

STRATEGIES FOR ONLINE EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT

For a variety of reasons, online education is an increasingly viable option for many students seeking to further their education. Because of this, the demand for online instructors continues to increase. Instructors transitioning to the online environment from the traditional classroom may find teaching online overwhelming. While some practices from the traditional classroom may apply in the new environment, there are many strategies that are unique to online learning. Additionally, the field of online instruction is changing so rapidly that the techniques for teaching online must be revisited regularly as well.

This paper explores research regarding some current strategies for teaching online for both new and current online instructors. The practices examined include training, organizing the course, remaining proactive, providing regular and timely communication, maintaining a presence in the classroom, facilitating effective discussion boards, scaffolding, and desiring to improve one's online instruction. By utilizing these techniques in one's courses, online instructors are several steps closer to successful and satisfied students excited to continue learning in the online environment.

Keywords: Online Instruction Strategies; Distance Education; Teaching Online

INTRODUCTION

Due to the demands of life, economic downturn, convenience, and many other factors, "online education has emerged as a popular alternative to face-to-face classroom instruction" (Heather & Lynda, 2012, p. 11). Distance education courses are increasingly popular and suit the lifestyles of many students far better than traditional courses do. According to Donathan and Hanks (2009), "Distance learning is no doubt the topic most discussed today in higher education. The demand for online classes is increasing rapidly" (p. 589).

Not only are students turning to distance learning programs, instructors are also seeking out online teaching positions for a variety of reasons (Carnevale, 2003). While the demand for these programs and the desire to teach them is great news for Universities with online programs, there is a great responsibility for these programs to provide quality instruction. Due to the increased interest and enrollment in distance education, there are some best practices for teaching online that instructors should consider. These practices include training, organized course format, remaining proactive, regular and timely communication, maintaining a presence in the classroom, effective discussion board facilitation, scaffolding, and professional development.

TRAINING

Teaching online courses can be a daunting task, especially for teachers who are new to the online learning environment. According to Cole and Kritzer (2009), "The prospect of having to learn to teach new courses in an online environment can be intimidating and stressful" (p. 36). While upcoming college students are incredibly tech-saavy, the prospect of utilizing online tools to deliver instruction can be overwhelming. If teachers go into new courses intimidated and stressed out, it will undoubtedly be a negative experience. On the opposite side of the spectrum, many teachers believe that teaching online will be a quick and easy way to earn some extra money from home. While distance education provides accessibility to teaching that did not exist before, it is a fallacy to think that teaching online is 'easy.' Research clearly indicates otherwise. According to Barron (2003), "teaching an effective online course is a challenging experience" (p. 128). If online instructors want to be effective, they will have to put the work in to make that happen, just as they would in the traditional classroom. If instructors are not willing to put in the work to be effective in the online environment, they should reconsider entering the field. Cole and Kritzer (2009) noted "it is crucial that the faculty teaching in these [online] programs provide high-quality, effective instruction that meets the needs of the students" (p. 36).

In light of the challenges to the online environment, new instructors might want to seek out training for their new role (Merideth & Steinbronn, 2008). It is in the best interest of the institution to provide this training, so that instructors are learning to adapt to the specific platform used at their university.

This training may consist of many components but should definitely include instruction on the specific platform being used, facilitating online discussion, and providing through feedback for online assignments. Completing this course in an online format can be especially beneficial for the instructor because it allows them to step into the role of online student (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001). Through this type of training, new online instructors can gain a better idea of the challenges their students face.

ORGANIZATION

One of the most important considerations for the online instructor is the organization of his or her course. There is nothing more frustrating for both online students and instructors than a poorly organized course. When a student determines that it is time to complete an assignment, it is crucial that the student is able to navigate the course quickly and logically so they do not waste time merely trying to find the required assignment.

According to Barron (2003), "When a course is offered completely online, efficient management of information becomes critical" (p. 131).

When considering the organization of an online course, instructors should keep in the mind the layout and design of the course. The course design includes things like access to announcements, assignments, and the grade book. While it may seem that organization of a course is simply for convenient locating of information, Cole and Kritzer (2009) note that "typically, students in a distance learning education program also tend to work, have family, responsibilities, and have other duties that must be fulfilled. As such, organization of the course is crucial for student success" (p. 39).

If the organization and design of a course is not clear and logical, it will be overwhelming to students and a deterrent to student success. It is important for online instructors to strive to do everything possible to satisfy students and improve students' attitudes towards learning. It is clear that this begins before the course even starts through a clearly organized course.

According to Simonson (2006), "Well-designed online courses were reported to produce more positive learning outcomes and to be related to overall student satisfaction. Design and quality are important" (p. vii). Research shows that the organization of online courses is directly linked to student attitude, learning outcomes, and even success.

Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, and Liu, (2006) noted:

Appropriate and excellent course design and development may prove to be paramount to the success of students in online courses... It has been shown that the more transparent the interface the more likely it is that the student will be successful in online environments. (p. 117)

Additionally, transparency is important in course design (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). This implies that there shouldn't be any information that is 'hidden' from students or difficult to find, especially if it is critical to success in the course. The design of online courses should be intentional. Instructors must remember that the "development of online courses requires additional time for planning and designing to ensure the quality of online courses" (Akdemir, 2008, p.101).

PROACTIVE TECHNIQUES

Clear, organized, transparent course design is essential for students. However, despite the best course design, it is inevitable that students will still have questions regarding content, assignments, or course procedures. Advocates for online instructors recommend a variety of proactive techniques to assist with this process. Researchers encourage instructors to anticipate and compile student inquiries to offset the amount of additional questions received each week. To reduce the volume of messages from students, Barron (2003) suggests "encouraging students to answer each other's queries (e-mail or bulletin board) and compiling a list of FAQs to avoid answering the same question multiple times" (p. 131).

In addition to a list of frequently asked questions, Donathan and Hanks (2009) actually decided to include "a "start here" button to the course" to help students get started in their new online course (p. 589). A similar technique that can be utilized by online instructors is to send an email or announcement to students just before the course begins, outlining the necessary steps for them to take before the course starts.

The email can point students in the direction of the syllabus, course schedule, the aforementioned FAQs list, and other pertinent information. By proactively directing students to course components that can easily be overlooked since they do not carry any weight as an assignment, instructors can help ensure students are in the right place and prepared for success in the course. While posting a list of frequently asked questions and a "start here" button or post in your course will prove beneficial, it is likely that it will only really help with start of course information like navigating the learning environment, accessing the syllabus and assignments, locating the grade book, or communicating course policies.

To provide all the information that a student will need for the entire course in this format would be overwhelming and ineffective.

Instead, Ayers (2007) suggests:

Post information in announcements. Train your students to read announcements every time they open the course. When a student emails you a question, suppose that others have the same question, reply to the student, and post the information in announcements. (Rule 2)

Ayers' technique is one that can be used over and over again throughout the course to handle any issues or questions that were not anticipated. It also allows you to communicate with students in a timely and concise manner. Announcements posted within the course are a great way to keep students progressing and on track in the course. Since students are not physically walking into your classroom each day to hear reminders about assignments and due dates, announcements can accomplish this. However, online instructors can take this a step further by emailing announcements and reminders so that students receive these alerts without even logging into the course. This proactive technique prevents students with a tendency to procrastinate from being unaware of large assignments until the day before (or day of!) the assignment due date.

COMMUNICATION

Despite an instructor's best effort to curtail student questions and concerns, additional questions will arise throughout the course. Because of this, it is important that online instructors have a policy for communication in place. Students should know how and when to contact the instructor. One of the most natural forms of communication in the online learning environment is email. It is essential that instructors check and respond to email regularly.

According to Al-Asfour (2012), "To best serve their students, online instructors must be available five days a week by email" (para. 13). While Al-Asfour's guideline is a good one, instructors should also keep in mind the policy of the respective institution. Many schools require a twenty-four hour turnaround time for emails while others require more stringent monitoring of e-mail on days assignment are due. Additionally, certain segments of the semester may require increased accessibility. During the first week, weeks with large assignments, and the last week of the course, an increased number of student questions and concerns will likely arise. Staying on top of emails is crucial during those times so that students receive responses within a timely manner and are not prevented from moving forward with course requirements. While email availability is important, Al-Asfour takes instructor communication and accessibility one step further by noting that instructors "should also maintain regular office hours" (2012, para. 13). Like their traditional teaching counterparts, online instructors may find it beneficial to have dedicated 'office hours' where they are available by phone or synchronous chat.

This can be especially important when larger assignments are assigned or are nearing completion. Cole and Kritzer (2009) noted "The advantages of synchronous office hours include the timeliness of interaction between student and instructor, as well as the interaction that allows the students to continue a conversation until all questions are clarified" (p. 40). While dedicated office hours may seem inconvenient to some online instructors, they can help cut down on the number of daily emails they receive. 261

Students may hold questions knowing that the office hour or synchronous chat time is nearing. Additionally, it reduces the number of follow up emails since students can have all questions answered prior to the end of the conversation. In the experience of Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006), "Students needed real-time, back-and-forth discussion with their instructors that helped them to better understand their course projects" (p. 97). Synchronous chat sessions also allow students to learn from the questions of other students and the transcripts from these sessions can serve as a resource for students that missed the session.

While it is important that online instructors respond to student inquiries in a timely manner, instructors should not allow those inquiries to be the only time they communicate with students. Instead, instructors should remain in regular contact with students. According to Hartley, Gibney, Heflich, and Studler (2001), "Research studies indicate that frequent student-teacher and student-student communications are very important for an effective online course" (as cited in Barron, 2003, p. 136). Good opportunities for class wide communication between the instructor and students are at the beginning of new modules/weeks, when a previous week's grades are posted, or when clarification is needed.

Online instructors should also communicate with students as needed when individual struggles arise. Instructors should contact students who have ceased to attend the online course, are submitting late assignments, or who are underperforming in the course. Personal contact and encouragement from the instructor can go a long way in the student's performance during future weeks. Rather than waiting on students to initiate contact when they get behind, proactive communication initiated by the instructor prevents the problem from getting to the point that the student cannot assimilate back into the regular schedule of the course.

INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE

Regular communication from the instructor is a good way for the instructor to remain "present" in the online classroom. In a traditional classroom, the instructor's presence is obvious because you can visibly see them in the room. In the online classroom, this is not the case.

While the instructor may be visiting the classroom frequently, students may not be aware of this if evidence is not left. Instructors should be conscious of this and intentional about their presence in the online classroom. According to Cole and Krtizer (2009), "An instructor needs to maintain a "presence" in the classroom, and this is also true for the online classroom environment" (p. 39).

There are a variety of ways to maintain a presence in the classroom. Cole and Krtizer suggest using "email and phone-desk services, "getting to know you" discussion boards, and weekly video messages" (p. 39).

Additional recommendations by Schulte, 2009) include "instructor announcements, virtual online office hours, or grade book feedback" (p.111). It is also important to use these strategies to remain present in the online classroom to prevent feelings of loneliness and isolation from occurring in students (Halter, Kleiner, & Hess, 2006). Students desire to sense that they are not 'in it alone,' and that they have the support of their instructor even though they cannot see them.

Instructors can be present in the classroom discussion on a weekly basis as well. According to Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006), it is possible that a "lack of instructors' guidance in online chatting and discussion" can result in "students' shallow participation in online interaction" (p. 101). The presence of the instructor in the online classroom can improve student participation when the instructor models what healthy participation looks like.

DISCUSSION BOARDS

Many online courses include regular graded discussion boards or forums. These discussion boards usually provide an initial prompt or question that students then answer and discuss through research, experience, or opinion. According to Cole and Kritzer (2009), "Electronic discussion boards are useful in allowing both a demonstration of instructor presence as well as a facilitation of student community" (p. 37). When instructors interact with students by posting in discussion forums, they make their presence known. However, there is a balance required for instructor participation.

According to Cole and Kritzer (2009):

More participation by the instructor demonstrates presence and interest; less participation by the instructor may alleviate the fears of students of contributing something that may disagree with the instructor. It is important to find the balance that allows students to feel comfortable contributing without the discussion being overwhelmed by the instructor's presence. (p. 38)

If instructors dominate discussion, they may squash the voice of their students or hinder discussion. Further, if the instructor participates too frequently, there will be nothing left to be said by the student. They can also intimidate students and limit their viewpoints.

In addition to student to instructor communication, discussion boards allow for student-to-student communication as well. Research indicates that the use of discussion boards or forums can be incredibly beneficial in the online classroom. In a study completed by Donathan and Hanks (2009), "Using the discussion boards allowed students to see different perspectives and learn from their peer's experiences" and it increased student interaction (p. 590).

Learning from the experiences of other students is exactly what online education is all about. According to Al-Asfour (2012), "the ethos that "each one teach one" or "everyone shares the teaching" is practiced in online education" (para. 17) and this can be accomplished through online discussion boards. Using these forums is an important strategy for online instructors.

It is important to note that discussion boards in online classrooms can be synchronous or asynchronous. While synchronous discussion is possible and may be valuable for group work, the logistics of different lifestyles and time zones makes class wide synchronous discussion difficult. There are additional benefits to asynchronous discussion, beyond convenience. According to Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006), "Researchers reasoned that in asynchronous discussions, students had more time to think about their responses and that the increased thinking time improved the depth and quality of responses" (p. 96).

Because immediate response is not required in asynchronous discussion, students are more likely to reflect on their responses and to utilize research to support their viewpoints.

An additional benefit to using discussion boards or forums in online education is that they allow instructors to get to know their students more a little better. Typically, assignments are not very personal no matter the environment one is learning in. However, in the traditional classroom, personalities shine as students interact on a daily basis. The bonds forged in the traditional classroom can be difficult to form in the online classroom but are not impossible when discussion boards are used. Peruski and Mishra (2004) found that "the experience of getting to know their online students through their writing was powerful" (p. 45).

It is important those discussions, or any activity in the online classroom for that matter, be engaging and effective for that environment. Some strategies that work in the traditional classroom will not work online. Barron (2003) reminds online educators that "activities must be designed that will motivate students, while enhancing interactions and communications. Strategies might include project-based learning activities, online debates, group presentations, or a multitude of other options" (p. 136). Keep these recommendations in mind when incorporating discussion in your online classroom.

SCAFFOLDING

It is essential for online instructors to remember to provide instructional scaffolding just like they would in the traditional classroom. They should provide more support early on as students acclimate to the online environment or course policies. This is especially important during a student's first course or courses that are at the beginning of a student's online degree. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) noted, "Instructors in online courses, like their counterparts in regular classrooms, play a crucial role in students' knowledge construction by scaffolding the learning process for them" (p. 101). Just as the online environment can be overwhelming to instructors that are new to the environment, it can cause anxiety in students that are new to the environment as well. Scaffolding is a strategy that can help prevent this.

Cole and Kritzer (2009) also apply the scaffolding process to large assignments noting that it can be beneficial to apply "a scaffolding approach for the major work of the class" (p. 38). Major works in the course would be things like research papers or capstone assignments. By requiring regular progress checks or for students to submit a summary of the work they've completed so far, instructors can ensure students are hard at work on their assignments.

This is important because in the online classroom, you do not visually see students working on group assignments, major papers, or other capstone assignments like you would in the traditional classroom.

For example, in a 100 level course with a research paper, scaffolding of the major assignment for the course is accomplished through dividing it into several steps including article selection, a rough draft, a peer review, a revised and edited draft, and a final draft. Spreading the large assignment out over the course of several weeks allows students to master not only the assignment, but the process as well.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & EVALUATION

Even if an instructor keeps in mind all of the suggestions for online teachers found in research, improvements can be made. Donathan and Hanks (2009) noted, "The road to online instruction improvement is not free of bumps" (p. 590). Because the online classroom is still fairly new, there is still much work to be done. Professional development is often a required component for traditional educators and should be completed by online instructors as well. The retention of students is directly related to the quality of instruction by their professor (Hirsch & Hitch, 2001). Professional development can help ensure online instructors are equipped to provide that quality instruction.

Many traditional instructors also have observations or regular evaluations of their work. This should also be a practice for online instructors. Many institutions have the supervisors or mentors of online instructors' complete evaluations at the end of a term or year.

Additionally, students often provide survey feedback after each course. This feedback can be used to help the online instructor develop and grow. However, peer observation or evaluation can be beneficial as well. Collaboration with other online instructors is a good way to improve one's instruction (Donathan & Hanks, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The prospect of teaching online is exciting for many educators. Just like teaching in the traditional classroom, teaching online can be rewarding. However, instructors must remember that it is still time consuming and hard work. It takes a lot of effort to be effective in the online classroom. Whether you are contemplating a move to online education or are already teaching in an online environment, consider incorporating the strategies laid out in research as best practices in their classroom. It is also important to remember that the field of online education is relatively new so there is still a very real need for more research on teaching online courses. According to Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006), "While recent research literature defines online delivery systems, few studies actually focus on instruction and learning online" (p. 117). Important strategies for online instructors include training, organization, proactive techniques, regular and timely communication, maintaining a presence in the classroom, effective discussion board facilitation, scaffolding, and professional development.

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