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Resolving Instructor Challenges in the Online Classroom

Patt R. Elison-Bowers
Boise State University

Kimberly Henderson
Boise State University

Jaime Sand
Boise State University

Linda Osgood
Boise State University

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Patt Elison-Bowers, Boise State University, USA
Kimberly Henderson, Boise State University, USA
Jaime Sand, Boise State University, USA
Linda Osgood, Boise State University, USA

Abstract: The rapid growth of online education has led to expanded opportunities for students while introducing instructors to new teaching challenges inherent to virtual learning environments. The practical responsibilities, once confined to the traditional classroom, such as handling student records, class size, teaching assistants, and instructional material now require a new mind set as well as sufficient technical knowledge. The online instructor faces additional opportunities and challenges once the class is online and students have enrolled. How to merge the best of the traditional classroom including teaching and practical responsibilities with the best of an online teaching opportunity become paramount to the online instructor. These issues and corresponding suggestions for the online instructor will be discussed in this paper.

Keywords: e-Learning, Novice Instruction, Teaching Challenges

T**EACHING AN ONLINE** class is substantially different from teaching a face-to-face class. While the growth of online education has led to many new expanded teaching opportunities, it also presents new challenges to the traditional instructor. In fact, most traditional instructors find themselves in a situation where they are novices about online education. Often, traditional teaching methods do not translate smoothly to the online environment (Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008; Haughton & Romero, 2009). The purpose of this paper is to identify key classroom responsibilities, once confined to the traditional classroom, and make recommendations for merging the best of the traditional classroom into the new online learning environment.

When traditional instructors encounter challenges in the online classroom, it is important to remember that the abundance of experience they bring to the table has been obtained in a face-to-face learning environment. Online teaching is, in many significant ways, quite different from teaching face-to-face. It not only requires teaching experience, but sometimes a complete change in pedagogy (Haughton & Romero, 2009; Zhao, 2003). The challenge to facilitate learning and engage students without the normal visual cues can be very daunting to the new instructor. It takes some time to stop relying on the trial and error process to meet these challenges, manage the new environment, and find a way to teach effectively (Connolly, Jones, & Jones, 2007; Haughton & Romero, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2004). When teaching online, the authors have found it helpful to make classroom adjustments in key areas before the start of the online course to lessen the impact of the trial and error process. This also can assist the new instructor in merging the best of the traditional classroom practices into this new online learning environment.

COMMON
GROUND

Course Policies and Expectations

The online learning environment creates a unique requirement for extensive communication about the course and the instructor. In a traditional classroom, many course policies and instructor expectations are communicated throughout the course, but in an online environment, policies need to be defined and readily available before the class commences. The instructor needs to clearly define online communication, course policies, and additional course expectations (Hricko, 2002). This information should be provided in the course syllabus and throughout the course site (Center for Teaching, Office of Academic Planning and Assessment, Center for Computer-Based Instructional Technology, & Continuing Education, n.d.).

The guidelines need to be particularly clear for areas such as any netiquette or other course communication policies (Center for Teaching et al., n.d.). The instructor should provide contact information and outline preferred methods of communication, such as email, office phone, or cell phone, as well as defining instructor availability and response rates (Center for Teaching et al., n.d.; Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008; Hricko, 2002; Keramidas, Ludlow, Collins, & Baird, 2007). Is the instructor available on evenings and weekends? How soon can the student expect a response? Defining these expectations for students will assist in reducing the number of repeat emails or phone calls and increase student satisfaction with the instructor and the course.

In the online environment, the instructor can easily become hidden behind the scenes (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Communication expectations should also define the instructor's role, including how and when interaction will occur (Center for Teaching et al., n.d.). For example, will the instructor be involved regularly in discussion boards, or will that role be reserved only for the necessary interjections? A relatively simple, yet valuable way the instructor can remain actively involved and present to the students, is for the instructor to post weekly announcements (Center for Teaching and Learning [CTL], 2006; Center for Teaching et al., n.d.). In a structured course, this may include assessments and deadlines for the week, or in a self-paced course, may simply be a short greeting that provides hints or tips and general statements about progress made.

Course policies that typically appear in the online syllabus include the pace of the course, as well as areas such as the grading policy, late policies, and university policies that need to be addressed (Hricko, 2002). Students need to understand if the pace of the course is structured by the professor, or if they progress at their own rate. If there are due dates, these should be clear both on the syllabus and course site (Center for Teaching et al., n.d.; Keramidas et al., 2007). The syllabus should address late work, identifying if it is accepted, and if so, if there is a penalty (CTL, 2006). An error sometimes made by new online instructors is to assume online learning means maximum flexibility. Failure to establish specific deadlines, however, could result in inadequate time for the instructor to provide detailed feedback on papers or other assignments or student abuse of online testing time frames (Watwood, Nugent, & Deihl, 2009). As already mentioned, due dates should be clearly stated, and if there is any change, should be communicated immediately to the students, both through the course site and through email (Hricko, 2002). The syllabus should outline the grading scale, indicating how points are allocated in the course and other grading policies of the instructor. Finally, the syllabus should always include institutional policy such as a statement about academic honesty and plagiarism (Keramidas et al., 2007). The syllabus should describe what this is, provide a link to institutional policy, and describe the possible sanctions for violation. While

most of these recommendations carry over into the traditional classroom, they are particularly important for the online class and present an entirely new set of challenges.

Time and Assignment Management

As in the traditional classroom setting, assessments often come with time constraints in the online classroom, with limited time allotted for quizzes, exams, and deadlines for assignments. These time frames should be communicated, again both in the syllabus and on the course site, and a policy regarding excessive time use for exams and deadlines for assignments should be provided. It is important to be familiar with the electronic course management system and how it handles use of time. If no policy is in place, it may be impossible to justify a sanction against those students who go beyond assignment deadlines or testing time limits.

Assignment management can be cumbersome in the online learning environment, and instructions should clearly define how students should post assignments for the course. The instructor should define how students are to label saved assignments, and how those are to be submitted, whether sent through email, an electronic dropbox, or an assignment link (Hricko, 2002). A policy also needs to be developed to identify sanctions for not following directions. This understanding with students could eliminate the need to spend hours of instructor time working with technology personnel from the course management system to locate assignments that have allegedly been posted online. Without the ease of the traditional classroom, where assignments can be shared in a face-to-face environment, assessment online can be very challenging for instructors if the correct policies are not in place.

Technology Issues

With an online environment comes technology, and unfortunately, it is not without issues. It is important to remember that the instructor should be familiar with all of the technology involved in the course (Song et al., 2004). Without this knowledge, the instructor cannot identify any potential technical difficulties in advance. In the online classroom, it is important to be prepared for technology issues and to communicate expectations and course policies to students. The syllabus and course site should contain key phone numbers for students, including university support centers for computer and course management system issues, and discuss technology requirements, such as hardware and software required for the course (Center for Teaching et al., n.d.; Keramidas et al., 2007). It is also recommended that the course site provide technology tips and links to helpful Web sites: browser recommendations, such as Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox and compatible versions; links to tutorials, such as for the course management system; links for software downloads, such as a PDF reader or compatibility pack; and links to helpful troubleshooting and software support sites.

The course site should also provide orientation experiences for students. This is generally offered in the first assignment or module. If students will be using the discussion board, the instructor should create an initial thread for introductions, so students can become accustomed to the system without affecting grades (Hricko, 2002). If students will be submitting assignments through a designated assignment link, use the first assignment as a test run, or create an orientation assignment for practice (Keramidas et al., 2007). A similar concept can be used for course quizzes or exams, allowing students to practice taking and submitting assessments before completing required exams or projects. An initial practice quiz may even be

used to assess the students' knowledge of the system, so problems can be addressed early in the course, before assignments and exams are due.

Even with extensive preparation, however, the best systems will sometimes experience downtime or other technical difficulties. Instructors need to create policies for such instances and communicate those policies to students. Policies may be different for system-wide issues versus personal computer issues. For example, if a student has difficulty submitting an individual exam, perhaps the course policy is to reset an exam one time only. On the other hand, in the case of a system-wide breakdown where the entire system has gone down and is unavailable to all students, the instructor may indicate in the course policy that the affected exam will be reset, and the deadline for the exam will be extended. Being prepared and communicating course policies can help address problem issues and hopefully avoid negative responses from affected students who are worried about grades and uncertain of outcomes related to technology.

Student Preparation

Students come to the online learning environment with their own set of expectations and learning experiences, and many do not understand the unique learning opportunities and challenges provided in an online setting. Although students are often familiar and perhaps comfortable with the lecture/note taking activities of the traditional classroom, the online environment may require engagement of the student through both independent and collaborative activities. Instead of passive learning, students are required to co-facilitate and be actively involved in the generation of knowledge (Rabe-Hemp, Woollen, & Humiston, 2009; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). It is important to prepare students for these pedagogical challenges, as well as the technological challenges mentioned above.

A well-designed orientation program will not only address technological issues such as equipment and browser requirements, exposure to learning management systems and software platforms, links and instructions for downloading software, but will also expose students to independent learning in an online environment (Yang & Cornelious, 2005). The instructor should explain that while students will not receive the immediate visual and auditory feedback of a traditional classroom, they will gain individual support, as well as input from the class, as a result of group and individual discussions. Students will need to understand that online courses require a great deal of self-discipline and planning (Anderson, 2008). Ongoing discussions will require students to return to the course site on a regular basis, four – five times per week, to stay abreast of course activities and involved in discussions.

In the online learning environment, it is helpful to provide students with more than one way to access information designed to prepare them for the course. While the course syllabus and orientation program may be well-designed and developed to provide students with everything they need regarding the course, it is advisable to reinforce this information in introductory statements through course postings or email (Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008). An additional tool may be the use of a frequently asked questions (FAQ) file on the learning site which anticipates and addresses questions and problems students may encounter (CTL, 2006; Yang & Cornelious, 2005).

Building a Sense of Community

An important part of an online course is to build the sense of community. Without it, students may feel isolated and become disinterested (Song et al., 2004). This is often accomplished in the traditional classroom through face-to-face interaction. Fortunately, there are many books and articles available on this subject for the online instructor, as well as a host of technologies to assist with building a sense of community. Some of the most successful options include the use of email, online group projects, the online discussion board, and online real-time chats (Conner, 2004; Watkins, 2005; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). While it is not possible to do everything at once in an online course, it is helpful to utilize available technology to teach new skills in order to bring all of the course elements together (Gibbons & Wentworth, 2001).

Experienced online instructors often use good communication and innovative techniques to build the sense of community required by an online course. This may include providing not only an online profile of the instructor with the typical biographical information, but also a picture of the instructor, a departmental link, and perhaps a short description of current research. The instructor may also encourage students to post a digital image that represents who they are (such as a photo or avatar) and/or to create a homepage (Keramidas et al., 2007; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Song et al., 2004). Other useful techniques include developing "get acquainted" activities where students introduce themselves (background, personal goals for the course, listing something unique about themselves) and then respond and interact with one another (Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008; Watkins, 2005). Instructors may also pair or group students into learning teams to discuss reading questions, complete learning activities, and work on study questions (Center for Teaching et al., n.d.). Blogs are often used as a medium for students to complete, share, and comment on reflection and self-assessment activities throughout the course. Activities might also be developed, requiring students to contribute to the development of course content and learning "products," using tools such as wikis (Grassley & Bartoietti, 2009; Lane, 2008; Smith, Miles, & Meyers, 2009).

Utilizing Teaching Assistants

Instructors who rely on student teaching assistants in the traditional classroom often find that the online environment does not alter the fundamental concept of the teaching assistant, but does make important changes in how that role is accomplished (Caulkins & Kelly, 2006; Fingerson & Bartoietti, 2001). It is helpful for the instructor to plan an orientation of online courses for student assistants and also provide a student manual which includes items such as online office hours, job duties, and a confidentiality statement. In the traditional classroom, the student assistant performs such tasks as attending the course, taking attendance, collecting and distributing assignments, proctoring exams, and providing a set number of face-to-face office hours for students in the course. An online course can eliminate some of these traditional responsibilities and replace them with others of equal importance. Student assistants who are part of an online course need to be aware they may continue to have face-to-face office hours, but could spend more time answering student questions electronically.

As in the large traditional class, teaching assistants are particularly helpful to the instructor in a sizable online course. The use of student assistants in a substantial online course allows the instructor to divide the course into smaller sections and assign a student assistant to indi-

vidual online sections. Unlike face-to-face courses where one student assistant is utilized for all tasks, student assistants in online courses can often be utilized best in specialized task areas. An online environment provides the instructor with an excellent opportunity to assign student assistants to specialized jobs such as grader, or online teaching assistant to answer online questions, while assigning others the task of face-to-face office hours. Another advantage of student assistants in an online course is they are often able to notify the instructor of technical difficulties with the system before those problems are announced formally by the system administrator. This early notification allows the instructor more lead time to ensure that a policy dealing with technical difficulties with the system is referenced in the syllabus.

Student assistants will definitely need to be oriented to the new online activities assigned to them by the instructor. One way this can be accomplished is by opening an additional online section only for teaching assistants. The instructor will then be able to post relevant information such as the teaching assistant manual, individual assignments, and other projects for the student assistants at this site, while at the same time modeling online expectations (Caulkins & Kelly, 2006).

Conclusion

Based on research and the experience of the authors, online education comes with many new challenges. Key components to the success of online teaching include thorough course preparation and clear, consistent communication. Effective instructors spend a great deal of time preparing to teach online. They develop course policies to reflect the unique learning environment of both pace and time management issues. Special consideration is made to organize the course site and learning modules in an understandable and easily accessed fashion.

A worthy goal in online learning is to anticipate problems before they occur. Crucial to this goal is establishing clear communication practices in the online classroom to convey course policies, procedures, and timelines, as well as interacting with students to develop an active and engaged learning community. To enhance the online classroom instructors must be resourceful in the use of technology and use of teaching assistants while at the same time being careful not to overwhelm students or the learning experience.

Although online education comes with new challenges, at the end of the day a successful online course, just as a good traditional course, requires a first-rate online instructor. Online teaching offers opportunities to try new techniques in the classroom and to become more familiar with new technology, and the global access provided by online education allows instructors to work with a diverse group of students, in age, culture, and region. While online teaching requires some modifications from traditional face-to-face instruction, it can be a stimulating and rewarding experience.

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About the Authors

Dr. Patt Elison-Bowers
Patt Elison-Bowers is a Professor in the Department of Psychology at Boise State University.

Kimberly Henderson
Kimberly Henderson is a Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Boise State University.

Jaime Sand
Jaime Sand is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Community and Environmental Health at Boise State University.

Linda Osgood
Linda Osgood is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Community and Environmental Health at Boise State University.