12 Tips for the Online Teacher

A lot transfers from face-to-face courses to online courses, but some adjustments are required by both teachers and students.

By Audrey M. Quinlan

It sounded so good. Teach a graduate course totally online? No need to drive 20-plus miles to campus through traffic? A way to save on the forever-escalating fuel prices? Teaching from my home computer in my sweats? Why not? And that’s how I ended up teaching two online courses for my university. As I concluded my second online course, I realized that I’d learned as much or even more than I had taught.

My dozen online students came from three states. Eight students were in their second semester as part of a cohort working for a master’s degree in inclusive education; four students were using this as an elective in their master’s of arts program. I was to design and teach two online courses in subjects where I had great interest but had never previously taught. The students were to respond to discussion “forum” questions posted on the university’s electronic course management system for each of eight modules — one module for each week. This leads to my first tip:

#1. ALLOW YOURSELF PLENTY OF PREP TIME.

As with traditional face-to-face courses, as soon as you identify the course you’ll be teaching, research possible textbooks. Because most students won’t be able to walk to the campus bookstore, an early decision helps students obtain the book before the course’s starting date. This book is your “guest lecturer.” If students won’t read it, it is like cutting class.

Keep your audience in mind. Online students often have jobs that require 40 hours a week. Books must be available, readable, and worth their time. For my first course, I took time to review and required two excellent books. Students were very receptive and positive. Unfortunately, I didn’t have as much time to choose the text for my second course, and the students questioned not only the book but also its 1999 copyright date.

When creating an online course syllabus, state specific learning or task objectives for each week and maintain that focus for each week. Be clear and specific. If you don’t want attachments, say so. I never imagined students would use attachments instead of posting directly in the forums. Opening each attachment, reading it, saving it, and evaluating it with comments became quite laborious. At one point, I decided to simply print them all at once, only to have my printer (on a shelf above my head) start shooting the responses over me like a cascading waterfall. As I gathered the pages from my office floor and desk, I realized that few pages had names or page numbers. What a mess!

#2. GET TO KNOW YOUR IT PERSON — SCHMOOZE IF NECESSARY.

At my university, one person was responsible for setting up the view of the online course, which she called the “shell.” This “shell” is your classroom and has links to program policies, course procedures, and getting to know the professor. Check out the site weeks before the actual start date to allow time for corrections to avoid embarrassing errors. I am a stickler for using APA and require my students to master the APA refer-

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ence style. The work-study student who set up my site decided to “correct” my capitalization “errors” on my posted reference list. I was grateful to our IT person, who promptly responded to my panicked e-mail and had it back to perfect APA before the first student “clicked.” I returned the next day with candy for the troops.

**#3. KEEP IT SIMPLE.**

This advice, which pertains to so many aspects of our lives, is also appropriate for the online course. Be comfortable with your technology venue and use only the aspects that cause you no stress. For example, during my first time, I wasn’t comfortable making a video of a lecture, so I just said, “No, thank you,” and was glad I did. However, I now believe a video introducing myself may help students feel as though they know me and perhaps glean a sense of my approach to learning.

I wasn’t familiar with some features of the program, so I didn’t try to use them. After discussing this with colleagues, I learned of upload/download assignment features that could simplify my online life. However, the time to master these skills is before the class is planned and syllabi are posted.

**#4. BE AWARE OF THE WIDE RANGE IN TECHNOLOGY SAVVY OF YOUR STUDENTS.**

The same colleague who extolled the virtues of the upload/download assignment features complained that a student kept e-mailing him because the student couldn’t find the professor’s assignments. After days of frustration and worry, he ended up with a phone call to walk her through the process. “I should have offered to do that as soon as she complained. It would have saved both time and my blood pressure,” he said.

Another student couldn’t read the inserted comments on his papers. After several frantic e-mails, in which he indicated that I was grading him capriciously, I realized that he wasn’t seeing my comments. He discovered that his work computer could display the comments, but his home computer could not. It was a matter of adjusting e-mail addresses.

**#5. BE WILLING TO START FROM SCRATCH.**

If you taught a course face-to-face, it would be difficult to duplicate that same experience online. It isn’t meant to be the same. This advice was gleaned during a lunchtime conversation with colleagues who were teaching the same courses online that they had taught in the traditional classroom. When they posted the list of assignments, the online students were shocked and stressed and respectfully let them know it.

In our division, the online courses ran for eight weeks, as opposed to the 16-week semesters. Most online courses are condensed. So, when creating the syllabus, cut the fat, clear the clutter, and create a lean, manageable course that focuses on the essentials. Through the years, most of us continue to add to courses and seldom delete much. If you’re teaching an online course that you also teach face-to-face, review the syllabus you used when you first taught the course. That lean, first-year syllabus may provide the perfect online framework.

**#6. PROVIDE A DEFINITE CONTACT TIME.**

Because the typical online student has a full-time job, provide an evening contact time. (Remember the student who couldn’t locate the assignments?) I started with a virtual office hour (6-7 p.m. Mondays) in the chat room of our course management system. After three weeks with no “visitors,” I changed it to “feel free to phone me at home on Mondays between 6 and 7 p.m. EST.”

During two courses, not one student ever phoned. I attributed that to my prompt response to e-mails rather than to a lack of concern. However, caution is advised here. One professor provided a home number without restrictions and ended up with a student who felt free to phone her home at midnight. Since students may be in different time zones, clarifications are required. Again, do what will work best for you.

**#7. USE SCORING RUBRICS TO EVALUATE ONLINE THREADED DISCUSSION FORUMS.**

I’m a fan of using scoring rubrics to assess student work in all my courses, and the online course was no exception. The final version of the rubric I created to evaluate online threaded discussions is illustrated in Figure 1 on page 31. Because this rubric was posted online as a handout, students knew exactly how their responses were graded. I saved these evaluations by using the student’s last name, course, and assignment (such as Smith, Ed 830, Module 2) and simply at-
tached the completed rubric to a return e-mail. This gave me a record in both my sent folder and in my document folder in Word. I didn’t evaluate any work until after the posted due date and time, such as Tuesday, Nov. 9, 2010, by 11:59 p.m. EST. I reserved Wednesdays to read and evaluate and returned all rubrics to the class by Thursday morning.

I actually simplified part of the rubric during the first course. Under “thoroughness of response to classmates,” I had originally indicated the score of four points as being “responded to all previous discussions” which became burdensome for me as well as for my students. With the approval of students via e-mail, I changed the rubric to the one illustrated in Figure 1, which worked well for me.

#8. DON’T GET LURED INTO THE REPLIES.

This may sound harsh; however, ask a group of teachers who have taught online and they will agree that teaching an online course is surprisingly time-consuming — especially for those of us who are slow typists. Although I didn’t assess threaded discussions until the posted due date, I couldn’t resist logging in midweek to check student responses. Occasionally, I’d jump into the discussion with a reply, but this soon created an expectation that I would respond to each entry before the assessment rubric. I handled this by creating a bulleted list of responses from me that had been generated by student comments for that week and posted that list as a summary after all comments had been submitted. I often labeled it as a “random thoughts lecture,” which helped to function as a summary or as a basis for reflection. By my second course, I included this information in my syllabus so that students did not expect a reaction to each entry.

An exception to this rule was the “sign-in assignment” of having students reply to the first day’s forum by introducing themselves and telling something personal. I made sure I responded in the public forum to each student with a comment about something he or she found important and tried to find common ground. For example, for middle school teachers, I reveal my past life as a middle school teacher; for fans of country music, I share my favorite tunes; and for parents, I assure them that I’ve also been there.

#9. CREATE AND USE COMMENT SHEETS TO SAVE TIME.

During my first online course, I realized that I was making some comments on more than one paper. As I was typing the same corrections or comments for many students, I began to make a list of these as a Word document. With this document open and minimized during the assessments, I could simply maximize, highlight the appropriate comment, copy it, and then paste it on the student’s rubric. Some of the comments that I used again and again were: “Great connections to real life,” “Great connections to other readings,” “Nicely researched,” and “One of the greatest tips I received as a writer was that periods and commas are always inside quotes.”

#10. EXPECT SOME DISCOMFORT.

If you or your students are new to online teaching, expect to experience frustration, confusion, and fatigue. Keep in mind that Vygotsky and Piaget tell us that there is no learning without discomfort. There were Wednesdays when I felt that I couldn’t read another entry. I’m sure there were times when students felt that they couldn’t write another entry. (See tip 12 below.) Although there were days when I missed the face-to-face contact, it was also interesting to assess students’ personalities and philosophies simply by their writings.

#11. PUT YOURSELF IN THE STUDENT’S PLACE OR BE READY FOR ANYTHING.

One of my first unexpected happenings was a student’s assignment posted at 5 a.m. (five hours late) accompanied by a harried e-mail that listed a Lucille Ball chain of events that began with a power outage and ended with a late-night attempt to convince a security guard to permit her to enter her place of employment to use an office computer. My next list of tips to students will include that story with the advice never to procrastinate.

#12. MAINTAIN YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR.

As with all teaching, online instruction has its moments of frustration. When those papers rained down on my head, I knew I had to change things. I also knew that sharing that happening with my students would help them to realize that, at times, we’re all at the mercy of our computers.

CONCLUSION

I enjoyed the online process and felt as though I grew to know my students quite well. As with any new teaching project, I had regrets and rewards from
my online teaching adventure. I regretted not making a clear and firm policy concerning attachments. However, I was rewarded by two students’ e-mails near the conclusion of the course.

One student vented, “To top things off, after toting all of my school stuff to wild and wonderful West Virginia for the day, I discovered that my future father-in-law (whose son is the computer/tech director for a whole county of school districts in Maryland) did NOT have WORD on his computer! You know, if it weren’t for my grade on the line, I would almost think this (and similar situations I have experienced this semester) is comical!”

And an elementary teacher wrote, “I truly enjoyed this online class. I’d never participated in an online seminar before this one, and I was very pleasantly surprised. I gained immeasurable knowledge, especially in regard to APA format, through your leadership and teaching in this class. Thank you for being ‘tough’ on me when I needed it. I just wrote my references page for my thesis proposal and I feel confident that it is error free! It was a snap to write after all of the practice I had over the eight weeks in gifted seminar! Thanks again!”

So, if teaching from home appeals to you, my 13th tip (to make a “baker’s dozen”) would have to be simply try teaching a course online. You just might like it.

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**FIG. 1**

Assessment Rubric for Threaded Discussion Entries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Incomplete (1 point)</th>
<th>Off-track (2 points)</th>
<th>On-track (3 points)</th>
<th>Superior (beyond expectations)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of the response</td>
<td>Omits part(s) of question. Weak—lacks quality.</td>
<td>Answers all parts, but lacks depth or understanding. Minimal response.</td>
<td>Addresses all aspects of the question in depth. Able to make connections from content to other readings or to life experiences.</td>
<td>Addresses all aspects of the discussion question in depth. Able to make connections from content to other readings or to life experiences. <em>Additional research evident and cited in APA format.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadlines</td>
<td>Late submission</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Submitted by due date (on time)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoroughness of response to classmates</td>
<td>Ignores others’ comments</td>
<td>Appears to have read only one previous discussion OR criticism is unfounded.</td>
<td>Appears to have read at least two previous discussions and considered others’ viewpoints before providing constructive criticism to others.</td>
<td>Appears to have read at least three or more previous discussions and considered others’ points of view before providing constructive criticism or support to others. May add another reply after original submission in response to others.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>follows rules of formal written English (mechanics, usage, spelling)</td>
<td>More than 5 errors in the response</td>
<td>3-5 errors</td>
<td>1 or 2 errors</td>
<td>No errors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL SCORE _____________ (max. possible = 15)