



## BASIC GUIDE FOR AN ONLINE INSTRUCTOR

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### Introduction

My perspective on online learning might be best reflected in Don Tapscott's *Growing Up Digital* (1998). In this best-selling book, Tapscott characterizes the "Net Generation": young people who in 1999 were between the ages of two and twenty-two. This generation represents the students in today's elementary, middle school, high school, and college classrooms. Tapscott reminds us that while our students are changing, so must we as their teachers. He explains that our generation has grown up on a broadcast world with television as a perhaps our primary source of information. It is a unidirectional transmission of content to passive receivers. Our students, the N-Geners, have grown up knowing and using technology to actively seek out information in a way that makes sense to them, at their own pace. Their primary source of information is the Internet. They must actively pursue, evaluate, and construct meaning from the information they pursue.

A strong parallel exists when we compare the traditional paradigm of the classroom teacher to the new paradigm of online instructor. Though many teachers may not mirror the broadcast paradigm of instruction, others too closely resemble late model Zeniths, Magnavoxs, and a few of them, Sonys. By contrast, to teach successfully online demands that teachers more closely resemble LANs, WANs, Internets, and Intranets. We must provide students with opportunities to collaborate in online communities, to discover experts in one another, to choose when they will engage in learning, and to demonstrate their learning in ways that capitalize on their learning strengths.

### Supporting students

After a few years of schooling, students begin to grasp the concept of school, classroom, teacher, students, books, homework, etc. In the same way that children are acculturated to school, online instructors must introduce students to the online classroom. e-Learners.com offers a nice overview of *How Online Learning Works* to introduce the potential online student to this new environment. Since distance education online is relatively new, most students, regardless of their age, do not possess the cultural norms for engaging in online learning. Couple with this the fact that some online students are not as familiar with the technologies that support online learning, and the instructor may have to provide some serious support for students as they learn how to learn online.

This may sound obvious, but making it happen is not so easy. Online instructors have to make explicit how learning online occurs for their students. This means embedding instructions for how to navigate the environment as well as establishing behavioral norms for successful participation throughout the course. It does not mean describing every minute detail of course navigation nor “handholding.” As James Mazoui notes, the role of the instructor is to support students as informational explorers (1999).

### **Course requirements and learning agreements**

When I taught my course for the first time, I sent out an email to all students prior to the start of the course welcoming them and explaining how they would access the course on the first day of class. I included a list of course requirements which vaguely communicated the expectations of student participation during the course:

- Willingness to learn
- Desire to improve personal ability to develop and write good lesson plans
- Dedication to working consistently on course assignments
- Consistent participation in online discussions
- Best effort to complete all assignments in a timely manner
- Completion of one good lesson plan following the model outlined in this course. Plan must be submitted for review to the LEARN North Carolina Lesson Plan Database within two weeks of completion of the course.
- Written reflection / evaluation at the end of the course.

I thought this was enough. All of the other important information about the course I embedded into the course online: assignment dates, grading policy, expectations for successful participation, etc.

I later discovered through the *Designing and Teaching Online Courses* (DATOC) course how much anxiety, confusion and frustration could have been avoided if I had prepared students for taking the course. A pre-course email often called a Learning Agreement is a simple strategy for addressing this issue. In their book *Teaching Online*, Steve Rossen and Susan Ko speak of a Contract where the instructor explains, “the terms of the class interaction — the expected responsibilities and duties, the grading criteria, the musts and don'ts of behavior” (p. 47).

This document can be likened to the teacher's first day of class welcome and introduction to the class. It clearly goes far beyond the class syllabus to include an explicit description of what is meant by “successful class participation.” Remember, this is a new environment for most students, so the instructor bears the responsibility of supporting students in a way to minimize any confusion about what they are supposed to do, how they are supposed to do it, and when they should do it.

For example, “successful participation” might be quantified as a minimum of three postings per week to the class discussion forum in order to manifest their “presence in the course. My first attempt included an email that simply oriented students for the first day of class and little more. I believe students would have contributed more to class discussions and possibly more of them would have completed the course if I had included such an agreement.

### **Identifying successful online learners**

Preparing students for online learning requires more planning on the part of the instructor than is normally seen in the traditional classroom. To prevent drop-outs and drop-ins, most students might benefit from a little assistance in deciding if online learning is right for them. In my work, I have heard many educators claim that they would not be good online students because they are not very technologically proficient. Others claim the converse by touting their ability to surf the Net with the no road blocks.

The myth that technological savvy is the contributing factor to student success is slowly being corrected. Two of my students were technology facilitators in a school system known for its wonderful use of technology. Their role was to teach teachers how to use technology. We all discovered that their strengths did not help them complete assignments in a timely manner, budget their time, nor help them to collaborate effectively with their classmates. Being able to navigate the courseware is not enough. Paloff and Pratt offer excellent suggestions for enhancing student participation in the course:

1. Be clear about how much time the course will require of students and faculty in order to eliminate potential misunderstandings about course demands.
2. Teach students about online learning
3. As the instructor, be a model of good participation by logging on frequently and contributing to the discussion.
4. Be willing to step in and set limits if participation wanes or if the conversation is headed in the wrong direction.
5. Remember that there are people attached to the words on the screen. Be willing to contact students who are not participating and invite them in.
6. Create a warm and inviting atmosphere that promotes the development of a sense of community among the participants. (Palloff & Pratt, 1999)

The web houses several examples of aptitude surveys that help students to carefully consider whether or not they want to choose an online course as a solution for learning. Take a look at this Readiness Checklist from Monroe Community College, which offers immediate feedback to the potential online student. Though such agreements might discourage some students from enrolling in a course, it can prepare others for the experience and assist them in planning to take a course.

Soles and Moller explore how online instructors can match the tools and functionality of the online environment to suit individual learning preferences of their students (2001). They suggest that thoughtful instructional design and awareness of learning preferences through inventories like the Myers-Brigg Type Indicator make it possible for instructors to meet the needs of all of students regardless of their abilities (p11.).

## **Planning**

I have heard repeatedly that for every hour of instruction online, the teacher must devote ten hours of preparation. Not only is this true, but it might be an understatement for the novice online teacher.

Anticipating all of the needs of students without first-hand knowledge of them and incorporating supports into the course design is a monumental task. It does not end before the first day of class. Coming from a constructivist background, my initial paradigm for teaching online could best be seen as interpretivist more so than positivist or post-positivist. I believe that learning transcends materials and rote memorization toward the individual construction of knowledge through negotiation of learning objectives and interaction with classmates.

Planning under this paradigm “...becomes more of an iterative and recursive practice than a linear and hierarchical enterprise” (Heinecke, Dawson, & Willis, 2001, p 306.). Unfortunately, my planning was still somewhat grounded in a linear process. One of the strengths of the online environment that is also a challenge is the ability to change course content and structure to accommodate the uniqueness of each class and each student as the course progresses.

## **Jumping into the deep end**

Developing an entire class online as your first attempt at distance learning might not be the best transition toward online instruction. Instead, a less daunting challenge might be to simply place course materials like the syllabus, extra readings, and announcements on a webpage. Judith Boettcher and Rita-Maria Conrad (1999) describe three types of online courses being offered. *Web courses* are similar to the approach described above. A step above this model is the *web-enhanced course*, a hybrid that couples face to face meetings coupled with some online class sessions. The pinnacle of online instruction is the *web-centric course* that is conducted exclusively online with few or no face-to-face meetings.

My course *Lesson Planning...NOT for Dummies* is an example of a web-centric course. It was designed for K-12 educators as an asynchronous two-week course with an additional two weeks of access to the course to assist students in the completion of a well-designed lesson plan. I never met my students and communicated almost exclusively with them via email.



As mentioned earlier, I had learned how to use the software to create the course and conducted my own research about how to design instruction within this new environment. Though aware that the approach to teaching and learning had to be different than what one might see in a traditional classroom, I did not know and had not experienced the key elements of successful online instruction. I did not know how to do it. The DATOC course later helped me to revise the planning and design processes for the course, in essence assisting me with a new blueprint for instruction. I was moving in the right direction and had already embraced a paradigm conducive to successful instruction, but I was missing the essential elements for preparing, designing, and teaching online.

The DATOC course carefully followed the book *Essential Elements: Prepare, Design, and Teach Your Online Course* (Elbaum, McIntyre, & Smith, 2002). One of the authors, Cynthia McIntyre, served as the instructor for the course. As the title implies, we explored **seventeen essential elements** that contribute to a successful online course administration. These elements are distributed among the three major phases of an online course: preparation, design, and teaching.

### **Prepare for your online course**

1. Prepare to teach online.
2. Build a course outline.
3. Create a course schedule with clear deadlines.
4. Plan for ongoing quality assurance.
5. Ensure support from your administration.
6. Provide technical support.

### **Design your online course**

1. Format your course so that students can focus on the content.
2. Design a learning community that is collaborative, engaging and inclusive.
3. Find and use appropriate course materials and resources.
4. Develop rich, relevant learning activities to support your learning objectives.
5. Include a balanced mixture of individual and group learning activities.
6. Recognize that pacing in an online course is different.
7. Provide equal accessibility to all students.

### **Teach your online course**

1. Provide a comprehensive set of informational materials.
2. Facilitate discussions in a way that keeps students on-task, promotes full participation, and encourages peer collaboration.
3. Engage with your students without over-engaging.
4. Assess student work and provide feedback.

Notice that all but four of these “essential elements” address the preparation and design of an online course. Does this mirror the amount of effort devoted to preparing to teach in a traditional classroom? In the transition from classroom teacher to online teacher, the DATOC course made it clear that the bulk of my growth in the first two phases would occur in two areas: scheduling and fostering a learning community.

## **Scheduling**

My first learning opportunity came when students were not participating in online discussions in a timely manner. The intent of the initial discussions was to get students to share their understanding of the lesson planning process. Of course I was dismayed when, several days after the due date, almost half of the students had not yet contributed to the discussion. Were my instructions not clear? Did they not understand what they were supposed to do? This developed into a pattern throughout the course.

In addition, several students emailed me repeatedly to ask for additional time to complete assignments such as reflection papers or scavenger hunts. Like many first-time online instructors, I logged in repeatedly to monitor student participation only to be consistently frustrated with the lack thereof. I later learned that I had not paid attention to the scheduling and pacing of assignments.

## **Weekly schedules**

A survey of the literature shows that the syllabus for an online course should be organized by weeks. This unit of time is familiar to students and gives students more flexibility to complete assignments within their own workspace. Assignments should then be due at the end of the week. If readings or forum postings must be completed within the basic unit of time, then allow two to three days for students to complete the activity. This framework is necessary because students are not required to log in to the course at any specific time.

In addition, each week should begin and end during the *middle of the week* rather than on a Monday (Elbaum, McIntyre, & Smith, 2002, p. 25). There are many reasons why this is important, but perhaps the most significant is to accommodate students whose busy schedules require that they complete assignments over the weekend. I was expecting too much of my students, asking them to complete postings within twenty-four hours. I also chose to begin the course on a Monday, so students were forced to cram their work into the weekend.

## **A realistic workload**

Students in my course also complained about the workload. There was no time for orientation to the course, so consequently they were thrust into becoming comfortable with the environment while at the same time engaging in the content. I had designed the course as a 2.0 CEU course, or ten hours per week. This was undoubtedly too much for this type of course. A more realistic time commitment would have required around five hours each week, not counting any time spent on technical issues.

Students would have been better prepared to handle the workload if they had also known in advance what kind of assignments they would be required to complete each week. The DATOC course used an overview document to inform students of the entire week's assignments. Students were given the opportunity to view this document at the end of the

previous week in order to schedule their participation. Each overview included a checklist of assignments displayed in the form of a table for a quick look at the workload ahead. Take a look at this overview for the third week of the DATOC course. In retrospect, the schedule of my course was more instructor-friendly than learner-friendly.

### **A learning community**

Online courses create an excellent environment for a learning community. As stated in a report by the Higher Education and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers Distance Education: Guidelines for Good Practice (2000), "Course design should be shaped to the potentials of the medium" (p. 8).

In the design of my first course, I failed to capitalize on the medium's potential for promoting the development of a learning community. Online courses provide several venues for development of a learning community, among them asynchronous discussion forums and group projects. In my course, the assignments were all individualized, as were the discussion postings. There were no group projects, since the course lasted only two weeks and I thought there was not enough time to include them.

The closest resemblance to a learning community occurred on two occasions when students posted responses to their classmates' reflections and observations about lesson planning. The outcome of this activity did not apparently engage students to continue the discussion beyond their responses. They had no motivation for interaction beyond the requirement that they must respond to someone else's posting.

Once again, students had no model of how effective discussions occur online. They also had no rubric or guide for explaining what was expected in their responses. For example, students were asked to respond to the following prompt:

Based on your experience and your discussion with colleagues, name and discuss one variable that affect how you conduct a lesson plan. Please address the following in your response:

- What is the variable, i.e., time?
- Give an example of when this variable affected how you conducted the lesson plan.
- How did you accommodate this variable when you realized it would have an impact on the plan?
- How would you revise that lesson to accommodate that variable for future use?

There was no explicit direction to respond to their classmate's postings, so most "discussions" looked like the following:

**Student A:** A very major variable that impacts on my lesson planning is time. During the school year, students are supposed to attend classes for 180 days, which is 180 hours in each class at Shelby High. However, testing, absences, schedule adjustments, etc., cut deeply into

this time. I think of every class period on every day as an opportunity for students to learn new things. When a class is canceled for testing or other reasons, it is a learning opportunity that is lost to students and can't be recovered. For this reason, it is important to use every day in the best way possible. Classes are in session from first bell to last bell during each class period, and there are no free periods. I plan lessons for each day with the expectation that every day is the most important lesson of the year.

**Student B Response:** I agree with your perspective of making each day as important as possible. It is unfortunate that this perspective is not always that of everyone else in the school. Wouldn't it be great if as a school, the decision could be made to limit interruptions, with specific ideas of when, how, and by what means class could be interrupted?

Sadly, the discussions never extended beyond this level of interaction. Another likely explanation for the sterile discussions comes from the missed opportunity to allow students to get to know one another via their online profiles. Instead of participating as distance education learners, they might have more aptly described as *distant* learners.

### **Building a comfort zone**

The DATOC course devoted the entire first week to creating our profiles and then exploring the profiles of our classmates. Take a look at this assignment from the first week designed to "Meet Each Other." As the course progressed, we grew to know one another in ways perhaps more than we would have had we been students in a traditional classroom.

From this assignment, I knew that Margo was a classroom teachers of twenty-eight years who now works with the Louisiana Department of Education, I knew how she would work with me later in the course when we worked together in a group to create a webliography. I also knew that one of my group members was not a good writer, having read her contributions to the discussion forums during the course. This familiarity would not have existed in the traditional classroom. Knowing her weakness, I was better able to plan how we could work together in our group activity.

The process of working collaboratively taught us more than just the content of the course. It helped us to become more self-directed in our learning, to take responsibility for ourselves and our classmates. As Speck notes in his work on professional development for educators, adult learners need a catalyst like small group activities to push them beyond basic understanding of content to the higher levels of thinking. The small group makes it possible for adults to "...share, reflect, and generalize their experiences (Speck, 1996, p. 34).

We devoted three weeks to creating the webliography mentioned above. We took turns as group leaders, negotiating how we would carry out the week's assignments which had been crafted to move us toward our final product. The experience was so rewarding because we were in charge of our learning. We had almost forgotten that there was an instructor for the course!



Reflecting on the experience, I realized the potential of an online learning community to prepare us as lifelong learners (Bransford, 2000, p212). As an additional benefit, we have established professional connections with individuals who share a common interest. Such relationships make it possible for us to move beyond a community of learners to a more global Networked Learning Community. Imagine working with individuals from various geographic locations around the world and learning as a group while at the same time collaborating toward a common goal! (Carroll, 2000).

### **Maintaining communication**

This aspect of becoming an online teacher provided two additional opportunities for learning: deciding on my role as instructor of the course and maintaining communication with students. In a constructivist environment, the instructor/teacher role is more of a facilitator.

### **The instructor's role**

The instructor of the DATOC course served more as a consultant than anything else, intervening when we had specific questions about assignments or technical questions. She directed us to be the experts throughout our group activities and within various discussions. Quoting a student's remarks or insights shifts the expert role from the teacher onto the students. As the instructor modeled this practice, students in the class were later directed to use this technique of engaging other students in the conversation. (Take a look at this posting from a student in the DATOC course.)

My role in facilitating discussions in the Lesson Planning...NOT for Dummies course proved less than ideal for several reasons. In addition to previously mentioned challenges, my experience with the DATOC course demonstrated that the instructor does not have to respond to every posting nor manifest the traditional expert voice when he or she does participate. I responded to every student's posting with what I considered a thoughtful, informative comment.

Maddison and Mazzolini discovered that on average, frequent postings by instructors did not necessarily drive student to post more frequently. In fact, during their study of 200 students in an online astronomy course, more frequent postings from the instructor lead to shorter postings by students (Maddison and Mazzolini, 2002).

It is clear that the instructor's role is important to any course. Instructors must decide in advance how they will participate in the course. Should the instructor assume the role of co-investigator, working alongside students or perhaps that of facilitator who intervenes only when necessary? In an online course, the balance appears even more tenuous if a true learning community is sought as suggested by Maddison and Mazzolini. Too great of a presence could suppress student participation.

### **Communicating throughout the course**

My final learning opportunity came from the challenge of maintaining consistent and clear communication with students throughout the course. I used email for one-on-one discussions and major announcements. Students were notified in advance of the course that they could contact me at any time via email. Assignments were posted on the welcome page of the site two to three days prior to their due date. When students completed assignments, they received feedback via email or within their personal profiles if they submitted work within the course site. Within the discussion forum section, I responded to every posting by students. From my perspective, I believed that each student received equal communication from me. I felt that my presence in the course was equally distributed among the students.

Ironically, the strategies I used to ensure communication with students did not offer them the feedback they needed to feel good about their performance nor did they provide students with the adequate notice they needed to *plan for participation*. I was so sure of my efforts to provide consistent communication and feedback that I did not question myself when a student emailed to ask “How am I doing in the course?” I replied with a simple “Great!”

By contrast, the DATOC course established clear guidelines for communication and feedback prior to the course, during the course, and even following the course. The pre-course email was followed by an email two days prior, and then one on the morning of the course. Once “inside” the course, ongoing communication about assignments and technical issues was made available using topical discussion threads.

Having separate spaces for communication about particular types of issues made me feel comfortable about the support I would receive. It also made it possible for the instructor to maintain a certain presence in the course while satisfying the needs of the students. From an instructor's perspective, it is an effective technique for organizing discussion feedback in an area which remains available for all students throughout the duration of the course. As early as 1995, Zane Berge observed that the facilitator of an online course or forum must satisfy four essential roles: pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. (Berge, 1995) This screenshot demonstrates how the instructor of the DATOC course satisfied these essential roles while limiting her presence, i.e., not a teacher-centered course.

On an individual level, a private discussion space was created so that students could ask more personal questions. This space was also used for weekly feedback from the instructor. (This screenshot shows the personal space in the course.) Each week, we received postings from the instructor in the “feedback” thread our participation for the previous week. We always knew how we were doing in the course.

## Conclusion

The process of becoming an online instructor has helped me to identify what can and cannot be transferred from the traditional classroom to the online course. I could not have learned this merely by studying the process nor by creating an online course and teaching it. Taking an online course and analyzing the essential elements of online courses are necessary to make the change.

Thomas Carroll tells us that we resist such change in schools because we have been operating under the paradigm of knowledge transmission rather than knowledge creation. (Carroll, p. 128) Online courses are environments rich with the opportunity to create learning communities that are “learning-centered.” Such an environment may include knowledge transmission, but not necessarily on the part of the instructor.

The instructor's role in the online course is different than that of a classroom teacher. It is just as vital to the movement of students toward achieving learning goals, but in different ways. Perhaps to a greater degree than the traditional classroom, the online environment allows the instructor to model the behavior of a learner for his or her students. Carroll (p. 126) suggests that we are moving toward new learning environments where there are no teachers and no students, only learners. If this is so, perhaps my greatest stumbling block as an online instructor newbie was the unconscious, instinctive tendency to teach as I had been taught.

The first time I taught *Lesson Planning...NOT for Dummies*, the attrition rate was very high. This could be explained by the communication issues mentioned above, to the demographics of the students in the course, i.e., working adults with family obligations, or general discomfort with this new paradigm for learning. Palloff and Pratt note that there is no sound research yet to indicate why online students drop out more frequently than do those in a traditional classroom. (p. 47) My guess is that some students have forgotten what it is like to be a learner and were easily discouraged. We need to remember our duality of purpose as educators whether in a traditional classroom or in an online course.

*We are always teachers and learners.*