

I bring this up for two reasons. First, instructors who are used to teaching in the classroom should think carefully about whether their activities and assignments will work online at all.

Creating an online version of a class isn't as simple as simply moving everything online. If you use a lot of activities and discussion—as I do in my statistics courses—certain classroom activities might need to be substantially revised, while others might need to be abandoned altogether.

In one of my courses, when we first talk about surveys, samples, and experimental design, I bring in regular and reduced-fat cookies and ask the students to design an experiment to determine if individuals can taste the difference between them. At some point, the students have to actually taste the cookies themselves. This activity is a big hit in the classroom, but clearly, it's not one that transitions easily to the online environment.

Second, one big mistake I made when I first started teaching online was to underestimated how much time it would take for students to work through activities that in the classroom easily took less than one class period. In the live classroom courses, the students would typically break into small groups where they would work together to complete and discuss one or more activities. This usually takes 20 to 30 minutes.

When I taught my first online course, I naively assumed it would be relatively simple for students to work together and discuss several different assignments within a single week. But almost all the discussions were asynchronous, and it was therefore unreasonable to expect that students could complete a discussion in a single day, or even in a couple of days.

I also didn't account for the fact that online discussions involve a lot of reading and writing, and that this too takes time. One solution I've found can work is to collapse several discussion topics into one, and give the students more time, maybe a week, to work through them.

5. Students need extrinsic motivation.

Some students are motivated by wanting to learn the material, and wanting to practice applying what they are learning. Other students need to be motivated extrinsically. In a traditional classroom, in-class work, with the instructor looming nearby, is often extrinsic motivation enough. Online, however, if an assignment is not collected or graded, some students will simply skip it, even if you strongly encourage them to do it for the sake of better understanding the material.

So, what types of assignments will be required, and which ones will be optional? If you as the instructor feel a particular assignment will be exceedingly beneficial, it should be factored into the course grade.

When I first began to think about online teaching, the one thing I knew for certain I wanted to include was ample opportunity for students to collaborate. I wanted to create a community where students had opportunities to get to know each other and learn from each other. I decided to break the students into small groups and have them complete several discussion assignments. They had one week, and then one student from each group would summarize the discussions and submit the summary to me.

Over the years, my colleagues and I have experimented a lot with the best way to structure group assignments, and we learned that often, the best way to motivate students is by making the task a part of their grade.

For example, initially, we instructed students to work on each assignment for a week and post their initial thoughts and return to the discussion at least once to respond in a meaningful way to something a peer had posted. But some students were waiting until the very last minute to even begin, and thus little discussion actually occurred. Further, some students would return to the discussion once but then never returned to see additional comments or questions posted by other students or the instructor.

We now require students to post their initial thoughts on the assignment by mid-week—or else lose points on the assignment—and respond to at least two of their peers. We also now grade the quality of the summaries because before, the write-ups sometimes included incorrect information, leading us to question whether students were reading through the entire discussion carefully and critically.

I have asked other online instructors if they use discussion, and, if so, how. Sometimes, they say they set up discussion areas, but don't require postings, and as a result, most of the class doesn't actually discuss important ideas and concepts with their peers and instructor. I can't help but wonder how the dynamics of the class might be different if these instructors required students to be more active.

6. Give deadlines.

Deadlines keep students on task and ensure that they are working through the material at a similar pace. Sometimes, I've heard students use the terms "self-paced" and "individual study" to describe online learning, and it makes me cringe. Flexibility is one thing, but it doesn't mean "no deadlines," nor does it mean that students can work at whatever pace they want.

Flexible in my mind means that from week to week, students can have some choice in terms of when they sit down to do their work, but they will encounter deadlines on a weekly basis. In learning, ideas build on others, and instructors need to help students create the foundation they need to better understand the more complex ideas and concepts that they will encounter later in the course or even in the successive course. And, I want to make sure that students are working at a similar pace so they can engage in real discussion.

Deadlines help students stay on top of things, too, and make the course feel legitimate. Ultimately, they also motivate some students to check in frequently. I give weekly deadlines because I have encountered some students who get off track if they have even seven days when nothing is due. This is not to say that I require major assignments every week, but I do attempt to make certain that students are accountable

for something, whether it be taking an assessment or participating in a discussion or completing a more formal homework assignment or project.

Finally, it helps if deadlines are consistent from week to week. For example, in my courses, assignments are due on Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays by midnight.

7. Online courses are not right for all students.

Online courses are not the right fit for all students. Try to provide students with many opportunities to make informed decisions about whether the course will meet their needs. If you are able to release your syllabus and materials or web site before the course officially starts, students will have an opportunity to preview the course and think carefully about whether it will meet their needs.

I always try to release my site one to two weeks before it begins, and at that time, I send students a welcome letter and a copy of the syllabus, and encourage them to explore the course web site and ask questions. I also set up an optional orientation during the first week of the semester, and invite anyone who is not attending to meet with me another time.

Soon after my first few online courses started, I noticed that some students had not read the syllabus or become acquainted with the web site, even after my continual pleas for them to do so. One semester, an online student approached me roughly five or six weeks into the semester and was quite surprised when I said I had sent him several messages within the email system that is part of the course web site. He had no idea there was an email system, much less that it was how I typically communicated! This, of course, was all stated clearly in the syllabus.

Sometimes, I now make going through the syllabus and web site an assignment.

I am also now in the habit of sharing a handout with students that I call "Tips for Success in the Online Course." It's packaged with the syllabus, and I also include it within the first weekly module on the course web site. It includes things like keeping up with assignment deadlines, checking in regularly, reading and replying to email, participating in discussion, and asking questions at any time.

8. Ask students what works and what doesn't.

Gather feedback from students about what works and what doesn't and how the online course or online resources can be improved.

I am very feedback-oriented in my approach to teaching, and I tell students this from the very beginning. I invite them to share their thoughts about the course at any time.

Instructors always have an opportunity to gather feedback from students at the end of the course, when final course evaluations are completed, but I strongly believe that feedback should be solicited throughout the course, and that the instructor should be open to making appropriate changes while the class is underway.

I invite students to complete an anonymous Midterm Feedback Survey. When they are submitted, I summarize the responses of the survey and share it with the class. Because I teach statistics, I find this to be a great way to model how one can summarize data and make decisions based on data. I explain why I do certain things in the course and what I can and cannot change. There are always things that come up that I cannot change mid-course, such as the textbook or having homework assignments. However, some things do come up that can, and should, be changed.

When I first started teaching online, I didn't participate a lot in student discussions because I worried that my presence might stifle the conversation. I only interjected if a major misconception or error came up that nobody else caught. Through feedback, I learned that the students wanted to hear more from me, if

anything just to let them know they are on the right track. I now make it a point to participate more and to make sure that students know I'm there in case they need me. I cheer them on, or question them, or provide direct instruction or other examples for them to think about if they are struggling. There are many ways to participate without necessarily giving away all the answers.

9. Share ideas, collaborate, and commiserate about the online teaching experience.

Don't hesitate to reach out to others who teach online to share ideas, collaborate, and commiserate about your experiences.

Collaboration among colleagues is important, and I have learned so much about teaching and learning when I have shared my own experiences with others and heard about their experiences, too. I've learned new activities and have heard great advice about class management issues. If anything, it's rewarding to be able to talk to others who understand what I'm going through.

Early in my online teaching experience, it was challenging to find people who could discuss with me their experiences working in an online environment because so few of my immediate colleagues were doing it. I felt very alone, but eventually realized there were many other ways to collaborate with other instructors.

I connected with online instructors from other departments at my institution. I sought out online discussion forums that might cater to online instructors or that were education-oriented, and I signed up for many different listservs, which helped me network even more. I learned of some great groups through Ning that connect online educators (College 2.0, ednak, Core4Women). I also looked for online colleagues through Facebook and Twitter. Given that I wanted to be able to specifically connect with others who taught online courses in my subject area, I worked with a colleague to create a group in Google called "Statistics Instructors Lost in Cyberspace."

10. Teaching online can inform what you do in the classroom if you have opportunities to teach both online and classroom-based courses.

I feel fortunate in that I have opportunities to teach both in the classroom and online, and I honestly feel that teaching online has made me a better instructor. The online teaching experience has provided me with so many great opportunities that I just don't get in the classroom. For example, in a traditional classroom, you can walk around and listen to bits and pieces of various group discussions, but you can't hear everything that's said in every group. But online, you have a window into every single discussion, letting you overhear and correct misinformation.

You can see just who is participating and who isn't. You can more easily identify and reach out to students who need extra help. To me, this is one of the most wonderful things about teaching online. I've learned so much from my students about how difficult it can be to understand certain ideas and concepts, and about the various types of misconceptions and misunderstandings that I didn't always pick up in the classroom.

I remember one time using an online discussion assignment that was based on a classroom assignment I had used for years. In the classroom, it seemed that students were working through the assignment rather easily and ending up with the answers I had hoped for, but as soon as I started asking my online students to discuss this assignment, there were certain misunderstandings about the information they were provided that sometimes led them to approach the assignment incorrectly. I began to wonder if maybe my classroom students had similar misunderstandings that I somehow had missed as I was walking around the room listening in on their discussions. Learning about these misunderstandings allowed me to restructure that assignment for both my classroom and online students, and I've been able to restructure several other assignments based on what I have observed during online discussions about what students are and are not understanding.

I often think teaching online has gifted me with a better sense of how to explain certain concepts, primarily because I sometimes have to go outside my comfort zone in the online course in order to

explain things in writing that I could much more easily explain verbally. I have to think more carefully about how to word certain things, and I sometimes have to do additional research to find resources I might be able to share that have visual cues or alternate explanations. I cannot rely on physical cues (e.g., the look on a student's face) to know if the student "gets it," and I have to find other ways to gauge whether the student does or does not understand the material. It can take several messages back and forth with the student, or it might involve a phone call or an office visit.

For students in the classroom who have difficulty following what I am saying, I can provide them with copies of notes I put together for my online students so they can have a written record of my explanation. I've had several students who have expressed appreciation at having access to these resources, and if I can do different things in my courses—whether they be online or in the classroom—to cater to different learning styles, I am definitely going to do that.

No matter what I teach, the ultimate goal is that students learn the material, and it still constantly amazes me that we can now provide opportunities outside a typical classroom setting for students to learn.

About the Author

Michelle Everson teaches statistics in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota. She has recently begun to explore how to best structure online statistics courses, in particular, studying ways in which active learning can be fostered in the online environment. She is the recipient of the College of Education and Human Development's 2009 Distinguished Teaching Award.

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