

Best Practices for Online Learning

Lessons Learned From Focus Groups Of Online MBA
Professors Whose Evaluations Were Highest

General

- Teaching online requires a different set of skills than for a classroom setting
- Instead of being the “**Sage on the Stage**” with regular face-to-face personal interaction, you are the “**Guide on the Side**” providing the materials (content), the map (syllabus, assignments), and the mirror (quizzes, tests, feedback) to guide your students through the course
- Establishing a good personal electronic connection with *each* student, and adopting a Customer Service Attitude are the keys

Managing Yourself as an Online Instructor

Get organized!

- You must be **obsessive compulsive about time management**
- Set a class schedule for yourself and put it on a calendar that you see *every day*. LMS tools like Blackboard can show these to you including deadlines you must meet, such as:
 - Grading assignments in a timely way
 - Sending out instructional FYI messages to your class
 - Posting grades to student gradebooks
 - Checking in on threaded discussions within the course
 - Pre-checking units before they open to students, etc. ...
 - This is the **production calendar** that helps you stay *on track*, so you don't look like a slacker!

Managing Yourself as an Online Instructor

Get organized!

- Be faithful to the deadlines you set (e.g. posting grades to their gradebooks).
- Don't expect students to do more than you are willing to do yourself
- If for some reason you cannot make a deadline that will affect the class, notify them in advance and apologize for any inconvenience that it may cause them

Managing Yourself as an Online Instructor

Personally Communicate:

- Regularly (daily even!) via discussion threads inside the course as they occur, PLUS regular messages to the class
- Speak in the virtual “voice” of an encouraging, but firm *cheerleader*:

When someone does an especially nice job on something, send them an *unexpected* kudo message so they know you are aware of their individual contributions to the class *and* appreciate them

Managing Yourself as an Online Instructor

Set boundaries:

- If you are going to get anything else done (e.g. Day Job, Family, etc.), you cannot be online *all the time* every day in a major way
- Identify certain days/times of the week that you guarantee to respond to email and be online working/participating inside the class
- On other days, fulfill your other non-course activities and DO NOT even get online
- Encourage students to set boundaries and schedules for themselves too, and be faithful to them for a healthy work/life balance

Managing Yourself as an Online Instructor

Take Care Of Yourself:

- Make a decent **home office workstation** where you can comfortably work
- Do not work excessively at a laptop, tablet, or phone for too long
- Use a **full screen monitor** and **keyboard**, and get a **proper chair** for back support

Managing Yourself as an Online Instructor

Take Care Of Yourself:

- Take *breaks* every couple of hours and go outside and walk around or throw the frisbee to your dog
- Make a deliberate effort to *exercise* on a regular basis and stretch out your neck and back
- Make a serious, professional commitment to the *content* and *management* of any online course that has your name on it. Do not give critics the pleasure of being right when they say that your course is inferior to a *traditional classroom experience* - interaction is paramount!

Preparation For Online Teaching

Before Teaching A New Course Section:

- Review *all* the posted information: syllabus, reading and homework assignments, in-class exercises, lectures, links, audio files...etc. and make appropriate editing/corrections/additions, if needed
- Update the unit schedule so that content units open for students on the days expected
- Build the online gradebook and make all the dates correct
- Ensure that your online students will have *access* to the course home page (syllabus and calendar) *before* the first class
- Make sure the objectives, time frames and course expectations are clear

Good Online Communication Practices

- *Respect* the student. This is most important. There are no “dumb questions.”
- *Set expectations* for your students about your schedule – best ways days, and times to communicate with you
- Immediately respond to questions (within *minutes* if practical) is desirable, but it should not be longer than *several hours*
- If you are going to be out of touch for a while, notify your students
- Do not wait more than a week past any delinquencies - Contact the student to enquire if they are having any difficulties – “Disappearing” online is easy to do (“Out of Sight, Out of Mind” ...)

Good Online Communication Practices

- **Perpetually moderate:** Threaded discussions are great, but not if the instructor does not actively participate. Consequently, use them wisely!
- Monitor all postings in Threaded Discussions and comment when necessary with a “good job” comment when that encouragement is appropriate
- Keep Threaded Discussions going: Respond to the question when a student’s post is not promptly answered by another student
- Allow students to correct each other (posted homework, threaded discussion....with professor comments/clarification)
- *Never* embarrass any student regarding their individual performance through an open response in a threaded discussion

Course Management Suggestions

- **Balance the workload** during the term
- Integrate **real world examples** with the content being covered
- **Include great websites** for students to access within lectures
- Provide **hands-on project activities** that help students apply the concepts learned on a unit by unit basis
- Include **supplementary readings** and **interactive tutorials**
- Include **problem-solving** and **critical thinking skills** developed in discussion thread questions

Course Management Suggestions

- Periodically send or post interesting and relevant **current events** news clips. This shows the students that the topic we are covering is “alive and happening.”
- Post the **exemplary exercise solutions** for all to see in a document sharing location
- Use a drop box or gradebook to receive and return assignments – avoid email attachments
- Build a file containing all the best answers for the weekly assignment. Share the combined solutions file with students a week before an exam, for review and information refreshing

Course Design

- Build the **foundation of the content** of each unit around *non-perishable concepts* in your subject that do not change often
- Enhance these foundational pieces with **current application/event material**
- Keep some sizzle in your current information by using **external sources** for audio segments and short video clips relevant to your topic (e.g. TED Talks)
- Make your *first quiz* be on the **syllabus content** – gets them used to navigating your course and understanding the ground rules early

Course Design

- Provide a **Quality Control Feedback Channel** – E.g. post a thread for students to report *typos* and *broken links* in your web pages, etc.
- Set up an open **Instructor's Corner** thread for general or off-topic questions from students – the kind that someone would approach you with during a break in a live class
- Provide **Course Structure and Layout**, and **Navigation Hints** to make it as easy as possible to find things in your course
- Add a **Glossary**, and a place for Articles and Links, and other Shared Documents pertinent to the whole course (like Templates, Samples, etc.)

Course Design

- At least *twice* during the course, ask students to provide *their feedback* regarding their opinion of the topics, textbooks, weekly assignments, lecture materials, audio added value to lectures, grading policy, etc.
- If possible, implement some of their ideas

Course Design

- *Bookmark* a few websites that contain **leading edge information** about what is happening in your subject domain and check these several times when you are online so that you are ahead of students in knowing about these trends/events

These could be professional/trade associations, regulatory agencies, or your favorite composite news sites where you yourself keep up with your topic!

Course Design

When Recording Presentations:

- Try [PowerPoint](#) (MS), [Slides](#) (Google), [Keynote](#) (Apple), [Prezi](#), or [other](#) for creating your show
- Get a good, comfortable **USB headset** with a high-quality microphone
- **Position the mic** to the *side* of your mouth, not directly in front (reduces wind and breath noises)
- **Talk naturally**, and click through your presentation as if you were making it to an audience (wave your hands around if that's what you do in class when presenting... just make it as natural as you can)
- Don't worry about mess-ups, *ums* and *ahhs*, *etc.* – you can edit those out later

Course Design

When Recording Presentations:

- Use a good screen capture and editing tool like **Captivate** (Adobe) or **Camtasia** (TechSmith); publish to [YouTube](#) or [Vimeo](#)
- Keep all recorded presentations:
 - **Topical** - on specific topics within your course's domain, so they can be shuffled among units if needed
 - **Generic** - no specific references to textbook or page, date, day, or time; avoid spatial references like “here”, “there”, etc. – the more generic the presentation, the longer it remains usable
 - **Short** – the shorter the better, but maximum would be [TED Talk](#) length (~12-15 minutes)

Course Design

When Doing Live Presentations:

- **Move the mouse cursor** *v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y* across the screen, so viewers can follow what you are doing (make your cursor settings *slower than normal* if you can't remember to slow it down during live demos...)
- **Create a script** for yourself if you aren't proficient with what you are demonstrating
- Have a **backup plan** in case something happens ... maybe screen snaps that you could talk to
- **Practice, Practice, Practice ...**