

INNOVATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN EDUCATION: CASE REVIEW FOR BEST ONLINE TEACHING PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the best online practices for online educators. Some distinct areas of interest an online educator needs to focus on include; Online Educational Trends, Making Sense of the Online Experience, Common Pitfalls, Online Presence, Instructor Characteristics, Critical Thinking and Developing a Learning Community. The article suggests techniques to address online students and foster an online learning community.

CASE REVIEW FOR BEST ONLINE TEACHING PRACTICES

The heart of a review of the best online teaching practices begins with the study of the teaching craft. Are the brick and mortar institutions of higher learning quickly becoming outdated? If so, are there differences between the online and face-to-face delivery in classroom? Most training, undergraduate, and graduate courses have transitioned to the online venue. The lesson review with other instructors encourages faculty development. Teachers need to make sense of each of their teaching experiences in order to improve the next class. Too often, lesson owners mandate the review and attendance is low. Educators have to make new faculty and students make sense of their experiences in order to improve online learning.

Teaching online is more important than ever before. Some distinct areas of interest an online educator needs to focus on include; Online Educational Trends, Making Sense of the Online Experience, Common Pitfalls, Online Presence, Instructor Characteristics, Critical Thinking and Developing a Learning Community. Developing instructors by these areas can improve both the student and faculty online learning experience.

Morris and Finnegan (2009) state "Nearly 35% of all higher education institutions in the United States are considered fully-engaged in offering online courses and programs." (p. 56). With the growing demand to provide online education to working professionals, online educators need to be aware how this demographic shapes the learning environment. Morris and Finnegan (2009) conducted four studies, tracking student behavior and online achievement, predicting student retention online, student persistence and satisfaction in the online environment, and perspectives of faculty teaching online. In tracking student progress, Morris and Finnegan (2009) state faculty need to utilize the tools that record how often and when students interact, ensure faculty give the feedback on student inputs, and aggregate interaction data to establish course norms. Morris and Finnegan (2009) also assert several faculty best

practices to include a comprehensive orientation, a clear syllabus, established roles in the online environment, consistent communication to establish resiliency, technology liaison, and tools for retaining students. However, Morris and Finnegan (2009) do not emphasize the importance of Lesson Objectives (LO). A clear LO gives the students very clear expectations within the course. Online discussion questions crafted to lesson objectives set the conditions for successful performance of the actions in the lesson objectives (PSU, 2008). A simple, but effective technique is to craft the questions to Bloom's taxonomy used in the lesson objective (Acito, 2002). For example, in an ethics course an instructor may ask, "Which is more important, moral, better, logical, valid, or appropriate...?" to support an evaluation lesson objective (PSU, 2008). To accomplish the lesson objectives, a discussion facilitator must guide the discussion to promote the best critical thinking environment. Student success is measured by accomplishing the lesson objectives.

There are techniques that sabotage a student's success through discussions that actually keep the student from successfully accomplishing the lesson objective. The most sabotaging online facilitation method is a facilitator who does not have any presence in the discussion forums either through the number of posting entries or the quality of the feedback. Avoid the "sneaky" techniques purposed by Bonk (2012). Simply replying first and last in a discussion forum may "trick" students into thinking you empathize, however this technique often does not promote the critical thinking. Avoid discussion boards becoming a glorified social network. Use both proof and clarification support to reply to student comments, which models reply behavior in forums to support comments with research or proof. Peer students that conduct a research scan of supporting material for another peer that is both cited and referenced in the reply, promotes critical thinking and research speak among classmates. Support "happy" talk as long as it is supported with research. The quality of the facilitator replies is more important than the iteration of the reply. Discussion facilitators lose credibility fast with the students, if the feedback is not substantive in nature.

Feedback from rubrics can also be helpful or problematic depending how the feedback tool is constructed. Sample rubrics that are both quantitative and tailored to the accomplishment of lesson objectives provide clear feedback (Al-Shalchi, 2009). Ensure point allocations are clearly linked to the level of contribution and accomplishment of the lesson objective. A discussion facilitator's goal; is to foster an environment, through carefully crafted questions, that promotes critical thinking, in accomplishment of the lesson objectives, by providing specific feedback, using well-constructed rubrics. Not

setting student expectations in the online environment can clearly lead to some common pitfalls.

Germain (2011) states the following common pitfalls of online faculty; “upload your course materials, then call it a day...let the course management system drive your thinking...insist on being ‘sage on the stage’... expect your students to consume knowledge rather than create it...sic [and] ignore the ways students learn from each other.” (pp. 1-2). Germain (2011) states that consistent dialogue is important to setting student expectations. It can be very humbling when a student points out course “flaws” and expose instructor ignorance or worse, incompetence. Staying current in the teaching craft and the profession is important. Teachers have also been pleasantly surprised when a student augments the course with a product that goes beyond expectations. So in order to avoid these common pitfalls, online faculty need to gain more online experience.

Some common themes emerged from the student online experience; time management, more work than expected, students miss online classes or fail to show any online presence, students desire more peer interaction, a sense of disconnection, more faculty feedback, ease of navigation is important, and the need to be committed and motivated throughout the course (Kelly, 2012). Kelly (2012) states that time management and student feedback are key in understanding the online experience. All online faculty must give feedback to show they care, which will inevitably spark motivation. Orso and Doolittle (2012) support communication, compassion, organization, feedback, as leading characteristics to motivate online students. The ability to “connect” with a student is more difficult online than face-to-face, and often instructors have a very short time to establish these relationships.

Annand (2011) states that in order to establish the relationships, the online faculty must establish a community of inquiry, comprising of three main interlocking circles, the social presence, the cognitive presence and the teaching presence. The goal is to optimize the educational experience. As Shea and Bidjerano (2012) pointed out in Annand’s (2011) research, the learner’s presence is also required. In order to make the experience complete, students must also be accountable for their experience. Online faculty should assist the student, where effort does not equal performance. Part of the online educator’s responsibility in developing students is helping them make sense of these experiences, which potentially supports other students and the online community at large.

Shea et al. (2005) research with over 2,000 students across 32 different colleges states the importance of teaching presence in an online environment. The importance of faculty enthusiasm communicated in an online course is imperative. To build this effective online community the faculty must be able to address individual and group needs communicated through various media. Both Shea et al. (2005) and Annand (2011) emphasize the importance of faculty presence in enhancing the student online experience by setting curriculum designing methods, establishing time parameters, utilizing the medium effectively, and establishing netiquette rules.

Mongan-Rallis (2012) states the debate of the face-to-face versus online teaching, trying to determine which

approach is best. Mongan-Rallis (2012) asserts that a hybrid model of both approaches, has several advantages over being a strict purest. Educational institutions are quickly realizing the benefits of saving student time and resources by providing seat time and online time.

However, the technology of today such as Adobe Connect can limit seat time even further. The technology has the interaction capabilities to utilize as many senses as possible. Live video to maintain eye contact during the dialogue, real-time audio for interactive synchronous communication, white-board for creative interaction, office technology to formally present material (powerpoint), and interactive tools such as polls to do a quick check on learning.

Time saved to perform multiple tasks at once seem to be at work here. Mongan-Rallis (2012) mentions the time saved with students and instructors, which allowed her to conduct research in different countries. This is significant for international research that requires international data collection. Surveys could be conducted online with countries that have access to the technology. Research committee meetings conducted via VTC, with several folks positioned all over the world (Bonk, 2012). In a resource-constrained environment, the educational community is adapting. The money and time saved from traveling vast distances with technology that can obtain the same data, allows students and faculty to dedicate more time to other activities.

Synchronous online teaching is changing the face of the classroom in a resource-constrained environment. Couple this with asynchronous teaching, which allows the learner to reflect and experience a brick and mortar “class like” experience at significantly lower cost and saving the student precious time for other activities (Bonk, 2012). One fair criticism is that online students do not engage in critical thinking activities.

In educational development, critical thinking is important. This is what educators do, whether it is face-to-face or in online education. Instead of being prescriptive, or developing a student from an instructor’s perspective, critical thinking is a great way to develop a student with the student’s efforts, challenge their perspectives, and assist the student in “filing” the information through reflective practice. This method bolsters student confidence, reduces intellectual fear, and develops the student on a path to cognitive growth. There are other types of thinking in the classroom and none of them are as evaluative as critical thinking (Morrison & Long, 2012).

There is reactive thinking where “gut” instinctive responses are based solely on experience and training, and what surfaces is one course of action to answer the question. An example of a student comment may be, “That’s not true...”. There is paradigmatic thinking where the student’s experiences are the sole basis for more than one course of action. A student comment may be “I have never experienced that...”. There is design thinking, where a coach, mentor, or leader, bounds the student’s rationality to shape several courses of action and guides the thinking. A student comment may be, “Isn’t this what you wanted...” Critical thinking is a skill-set that is difficult to teach, unless the student can craft questions to challenge their own thinking. A student comment would be “What would I

think about this if I were on the other side of the argument...” Critical thinking is boundless, and requires skillful questioning and time to do well in an online setting. Another type of thinking is creative thinking, which is mistakenly associated with critical thinking. Creative thinking is important and boundless as well. Coming up with new and novel ideas is very inspirational. (Morrison & Long, 2012)

There are many ways to facilitate critical thinking in students in online forums. Not all educators are versed in developing critical thinking in students, especially in lecture-based settings. There are several great ways to develop critical thinking skills by constructing questions for students, if in the learning objective, the objective is to develop one of these skills, such as interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, or self-regulation (Facione, 2006).

There are several dynamics to consider in a discussion forum. The online facilitator must be especially adept at changing his or her approach as needed. However, the facilitator’s preparation is important to proactively plan and anticipate the direction of the discussion. Students “file” information better through Socratic discussion than with straight lecture. The “critical” aspect of discussion adaptation and anticipation is vocalizing an individual’s critical thinking. Before a student truly masters the material, the student must understand his or her own critical thinking. Students progress through different programs, never truly aware of their lack of critical thinking.

Facione (2006) explains why critical thinking is so important in discussions. Regardless of the topic, critical thinking allows the cognitive exploration needed to go into a particular topic in depth. Critical thinking however, has no rules or boundaries. This is where the facilitator jumps in to direct, set boundaries, and limitations to support lesson objectives through carefully constructed questions. Left unchecked, students may run into a paradox or “rat” holes not linked to the lesson objectives. Educator leadership in the online forum can deflect the conversation from a paradox or a “rat” hole, through the posting of well-constructed questions.

The importance of faculty must include leadership in the online community. The online faculty are the leaders assigned to “inspire” the online community. The faculty’s leadership should be assessed as well, such as in their ability to make improvements to curriculum, in their ability to facilitate a lesson effectively through presence and competence, and in improving student and faculty interactions. Online faculty must have the passion to “teach” effectively by answering and constructing questions that help students make sense of their online educational experience. The faculty’s ability to educate, train, and inspire students is key, which does not seem different from the face-to-face method.

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