TEN TIPS FOR ONLINE TEACHERS

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Introduction:

For decades if not centuries, teaching involved the instructor lecturing and sometimes becoming involved in discussion in a face-to-face setting. If the class was large enough, the instructor might need a microphone and amplifier. One of the next technologies to find its way into the class was the overhead projector. In fact, the projector had been used for years in bowling alleys as the way to keep a running tally of everyone's scores. Sometimes, the instructor prepared a transparency for the overhead in advance. Often, the instructor just used a special pencil to write on the transparency as the lecture or discussion progressed. The technologies were rather simple and unobtrusive.

Today's "smart classroom" has one or more computers, projectors, wireless connections to the Internet and sometimes a local network linking the teacher's computer with those of the students. While the interfaces are becoming more user-friendly, they are also continuing to expand their features and becoming increasingly complex. The same is true for online learning courses. Besides being a discipline expert, the teacher has to learn how to "drive" these technologies. Not only is it more to learn, but it is more to keep track of during a presentation. While many students are far more savvy about these technologies than are the teachers, some students have to struggle to master the technology while trying to grasp the presentation's content.

 Teaching is communication. These technologies are intended to enhance the communication. Clear communication requires the presenter to exercise judgment in organizing the content and in its delivery. Everything should be selected with an eye to whether or not it helps move the presentation content forward and rejected if it becomes an external distraction. Humor and stories are good devices, but be

sure to make clear how they relate to the point being made. The rich array of features provided by these technologies are also helpful additions if and when they tie into the presentation. An occasional aside may add relief from the content, but keep it short and help transition the audience back into the content. There is a real temptation with technology to use it to add sparkle to the presentation which is good as long as it doesn't become a distraction.

A couple years ago, I heard about an army commander whose officers routinely submitted field reports as PowerPoint presentations. In frustration, he issued an order not to include any audio of bombs dropping, planes buzzing overhead and other battlefield backgrounds and just focus on the report content. Used in moderation, they may have served a purpose, but he became overwhelmed by his officers' using these features to impress him rather than focusing on the actual report.

The tips listed below are items that I found helped me to focus on using technology to facilitate communication while making it as transparent as possible. Your experience may be different than mine, and you need to pick and choose tips if and when they fit your situation.

1. Do NOT Replicate The Classroom

Find out how best the technology works and use it for your advantage. Don't force it to do what it is not good at. I began trying to do via the computer just the same thing I did in class and did surprisingly well at it. I was lucky because my first attempt at distance learning was to transpose an interactive class to distance learning. Coincidentally, it was well suited and took little modification. I soon learned that there were some things that worked better over the Internet than in class, and other things worked better in class. Already, we behave differently in different classrooms. I have one style for a giant lecture hall; another for a room full of 35-40 students; and still another with 6-8 students in a cozy seminar space. Take that experience and create a style and format that suits both your content and the technology you can use. Video is good for large classes with little interaction. Computer conferencing is better for small, interactive situations. Be thoughtful about designing your content and selecting the technology that supports your content and with which you are comfortable

2. Be A Virtual Host

Your students won't see you or at least not "in the flesh". You need to work to show you are present and work to convey some sense of personhood. When I first

began teaching over the computer, I thought long and hard about how to convey myself to the students. On our system, my username was nrcgsh and that is certainly impersonal and even meaningless. I discovered, besides that computerized label, that I could attach a personal name to my email and online postings. I thought briefly about "cyber prof" and almost threw up! I thought about Dr. Coombs and Professor Coombs both of which sounded both impersonal and stuffy. Then, I asked myself, "Who am I?" Right or wrong, I concluded I am a bit stuffy and a bit informal. Hence, I am "Prof Norm Coombs".

Intentionally or not, our physical rooms convey an atmosphere to our guests and this is part of projecting a welcoming image. One colleague of mine has his office desk facing the wall. When you enter the room, there is a comfortable chair for you, and my friend swivels around facing you. You sit almost knee to knee with nothing between you. Another colleague has his desk facing the door. He is on the other side with the desk between you. Besides putting space between you and him, his sitting behind the desk signals authority and creates a status gulf besides the physical gap created by the desk.

Look for ways to be a virtual online host and create an online atmosphere. Find ways to be warm and welcoming. In a face-to-face class, I do not stand at the door to welcome students as they arrive. On the computer, I try to recognize students personally once they have become virtually connected.

3. Model The Behavior You Want From Your Students

Obviously, you will use the syllabus or other introductory materials to describe the course structure and explain how it will function. Especially for students new to online learning, they may not be sure how to interact in this setting. There is nothing like modeling the behavior you want from your students to provide them with clues to how they should behave. For example, if you want a relaxed, spontaneous and sharing kind of class, make your personal introduction to the class in a relaxed and informal style. Talk about your family, your hobbies and show your non-professional side along with providing your academic qualifications. If you want a class that is highly structured; one where all the work turned in to you has been proof read and spell checked, use an introduction that is formal and academic. In one case when you make online responses, you will carefully use proper grammar, no slang and even spell check spontaneous interaction. If you want spontaneity from your students, make your interactions relaxed and informal.

Different courses have different demands. Remember, the class will not see your body language. You can put the same kind of message into the format of written

communication, a kind of verbal body language. Most students will reflect back to you the kind of behavior that you model for them.

4. Be Interactive

The uniqueness of the Internet is its potential for interaction. Make the most of it. Many studies of the impact of the Internet and the personal computer is that both tend to flatten power relations. This has also been shown true for distance learning. While some teachers find the lessening of power to be threatening, others find it liberating. It is now an old and hackneyed saying to say that the difference between classroom learning and distance learning is "The sage on the stage" versus "the guide on the side." Instead of being an authority figure, beyond challenge, the instructor becomes a resource. the teacher's role changes from that of being an instructor to becoming a mentor, and students do more than learn a disciplines content; they learn how to learn.

5. Modularize Your Material

Sitting in class through an hour-long lecture stretches most students' attention span. Listening to an hour-long audio or watching an hour-long video requires more concentration when there may be interruptions from family or even the phone. Instructional designers, whether talking of a face-to-face class or a virtual class strongly recommend that the content be broken into smaller, logical segments of 2-3 pages in length or 4-5 minutes long. If you build in opportunities for interaction at those breaks, it will help students engage both with the content and with each other.

In live presentations, teachers frequently go over material 2-3 times from different angles to help students understand and remember it. If the online content is asynchronous, and modularized, the repetition can be omitted because students can readily proceed at their individual pace and repeat a module 2 or 3 times. If the student has been interrupted because he or she does not have a controlled environment, the student doesn't lose the material as it can be repeated.

6. Use of Multimedia and Images

Different learners learn differently. Some are visual learners; some understand auditory information well; some benefit from text. By providing a variety of experiences, all learners benefit. Even if you can find ways to present the same or similar content in different modes, you will benefit a wider audience. Similarly,

some content is better adapted to text; some to pictures; some to audio or video. The point is to select the communication mode for its usefulness in communication content rather than selecting it to impress the students with your technical skills.

While people do have different preferred learning and interacting modes, some have disabilities which necessitates their learning by one mode or another. Besides accommodating different learning styles, you may be making the course content available to someone who, otherwise, would have been prevented from receiving an education. Some merely prefer a communication mode; others require it!

7. Design, Simple, Clear Display For Your Content

Online teachers, besides having to organize the course content, have to organize the content's display or layout. This is true whether that content is being delivered as a document or in a multimedia format.

Help the student to focus on your message by avoiding needless visual or auditory clutter and distractions. If the content being displayed contains text, be sure that the text is large enough that the reader won't have to strain to read it. Remember the average age of online learners is older than that of face-to-face students and those students may already be using glasses. Use a moderate font size and easy-to-read font types. The sans serif fonts are crisper and clearer for most readers. Be sure the contrast between background and foreground is adequate and avoid using highly patterned background. If you do not pack the text and/or images too densely, the student will be able to understand the content better. If the content is in an image or a video, try to remove needless items in the student's view that will distract. If it is an audio, do your best to avoid having annoying ambient noises.

While these comments may sound as if you are being urged to minimize your descriptions and explanations, please do not come to that conclusion. Each point you are making needs an adequate context to give it clear meaning. Use good transitions as you move from point to point. Build in transitions between the modules. When including images or tables or multimedia, do not conclude that the item speaks for itself. You know what you mean by including it, but the student may not know what you mean. Keep what you are saying simple but don't skimp on the necessary context to give those items their meaning in the bigger picture.

8. Create your Content Using Universal Design Principles

Design your materials to meet a wide variety of learning styles, socio-economic backgrounds and different user interfaces.   Strive to achieve clear communication rather than trying to impress your students with glitz. The teacher and/or the

instructional technology staff will frequently have a relatively new computer with a high-speed Internet connection. While this will let you use the latest technologies and upload even large files quickly to the server, remember your students are probably not so richly blessed with such state-of-the-art applications. While it can be fun using cutting edge tools, your content may not be useable by all of your students. It is better to work with technologies that are a couple years old and are being widely used. Even when students are on the cutting edge, they may be using mobile applications which, while being state-of-the-art, won't readily handle large graphics or multimedia. Because the content looks slick on your computer, that may not be true for all of your students. Besides designing for different student learning styles, you need to accommodate a growing number of different applications that may be downloading and displaying your content. Envision someone accessing your course on a cell phone, on a netbook, on a powerful desktop computer and also using special screen magnification or screen reader software.

Most of us never were given formal training in using the authoring tools we use to create our courses. Because we taught ourselves or got some help from someone else with little training, we fail to make use of some of the features in our applications that provide real help in designing content that takes advantage of their universal design principles. You can actually embed important information about your document into that document making it a powerful ally in conveying your meaning to the document user. This is called document markup. In creating print books, the process includes putting markup into the information being sent to the printer influencing its page layout. Markup is everywhere. Your word processor has always been including markup into its output. In old applications or simple ones like notepad, it could be as simple as a markup for starting a new line. In typewriter days, we called it a carriage return. Markup controls line length, centering or left justified and dozens of other things. What is important for our purposes is that some markup conveys information about the function of an item in a page. For example, there is markup for title, header levels, tables, columns lists and more.

Perhaps you are wondering why is it important to make a header with header markup instead of merely using font type, and size. Your eyes have been trained to recognize headers from its appearance. However when the functional markup is in the document, the application displaying the document can understand that. The Opera browser can jump from header to header helping you navigate a long document. Screen reader software can do the same thing for users who are blind using any browser. Here is an analogy to help you grasp the significance of header navigation. Remember cassette tapes and how frustrating it was using fast forward and back to try to locate an item? A blind user has to scan line by line down screen

after screen to locate something in an electronic document. With markup, the user can jump to a specific page, to the next header 1 or header 2.

I want to come back to the concept of universal design and not just accessibility. Ebook readers are using similar navigation tools. The Markup in a document can be used by future applications meaning the document will not become functionally outdated. If you are writing for a journal or publisher, they usually demand specific markup be used. Last, if you use document markup, you will be more consistent, and the universal design feature will be exported to other file types when you save a document in PDF, HTML etc. The fact is that by the software designers putting markup features into their software, this has always been their preferred way for you to use their application.

9. Tips to Make Content More Accessible for Students With Disabilities

Besides using style markup properly in authoring your content, there are a couple other important tips that go beyond that. The most important is adding a text description to any image. I do not mean adding the description above or below the image although that can be done. You can put the text description into the markup so to speak. In Microsoft products, right click on the image and depending on the version you will locate a text box where you can input a short description which the screen reader will speak to someone using a screen reader. That also exports into different document types when you export to those. Plain text, 'txt' documents however lose almost all markup information.

Probably none of you would dream of making 2 columns on a page in your word processor by using the tab and space keys. You would use the column feature. Similarly, you would not make a table of date using tab and space either. If you did, a screen reader would see the information left to right all as one line and read it that way. When you use column and table markup features, the screen reader reads the information properly. Two columns are turned into one long column for the user who is blind. Tables are separate cells and the reader can tab or arrow from cell to cell, and the application will identify the row and column before speaking the cell. You can even use markup to tell the document which row and column contains headers. Then when the user moves from cell to cell, the screen reader will speak the appropriate header. Like saying Tom had lunch on Monday and paid $7.99. Perhaps not speaking it exactly like that but would inform that information to the user. Tables only make sense when the contents of a cell is associated with its headers. Forms and combo boxes and radio buttons are other items where markup is crucial. This goes far beyond what these tips can cover.

The bottom line is that for most simple course content, proper markup for navigation, text for images and markup for columns, tables and lists are all important to use for anyone. Most of the more complicated accessibility issues deal with advanced Web features that teachers will rarely need or use.

To come back to basics, I want to stress that the most important thing you can do to facilitate the learning of special needs students is to be the best teacher you can and to communicate as simply and clearly as possible. Clear communication is the most important first step towards making an online course accessible for students with disabilities.

10. It's About People And Not Technology

You are using technology to teach, to communicate. Keep your focus on the student and the content not on the technology. I remember a bakery truck in my hometown with a sign on the back with this poem:

As you travel through this life,
Whatever be your goal;
Keep your eye upon the doughnut,
And not upon the hole!

When you begin using technology in teaching, there is the natural temptation to focus on it; how it works; what it does; and how it seems to come between you and the student. Think of it like a blackboard, just a tool. Try to forget about it as much as possible and focus on the student. Technology is the means to an end and not the end itself!

Recommended Resources:

Making Online Teaching Accessible
By Norman Coombs and published by Jossey-Bass in 2010.

Universal design in higher education: from principles to practice
Edited by Sheryl E. Burgstahler and Rebecca C. Cory published by Harvard
Education Press in 2008

*THE ONLINE TEACHING SURVIVAL GUIDE: SIMPLE AND PRACTICAL PEDAGOGICAL
TIPS*
By Judith V. Boettcher and Rita-Marie Conrad published by Jossey-Bass in 2009

Engaging the Online Learner
Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson published by Jossey-Bass in 2004

EASI (Equal Access to Software and Information provides regular Webinars and
several month-long online courses covering these and related topics:
www.easi.cc

EASI: EQUAL ACCESS TO SOFTWARE AND INFORMATION

PEOPLE NOT TECHNOLOGY

EASI is a non-profit organization, commited to the belief that students and professionals with disabilities have the same right to access information technology as everyone else. To accomplish this commitment, EASI is producing Interactive Webinars and online courses on accessibility-related topics. EASI materials strive to be jargon-free and to have all of its material fully accessible.

EASI Webinars

EASI Webinars include both free Webinars providing an overview of accessibility subjects and a more detailed, fee-based series providing up-to-date know-how on information technology.

EASI courses

EASI courses can be taken independently or those completing 5 courses may earn the Certificate in Accessible Information Technology. The courses include:
- Barrier-free Information Technology
- Barrier-free Web Design
- Barrier-free E-learning
- Accessible Multimedia, Podcasts and Vodcasts
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EASI Annual membership program provides free access to the fee-based Webinars and a discount on all courses. With the cut-backs in staffing and with the simultaneous speeding-up of technological change, keeping up with the state-of-the-art in adaptive technology becomes overwhelming for adaptive technology staff. The EASI annual membership program can fill this gap for staff and for colleges and universities. There are both individual and institutional Webinar Memberships.
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