



Best Practices in Online Learning

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Online Learning...E-learning...Distance Teaching...are these the same? Different? Related? Each of these get at teaching students in an environment other than the traditional, face-to-face classroom. How do we do that well? Can we do that well? I suggest that the answer is resounding, “Yes!”

That said, not everyone seems to think so. Some hold up face-to-face learning as the gold standard, as if anything else is somehow “less than.” But is this really the case? Or have we just emphasized face-to-face teaching through training, support, professional development, and resourcing in ways that we have neglected for distance teaching?

Remember how it felt to be new to the teaching profession? How everything felt challenging, and demanding, like everyone else had it figured out, but you were sort of fumbling along? Learning to teach online is similar to learning to teach face-to-face. There are some specific strategies that work really well, and others that work less well. And it’s also important to remember that not all strategies that work well in a face-to-face classroom environment will work well online...and vice-versa.

But here are three promising practices that all online educators can consider that will positively impact their students’ learning:

1. Remember the Human
2. Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing
3. Leverage Rich Media Wisely

Let’s unpack each of these a bit...

Remember the Human

Back when the World Wide Web was young in the early 1990s, norms for online behavior were developed; these were called “netiquette.” And rule number one? “[Remember the Human.](#)” In short, this means remembering that there is a real human being on the other end of your internet connection. This may seem obvious, because many of us got into education because we love people—real, whole human people. But somehow, communicating online has a capability of reducing our view of the humanity of the other person.

So, how can we remember the human? A few suggestions:

- Design for connection. As you are creating online learning experiences, how can you emphasize connection with others? Devise collaborative projects. Host book discussions. Incorporate peer feedbacking—and teach protocols for doing this! Provide rich feedback—and the opportunity for students to *act* on that feedback.
- Emphasize interactions. Research in online learning suggests that student satisfaction in online learning is highest when there is student-teacher interaction as well as student-student interaction.

Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing

It's tempting for many teachers to pile on the work in online learning situations. We might feel that students have plenty of time to do the work at their leisure, or that because they are "digital natives" they are quicker at doing the work than we might be. Sadly, these are myths. Online learning is demanding in terms of time, attention, and self-discipline. Adding more work is not the answer. And—I hate to break it to you—the idea that today's students are somehow "native" when it comes to technology is a myth. The reality is, they need to learn how to learn with technology, and we have a responsibility to help them with this! All of this means we have to emphasize the key concepts, and keep the main thing the main thing.

So how do we keep the main thing the main thing? A few suggestions:

- Practice "backward" design for learning. Set clear learning targets, carefully align our assessments to them, and then plan instruction that will ensure student meet these learning targets. Does this sound familiar? Wiggins & McTighe's (2005) book *Understanding by Design* holds up, and this approach is essential for successful online teaching!
- Particularly if shifting from face-to-face to online, discipline yourself to begin with the learning targets, rather than the great activities you've "always done."
- For assessment, authentic assessments that demand students put their learning into practice are almost always a better approach in online learning environments. How can students demonstrate that they have mastered the concepts? Use your answer to this question to guide your assessment planning.
- Reflection is an essential part of learning—for students and teachers alike! Consider where and how you will use reflection as part of your course.

Leverage Rich Media Wisely

One of the great temptations for teaching online is to make everything video-based. Video is a *powerful* tool for online teaching, but we have to use it carefully! Also, video is not the *only* power tool for online teaching. Audio, computer simulations, and digital texts can also be valuable tools for teaching. But don't discount low-tech (pencil & paper) or no-tech (experiential and reflective activities.)

So how do we leverage rich media wisely? A few suggestions:

- If you are creating videos for students, limit them to not more than 6 minutes in length. If they "need" to be longer, chunk the content into multiple, short segments and use a video playlist instead of one long video.
- Video requires a lot of storage for you, and a lot of bandwidth for students. Can audio fulfill the same intended outcome? Creating a podcast for students instead of a video might be a good strategy that is less bandwidth-intensive.
- If you are creating media, *write a script* before you begin. Keep on point, and keep it tight. That said, it's okay to be human in your recordings. Unless you go completely off the rails and flub everything up, don't re-record. Umms and Ahhs might feel uncomfortable to you when you listen, but it also demonstrates that you are a real human being.
- Good practice is including a transcript for students along with any video/audio recordings.
- Plan for learning activities that get students away from their devices, and then have them create media to share what they did/learned, if appropriate.

Other Tips and Resources

A few other tips for online instructors:

- Minimize the number of tools you require students to use, and be cautious about implementing a bunch of new tools. This is so hard, because when we discover new shiny things, we often want to put them to work! But there is a learning curve for teachers and students (and parents!) alike with each new tool. A few solid tools executed well trumps a whole lot of things used less well every time.
- Emphasize relationships. In our undergrad Teacher Prep Program at Dordt University, we emphasize the “three loves”: to be an effective teacher you have to love WHO you teach, WHAT you teach, and HOW to teach. In online teaching scenarios, the WHO is the most important. First and foremost, lead with care, concern, and comfort for the students—and inject a healthy sense of humor and joy as much as possible.
- Develop a strong teaching presence. Following up on the last one, if the WHO is the most important, the HOW is in second place. I strongly encourage teachers to have their methods match their objectives. Overall, I’m a fan of asynchronous learning over synchronous...but I fully recognize the value of synchronous session as they are called for. Live meetings “feel” more like “real teaching” to many educators, but the caution is that there is an equity question. Asynchronous teaching is often more equitable for students. And you can still have a strong teaching presence online in asynchronous design: use pre-recorded videos, leverage what you know about your students’ lives outside of school, be personal in the announcements and instructions you provide for students, etc.

Here are some other resources you might find valuable as an online instructor:

- Think about how to manage the workload of online teaching. Teaching online is still *work*, after all! Here is a blog post I wrote recently sharing some of my strategies for managing the work of teaching online: <http://iteach-and-ilearn.blogspot.com/2020/04/how-to-manage-teaching-online.html>
- Aligning objectives and assessments takes practice! Even for those of us who have been teaching for years, a refresher might be in order. This is a free, short (1 hour), self-paced, online course aimed at supporting educators in practicing aligning objectives and assessments: http://www.ucdenver.edu/faculty_staff/faculty/center-for-faculty-development/Documents/tutorials/Assessment/index.htm
- This e-book is an excellent resource for online instructors. Technically, it is about *blended* learning, but much of the advice herein applies to fully online teaching as well: <https://edtechbooks.org/k12blended>
- This e-book may be helpful for educators looking for tech tools, but unsure of which ones will benefit student learning. There is practical advice for evaluating the pros and cons of various technologies here: <https://edtechbooks.org/digitaltoolsapps>
- This book is strongly research-oriented (i.e., not light reading) and focuses on current research related to online learning in K-12 settings: <http://press.etc.cmu.edu/index.php/product/handbook-of-research-on-k-12-and-blending-learning-second-edition/>
- If you’re ready for the next step in your professional career, consider a Master of Education degree in Educational Technology. For instance, you might look at this one: ☺ <https://www.dordt.edu/master-ed>