Online Education | Feature

6 Keys to Engaging Students Online

While some instructors think online teaching will be a breeze, the truth is that the best teachers work really hard to connect with students. CT shares tips from an insider.

• By Richard Rose
• 05/31/12

In recent intake interviews with new students of education at West Texas A&M University, I found that teaching online is the new holy grail for many young educators. They dream about how wonderful it would be to work from home in their bunny slippers and to conduct meaningful interactions with students via Skype while preparing dinner. To this group, teaching online means never having to be anywhere at any particular time, never having to wear uncomfortable "professional clothes," and never being asked a question without having time to research the answer.

After two decades in online teaching in both the corporate world and higher education, I regret to report that the grass is not necessarily greener on the other side of a network connection. While online teaching offers many rewards for instructors, it takes a special set of skills and attitudes to excel at it. And these are emphatically not the same skills and attitudes that make an exceptional classroom teacher. Here's what it takes to be a successful online teacher:

1. Don't Expect Constant Validation.
While it may be heretical to say it, many teachers are attracted to the profession by all the ego-stroking they hope to receive. They remember the worshipful

For more articles, case studies, and white papers, please visit the 21st

http://campustechnology.com/Articles/2012/05/31/6-Keys-to-En... 6/11/2012
glances that they bestowed on their favorite professors, and now they want to earn their share. But there is a world of difference between a warm face-to-face encounter and an e-mail--no matter how appreciative it might be. While there has been much discussion about how e-mail or even video interaction might not meet students' emotional and security needs, the emotional vacuum on the professor's side has gone largely unnoticed. Online teaching actually requires a much higher level of emotional security and confidence in one's own professional competence.

2. Work Hard to Know Your Students.
It's hardly news that a great deal of human communication is nonverbal--anyone who's sat through a long phone conference can tell you that. Remove the verbal component from the equation and the chances of misunderstanding increase exponentially. It takes a great deal of time and effort on the part of online teachers to make sure they are really clear in their own communications, as well as to understand who they are teaching, what students are trying to tell them, and how well their students are succeeding in each course.

In my online classes, I find myself constantly at risk of wildly misjudging both people and their situations. I have had students whom I have mentally pigeonholed as headed for the dustbin--lacking both ability and enthusiasm--only to discover that they are top-notch performers who simply took a while to get the hang of the online system.

Several semesters ago, I was strongly tempted to ease one particular student out of the program. Her native language was Chinese, and I had concluded from her written work that she did not understand English well enough to pass. She soon taught me that reading comprehension and writing skill grow at dramatically different rates. Today, she is a stay-at-home mother making a good living by remotely providing webmaster services to three small colleges.

3. Accept the Loss of Complete Control.
Many teachers thrive in the emotional sphere I call "command mentality." Like an orchestra conductor, they love the sense of control that comes with
being in charge. They take this responsibility very seriously, and work like demons to get it right. They make sure every student is crystal clear on what is expected of them and the consequences of failing to meet those expectations. These are the instructors who adore grading rubrics.

For better or worse, fully online instruction can never provide the level of control they crave. To a great extent, online education operates on the honor system. You never know who is really doing the work on the other end of the wire. There is no combination of tightly timed tests, double-password protection systems, or retina-scanning identification gizmos that can change this reality. The knee-jerk reaction to this observation is to point out that students cheat in regular classroom courses, too. That's true, but not nearly as easily and, quite possibly, not nearly as frequently.

If you are confident that you can make a compelling case to your students about the satisfaction and benefits that derive from completing their courses legitimately, you have a future in online education. If you are comfortable only with more coercive methods of extracting effort from students, you need to rethink your game for this new environment.

Quality classroom teachers succeed by absorbing oral and visual feedback from each class session as it unfolds, and making moment-to-moment adjustments in response. Except for a small minority of instructors working with expensive synchronous learning systems that provide continuous one-to-many visual and auditory communication, online teachers don't have the luxury of making real-time modifications to their instructional strategies. Their teaching must be accurate, complete, and spot-on right out of the chute.

Most of my courses require that I make about 16 hours of technology-demonstration movies. Because I know my students so well, I never settle for the often-perfunctory movies that come with the textbooks. Instead, I tailor my movies to the specific interests of my students and to my ever-emerging understanding of where they are likely to stumble and fall. To do so involves a lot of work: It takes me at least 20 to 30 hours of effort to create one hour of video.
And most of this work has to be done before the course even gets under way. Some of my students live in towns so small that they might have just a couple of traffic lights. They have dicey internet service and personal hardware, which make downloading hour-long movies problematic.

To overcome this, I mail each student a DVD a week before school starts, which means that I have to complete my preparations for the entire semester before it even begins. Between preparation, correspondence, and time-consuming troubleshooting of student problems, I estimate that I put in 50 percent more effort in teaching technical courses online than I would teaching the same material in person.

5. It's Not Just a Day Job.
Teaching online is less a job than a lifestyle. Committed online instructors find it hard to set reasonable boundaries on the workday. When students run into trouble, the instinct is to help them as soon as you can. Since many online students have full-time jobs, this tends to happen a lot between 10 p.m. and midnight.

6. Don't Become Isolated.
Online teachers need to work hard to maintain the kind of peer relationships that on-campus teachers consider normal. This should not be considered a personal failing: It comes with the territory. My colleagues who teach in person maintain on-campus office hours to serve their students. As a result, they spend time in the department and in contact with each other. My students, on the other hand, are scattered all over the state of Texas--it would make no sense for me to keep regular on-campus office hours.

The good news is that online teachers remain blissfully unaware of watercooler politics. The bad news is that, if they're not careful, online instructors can become seriously out of touch with the ethos of their workplace.

About the Author

Richard Rose is the program chairman for instructional technology and design at West Texas A&M University.