Teaching online is a unique experience in a unique medium. Many of the skills and attributes of effective instruction in a classroom translate well to effective instruction online. At the risk of sounding fairly absurd - teaching online is very much like, and very much unlike, classroom teaching.

Processes & Core Objectives of Teaching

Many of the tasks and functions performed by an instructor online are similar to classroom. For example, regardless of medium, learning is still the goal...and learning happens through communication. Communication happens on several fronts - student to student, student to teacher, student with content, and in online learning, the addition of student with the interface of technology. The critical aspects of learning (brain-compatible classroom, learning styles, multiple intelligence, and emotional intelligence. See http://www.elearnspace.org/doing/methodologies/theories.htm) don't vary from online or classroom.

So what changes online?

If the process (communication through variety of interactions) or core objectives (increased student learning) don't change from classroom to online, what does? The biggest change is the role and function of both the teacher and the student. The teacher needs to shift perspective from the "provider of knowledge", to a "facilitator of knowledge". The student needs a similar shift - from passive learner to active learner.

Teaching online involves acquiring a new set of beliefs about what it means to be a teacher. The teacher's role online is to guide, direct, and equip students with the skills and abilities to provide for their own educational needs in the future.

The most effective way to experience the differences of online learning is to actually teach online. The following summarizes the lessons I've learned:

1. **New students need time to acclimate to the environment.** Before students learn content, they learn how to access content through technology tools. This process can be accomplished through effective introductory tutorials or pre-course work teaching how the software tools of the course work. Course designers should focus extensively on how the first module (first impressions!) welcomes and orients students.

2. **Connect emotionally first.** The most common complaint of students taking online or distance education courses is the sense of isolation or loneliness. This is very unfortunate. The Internet medium, when properly utilized, is about connecting, not isolating, people. “Ice breaker” activities like asking students to post a picture of themselves, their pet, or a favorite cartoon help to create a sense of connection. An instructor should always post a picture of him/herself with a welcoming introduction. This introduction should not focus at all on the course work or content – it should introduce the person on the other side of the course. This “warm fuzzy” approach may not appeal to all students, but most will find it very helpful.

3. **Explain the environment.** New online students have spent years listening to lectures and expecting teachers to tell them what to think and do. This doesn’t happen online…but new students don’t know this. If a student is not aware of the self-motivated, “everyone has a valuable opinion”, “knowledge is created, not communicated” aspect of learning online, she or he will be very frustrated. It is the responsibility of the teacher to communicate the environment to new students.

4. **Less content, more interaction.** Online learning is not about content communication – it’s about interaction. The content is communicated through the interaction.

5. **Sometimes, passivity is great!** In a classroom, a teacher provides a large part of the motivation to learn. Online, students typically have to provide 100% of the motivation. This is a reality of the medium. Effective online courses, however, need to provide some passive learning activities. These activities may include slides with audio, video presentation, Flash demonstration, or synchronous...
presentations (like http://www.horizonlive.com/ or http://www.centra.com/). These activities help to increase student motivation by providing a short “rest” before moving to more actively engaged exercises.

6. **Encourage reflection.** Learning happens during reflection. A student actively engaged is generally not focused on reflection. Reflection occurs during “down” moments. Reflection needs to be considered during both design and teaching phases of online courses. Reflective journals can be included to allow instructors the opportunity to evaluate student learning.

7. **Simplicity. Keep things simple.** One place for all memos. One place to post assignments. Too many tools and multiple processes can overwhelm new students. The student should not spend too much time learning tools, especially at the expense of content and interaction.

8. **Account for the “soft side”.** Give students a place to complain. Most often, a student’s frustration is minimized when he/she feels understood by the instructor. Instructors should contact students fairly early in a course and ask for comments, concerns, and frustrations. I’ve been in online courses where other students have dialogued about frustrations using email under the radar of the Instructor. End result – if an environment isn’t created that allows for venting, students will create it privately.

9. **Variety. Variety. Variety.** Students crave variety. Plan for different forms of content presentation, student activities, group work, and individual exercises. When learning online, a change really is as good as a rest.

10. **Experiment.** An instructor should constantly be experimenting. Student feedback should be solicited throughout and at the end of a course. These comments are then used as the premise for instructor experimentation to make the online experience more effective. Word of caution: As critical as experimentation is online, it needs limits. For myself, I set boundaries of experimentation to “those activities that do not impact the student’s learning”…unless a group of students agrees to a pilot outside of the scope of a course. This is how I initially began using http://www.groove.net/. The lessons learned were invaluable for eliminating inefficiencies for my first “live” Groove class.

11. **The instructor as an active facilitator.** This is the biggest change for most instructors. Teaching online is a facilitative process. The notion of “I provide knowledge, and students learn” needs to be replaced with “I guide and direct students to a variety of resources and encourage critical thinking and reflection about the concepts encountered”. As well, an instructor needs to be active. Regular discussion posts, personal emails, supportive statements, and challenging questions let students know that the instructor is accessible.

12. **Centering Point.** A classroom is the centering point for traditional students. This is where they go to ask questions, find out where they are in relation to the course objectives, get feedback on work, or generally get clarification on virtually any subject. Online, a similar centering point needs to be created. It may be a detailed course schedule, a blog maintained by the instructor, or a dedicated discussion forum for posting reminders and notices to students.

The highest objective of education is to improve the quality of life for students and to create a better society. This may be achieved through student self-awareness, learning through exploring new concepts, connecting previously unrelated field of knowledge and increased confidence. Online learning has much to offer in achieving these ideals. However, in order for the potential to be fully realized, instructors and educators need to dialogue about what constitutes effective learning online. What is different? What is unique? What is the same? The goal in teaching online is to retain the best of classrooms and improve the worst.

Questions or comments about this article? **Contact the Author**