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Fifteen Things that Work in My Online Courses (and Three that Didn't)

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I've been sketching, drawing and painting since I was a child. Sometimes people ask, "How do you draw so well?" On occasion I respond, "When you do something every day for a long time you can get pretty good at it." I've been teaching online for 22 years. By now, I've gotten pretty good at it. Here are 15 things that work in my online courses, and three that didn't.

1. Fully outlining the course using a mindmap. Drafting the outline of the course in detail before I even create the online course shell saves hours of guesswork. The branching logic of a mindmap also helps me avoid superfluous content. This is a very efficient brainstorming, planning, and design method; by now I can outline an entire course within one hour.

2. Creating a clean interface design for students. Striving to view my course site from the perspective of the student helps me keep the course design clean, uncluttered, and with a logical flow that is intuitive to navigate. I remind myself that "figuring out your course site is not an assignment." Adding consistent visual cues helps students navigate the course site, recognize standard segments, and important items.

3. Creating an atmosphere of both welcome and challenge. Reminding students that they are taking a "course" and not a "class" helps them appreciate that online learning is a different experience than the classroom. Setting the atmosphere includes an "introduce yourself" forum which can include sharing common experiences, using humor. When a student posts a great response, I will sometimes give them "1000 extra credit points." They don't cost me anything and they don't actually count for anything, but students get excited. Just like a classroom

course, I strive to create a "class culture" conducive to learning.

4. Providing a reading schedule checklist and other helps. Because I'm not as present as I am in a classroom, I provide students with helpful resources to help them self-monitor their progress. For example, this handy reading schedule checklist helps students stay on track and helps avoid the "when is the assignment due?" question.

5. Allowing up to two weeks of reading days before the first session. Because my online courses encourage critical reading and interaction with texts, I give students plenty of time to read ahead before requiring them to post responses. Additionally, I have a standard "How to read for this course" orientation that helps encourage reading for understanding, synthesis, and application rather than for coverage.

6. Scheduling one week for wrapping up the course. During the final week of the course schedule no posts or learning activities are assigned. This allows students to catch up on posts they've missed and gives them time to finish the summative paper or project before the submission deadline.

7. Being selective in content and student learning activities. I anticipate that my online class will require more work from students than a classroom version. Therefore, the content coverage becomes more focused (and the amount cut it by half). Aligning student learning activities to the course's student learning outcomes helps avoid overwhelming students with superfluous activities. Aside from reading and posting on forums, two additional student learning activities is the most I ask of students. One of those will often be a summative writing assignment or project.

8. Keeping all course sessions open. Keeping all sessions open allows the student a meta view of the scope of the course, which aids in comprehension, integration, and helps them plan their own schedules. It also allows for eager students to work ahead and for some to catch up as needed. I have found there is little value in keeping things "hidden" from students.

9. Being heavy-handed in responding to student posts for the first two sessions. During the first two sessions of the course I respond intentionally to student posts, communicating what I look for in student responses, highlighting what an effective student post is (and why), pushing for deeper thinking though follow up questions, etc. I emphasize that questions asked by the professor and by students are "real" questions which must be responded to. This provides cues to students about the expected quality of posts.

10. Scheduling two 45-minute log in times for myself. One rule I follow is "never work harder than your students." To avoid being overwhelmed by student posts and to help manage my time I schedule one 45-minute time slot in the morning and in the afternoon to read and respond to student posts. I don't respond to each individual post, rather, I select those posts that provide a chance to "teach to the class" with a response. When I note a student starts getting behind in their posts, I send one check in e-mail, but no more.

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11. Providing supplemental enrichment resources. There is a lot of good content available on the internet. Providing optional enrichment resources allows students to "go deeper" into the study and review alternate ways of accessing content (video, podcasts, demonstrations, interviews, model lectures, etc.). However, I try to be judicious and selective to avoid offering too many options in any given session. Alternatively, I sometimes assign students to do an internet search for appropriate and helpful recourses and have them post them on the course site (they must share why the resource is relevant and helpful).

12. Creating opportunity for immediate application. I strive for immediate application starting with the first discussion forum session. The application can be in the form of interpretation, analysis, providing an example, providing a critique, challenging an idea, or applying a concept to the students' experiences. Throughout the course I strive to address multiple modalities of understanding (see Wiggins & McTighe's Understanding by Design taxonomy).

13. Including a mid-course metacognition opportunity. At mid-point in the course I provide a forum with metacognition questions and prompts to help students "step back" and reflect on their learning *experience.* This provides helpful process feedback for both student and professor.

14. Including a 50-minute Zoom "open office hours." This practice provides novelty and can be helpful to foster a sense of connectivity and to provide an opportunity to discuss concepts that may need a more nuanced treatment. I typically don't schedule more than two during the course.

15. Including a "course closure" section. I have a firm deadline for course closure at which time all assignments are due, no exceptions. I post a firm notice at the start of the course, and on the syllabus, that I accept no late submissions. The course closes on the final date of the course schedule. The final session provides a place for students to post their assignments and a forum where they "sign off." When a student submits a post in this final forum it signals to me that have completed the course, so I don't have to guess when a student is "done."

Three Things That Have Not Worked

Requiring synchronous sessions forcing students to log on at specific days and times. Requiring students to check in at specific times for a live session tends to not have a significant pedagogical value in my experience. Aside from checking in from different time zones, the necessity of the right equipment, and need for stable internet connections, I haven't found that a "live" session is of significantly high value for the learning experience.

Posting a narrated 20-minute slide presentation for content delivery. Early on I tried to translate the classroom lectures with slide presentations to the online environment. That resulted in 20-minute narrated slide presentations students needed to sit through. Ultimately I found it more effective to provide students with a textual narrative of the content. Students can read faster than listening to a slow-paced narrated podcast, and it's easier to review the

content. Sure, visual and audio presentations have their place, but the question is, "What pedagogical function does it serve?"

Requiring quizzes and exams for a grade. Since students demonstrate achievement of learning through their posts (which are assessed immediately) and in a summative paper or project that synthesizes evidence of higher order learning, quizzes and tests are of little value. On occasion I do provide quizzes for self-assessment and review. Students can take those to reinforce and assess their own learning.

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