

THE CHRONICLE  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION

# Moving Online Now

How to keep  
teaching during  
coronavirus





# Moving Online Now

**A**s the coronavirus spreads, colleges are scrambling to respond to potential health-care crises, campus closings, and other issues that are arising and evolving on a daily basis. A major challenge: How can institutions continue to offer instruction if they decide to close or to cancel in-person classes? A growing number are moving classes online as a short-term solution. This special *Chronicle* collection includes our best advice guides and opinion pieces on online learning, to help faculty and staff members make the adjustment if that time comes.

A switch to online learning isn't a perfect solution, of course: Many professors have never taught online, and technical support is often lacking. Some critics have raised questions about whether requiring such a switch without adequate faculty involvement would violate faculty governance; others question whether an online-only model would penalize students who may not have access to digital tools or the internet. Still, many institutions are looking to online learning as a way to salvage students' education in the wake of the pandemic. We hope this collection can offer some guidance during these uncertain times.

In this special collection:

**4** **The Decision to Move Classes Online as Coronavirus Spreads**  
The U. of Washington took the first steps, and more colleges are following daily.

---

**8** **Going Online in a Hurry: What to Do and Where to Start**  
Michelle D. Miller offers a primer.

---

**11** **How to Be a Better Online Teacher: A Comprehensive Advice Guide**  
Flower Darby covers the nuts and bolts in this thorough document.

---

**24** **4 Lessons From Moving a Face-to-Face Course Online**  
Kevin Gannon finds that online teaching isn't better or worse than the face-to-face variety — just different.

---

**28** **Live From My Living Room, It's My Classroom!**  
Esther C. Kim shares tips from the home front on how to better engage students online.

---

**31** **Resources**  
How to use technology to give your students better feedback

For questions or comments about the collection, email [ci@chronicle.com](mailto:ci@chronicle.com)

Cover photo by Stuart Isett

# As Coronavirus Spreads, Moving Classes Online Is the First Step. What's Next?

By **EMMA DILL, KARIN FISCHER, BETH MCMURTRIE, AND BECKIE SUPIANO**

BRAD MITCHELL, ALAMY



The March 6 decision by the University of Washington to move all classes online amid concerns about the novel coronavirus raises questions that colleges nationwide are already asking: When is the right time to make that call? On what basis? And how easy is it to make the transition?

As reports of infections in the United States grew, Washington officials said they had made the decision out of an abundance of caution. “We have a responsibility to our community and to the community at large,” the university’s president, Ana Mari Cauce, said at a news conference.

“We want to be clear,” she said, “we’re not saying that it’s not safe to be in class.”

Later on March 6, Stanford University also announced it would move its classes online for the final two weeks of the winter quarter. At press time, a growing number of colleges were moving courses online, urging students to leave campus, and canceling study-abroad programs, conferences, sports events, and university-sponsored travel. One college had canceled its spring semester.

Washington’s decision was made by a campuswide task force, the Advisory Committee on Communicable Diseases, which includes medical professionals, student-support staff members, international-education experts, and others. The group also consulted with local and state public-health officials. Cauce said the decision to cancel in-person classes was made on Thursday, before officials learned that a staff member had received a “presumptive positive test” for Covid-19, the disease the coronavirus causes.

In large lecture halls, students may be crammed into close quarters, heightening the likelihood of transmitting the infectious respiratory illness. And while young people have been less likely to fall seriously ill from the coronavirus, or have recovered more quickly, many of the university’s students are beyond the “traditional” 18-to-25 age range.

In addition, students who have disabilities, who are pregnant, or who have underlying health conditions could be at increased risk in tight classrooms. Even before the decision to cancel classes was made, about a quarter of students were participating in

classes remotely.

Though in-person classes will be canceled at Washington, dining and residence halls will remain open, and campus organizations can decide whether to hold scheduled events. Students who choose to return home may do so. But Cauce noted that some students, particularly the university’s large population of international students, may be unable to go home. For those from coronavirus hot spots such as China and Italy, it may be safer to remain at Washington.

Cauce praised the campus’s response to the announcement. Faculty members are “really stepping up” to figure out how to deliver their courses remotely, she said, and librarians and academic advisers are working to put more resources online.

### MAKING THE TRANSITION

The decision to move classes online didn’t come out of the blue. Jennifer Doherty, a principal lecturer in the biology department, said that in the week or so beforehand, professors got emails from the provost’s office and, in her case, department leaders that encouraged them to think of contingency plans for their courses. “We’ve been talking about it all week,” she said.

Even earlier, Ben Wiggins, the department’s manager of instruction, told professors who teach its large lecture courses that they should be ready to iron out shared policies in the event that in-person classes were canceled. The department emphasized to students that they would not be penalized if they decided not to come to class.

Doherty is teaching an upper-level research seminar with 40 seniors this quarter. The seniors in Doherty’s course haven’t been particularly worried, she said. They had been coming to class — and washing their hands. But in some larger lecture courses, attendance had already dropped significantly, and some professors had already canceled classes.

Doherty’s students had just finished collecting data and were about to analyze their results. The final was supposed to be a poster session. “So obviously we’re not going to do that,” she said. She is figuring out how to adapt the projects for videoconferencing. The university has given every professor and stu-

The U. of Washington moved to a distance-education model in response to the threat of the new coronavirus.

dent an account for the web-conferencing program Zoom, Doherty said. The biggest wrinkle: “This presumes that everyone has the internet where they are. And broadband.”

That raises questions about equity.

Internet access may be a challenge, especially for students and faculty members in small cities and towns, where service can slow when everyone is trying to use video-conferencing at once, said Daniel Stanford, director of faculty development and technology innovation at the DePaul University Center for Teaching and Learning. Stanford also worries about how to replicate the learning formats, such as laboratory work, in which being physically present is central to the experience.

Another question is institutional capacity. Are colleges generally prepared to support thousands of instructors’ moving quickly from in-person to online teaching?

“In a word, no,” said Flower Darby, director of Teaching for Student Success at Northern Arizona University. “I don’t think most institutions are equipped to handle a situation such as this, in which more demands are

that if the transition to online teaching is rushed, it could have long-term effects on how professors view teaching remotely. “We don’t want to get the idea that this is what effective online education looks like,” she said. “Moving online with inadequate support is a short-term solution.”

Touro College, in New York City, is trying to avoid that by planning ahead: Students would take all classes online for four days, an official told *The Chronicle* by email, as a test “to prepare for academic continuity in case in-person classes will need to be canceled.” The University of Southern California announced a similar dry run.

While one national survey found that 46 percent of professors had taught an online course, different skills are needed to switch abruptly to doing that. What is the best way to deliver a lecture? What about student presentations, or active-learning projects? Is it better to teach class in real time or asynchronously? Campus ed-tech experts are wrestling with those and other tricky issues.

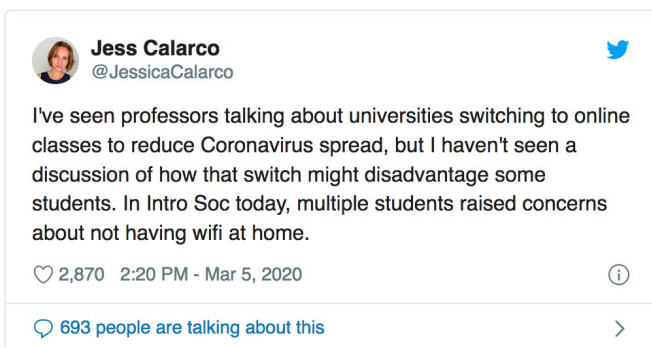
DePaul’s Stanford collected some of the resources he came across in a crowdsourced Emergency Remote Teaching Guidelines document. The New York Institute of Technology’s Keep Teaching page, for example, offers instructors advice on creating live, online classes through Zoom or prerecorded lectures with Voice Thread. Duke University has created a similar series of tips and tools for keeping class going in an emergency.

Stanford said plenty of user-friendly technologies exist to support both synchronous and asynchronous communication. GroupMe, Slack, and WhatsApp can all be adapted for class work, for example. And while none of those might be ideal for creating vibrant discussions, they are effective enough in the moment.

In the meantime, DePaul is one of many colleges trying to ramp up faculty training. The university is offering a series of short webinars in which instructors can quickly learn the basics of videoconferencing or how to get the most out of their learning-management system.

## LESSONS FROM ABROAD

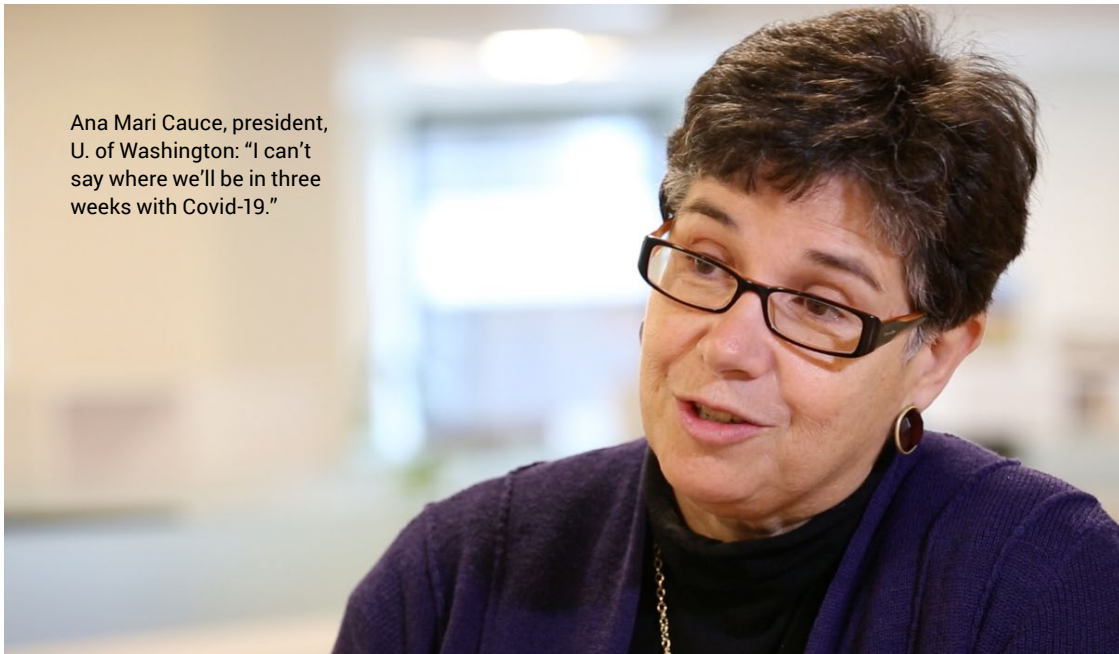
In thinking about moving classes online, college leaders may want to look to univer-



made of the technological infrastructure and you need a lot of qualified people to help.”

Darby has been following conversations on social media among education-technology and teaching specialists in recent days. While people are rallying to share resources and support, she noted that on many campuses teaching centers may be small operations. “Broadly speaking, at public institutions there are not enough support folks in general,” she said. She fears that, in an emergency, faculty members “will be thrown into the deep end of the pool.”

She and her colleagues are also concerned



Ana Mari Cauce, president, U. of Washington: "I can't say where we'll be in three weeks with Covid-19."

CHRONICLE PHOTO BY JULIA SCHMALZ

sities with campuses overseas. Duke Kunshan University and New York University's Shanghai campus made the transition to online instruction in February, following recommendations from Chinese officials.

Leaders at both universities recommend keeping things simple by employing digital tools that professors and students are familiar with and are already using, said Clay Shirky, NYU's vice provost for educational technologies.

"The tools you want to use are the tools you have in place before the crisis hits," he said. "You don't want to be deploying a whole bunch of fancy new tools."

One professor at NYU's Shanghai campus shared what he had learned from the experience on Twitter:



Even when teaching and technology work, a sudden shift online can be a challenge. It "can still feel isolating for students and fac-

ulty," said Noah M. Pickus, a dean at Duke Kunshan University. "So as we get ready for our last session of the year, we're putting a lot of our effort into both student support and community."

NYU "triaged" its courses by shifting online those classes with the largest enrollments first, and determining which courses could not work in that medium. Lab-based science courses and field-trip-heavy classes were canceled, Shirky said.

The university will follow the same template as it moves its campuses in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, and Florence, Italy, to online-only instruction. Each transition makes the process easier for faculty members and university officials, said Shirky.

"Every time we do this, there's a larger group of people familiar with it. There's more documentation. There's better walk-throughs for faculty," he said. "I don't think we would have chosen to get suddenly good at this, but that's been one of the side effects."

While the University of Washington is exploring scenarios in which it is forced to use distance learning in the longer term, President Cauce said, it has "every intention" of reopening at the beginning of the new quarter, on March 30.

"But I don't have a crystal ball," she said. "I can't say where we'll be in three weeks with Covid-19." ■

# Going Online in a Hurry: What to Do and Where to Start

By MICHELLE D. MILLER

The coronavirus has colleges and universities swinging into action to move courses online. In the coming weeks, we'll find out just how prepared (or not) academe is to do this on a large scale. Those of us in online teaching and educational technology have moved quickly to help, too, and it's astonishing how many useful resources have already been pulled together.





Even just a few weeks into the crisis, and really only a few days since class cancellations started to become a reality, there are top-quality guides free for the taking, created by people who really know their stuff. I will make no claim to have read all or even a fraction of them, but there are several that are clearly share-worthy:

- [A detailed Google doc](#), written by Jenae Cohn and Beth Seltzer — both academic-tech specialists at Stanford University — is geared for Stanford, but there's a lot there that anyone can use. Their guide is particularly noteworthy for how it breaks down the synchronous-asynchronous distinction, explaining advantages and disadvantages of each and offering guidance about how to use Zoom for virtual meetings.
- Derek Bruff, director of the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University, has pulled together a lot of useful ed-tech advice under the heading of “just-in-time online teaching.” [Read this page](#), in particular, for step-by-step instructions on key aspects of going online fast (the advice is geared toward the Brightspace learning-management system, in particular, but is general enough to apply to other platforms, too).

As a veteran of online teaching and education technology, I'll offer my own short list of advice for faculty members who need to move online, fast, with the twin goals of maintaining instructional continuity as much as possible and finishing the semester strong.

**No. 1: Begin by going over your course assignments for the coming weeks.** Are they accessible online, so that students can find the instructions and materials that they need? Is it clear how students will be turning in their work? Have deadlines changed, and are all of those deadlines prominently posted?

**No. 2: How will you give feedback on their progress?** Consider how students will be able to practice the key skills and objectives you want them to get out of the course

— things they would normally do in class. How will you give them opportunities for practice and feedback, for both small-stakes and high-stakes assignments? Undoubtedly those opportunities will be different from what they were before you moved the class online. Just be sure that it's very clear how students can access those opportunities.

And if you don't spend much class time having students practice and get feedback, now is a good time to increase that aspect of your course — given that you won't be presenting content in person. For example:

- If students would have been developing their skills in analyzing and synthesizing assigned readings via in-class discussion, perhaps they could do that online using collaborative annotation of the text. ([Perusall](#) is one such tool to do that.)
- Or, if you'd normally have students practice by attempting to answer questions in an interactive in-person lecture, present a version of those questions in online discussion forums or quizzes, and offer feedback on their responses.

**No. 3: Then, move on to the in-class experience.** What do you normally use your in-class time for? Try to define what you do in class at a higher, more goal-oriented level (e.g., presentation of content, checking for understanding, collaborative project work — instead of just saying “lecture,” “quiz,” “discussion”). If you keep those goals in mind, you will have a better idea of how to achieve them online, as well as what aspects of the in-class experience you ought to focus on simulating.

In particular, this mini-reflection should help you decide whether to go with a synchronous means of engagement (e.g., a real-time Zoom meeting), an asynchronous one (e.g., VoiceThread decks or narrated videos), or some combination of the two.

**No. 4: Decide what you're going to do about any high-stakes assessments, particularly exams.** There are no easy answers here, especially if you planned to have a good chunk of a student's grade hinge on what would have been a proctored, in-person test. Per-

haps you could take another route to summative assessment for the course, such as replacing a big supervised test with some type of project that is easier to personalize and less dependent on proctoring.

You also could explore online proctoring, but there are potentially objectionable aspects to this kind of test surveillance. Such concerns — along with the time required to research, select, and put into practice an online proctoring system — are significant hurdles. But it may be worth a look, depending on your situation.

**No. 5: Consider the course materials.** In all likelihood, your readings and other materials exist in digital form, and you may have posted them already. But you'll need to double-check that any readings, videos, problem sets, quizzes, and the like are accessible, along with key documents such as the course syllabus and calendar.

**No. 6: Once you've dealt with those things, the name of the game is communication.** In the face of all this uncertainty, you need to explain — as clearly as you can and in a variety of places — what students can expect about the course in the next few weeks. Be sure to cover what it is that students are responsible for doing, how they can find the things they need to meet those responsibilities, and what they should do first. Make sure the lines of communication are two-way, as well. When in doubt, offer more ways to get in touch with you (text, messaging app, email, video call), not fewer.

That's my teaspoon of advice to add to the pool that will no doubt be growing in the coming days and weeks. But I also want to acknowledge, and heartily agree with, the caveats and outright frustration being expressed by many in the online teaching space over the way our generously contributed advice could be misused.

As my colleague Flower Darby told a *Chronicle* reporter: "We don't want [people] to get the idea that this is what effective

online education looks like. Moving online with inadequate support is a short-term solution." She noted that an undersupported, hasty move could create bad impressions about online teaching, in general.

I fear that such impressions will outlast the present crisis. And so, while we all want to be as helpful as possible, online-teaching advocates are unanimous in cautioning that these options for salvaging the semester are not to be confused with the kind of intentional design that's needed to create high-quality online offerings over the long run.

And sadly, we do need to put that message on repeat, because if we online-teaching veterans have learned anything, it's that there are too many programs and institutions out there that do see this kind of rushed online teaching as a quick fix. How many of us have heard some variation on the idea of "just putting it all online" — in the name of profitability, convenience, or catching some imagined wave of the future?

It's always telling to dig deeper into what people think "it" is in that put-it-all-online edict. Is it the readings? Videos of a professor giving lectures? Or (I hope) something else entirely?

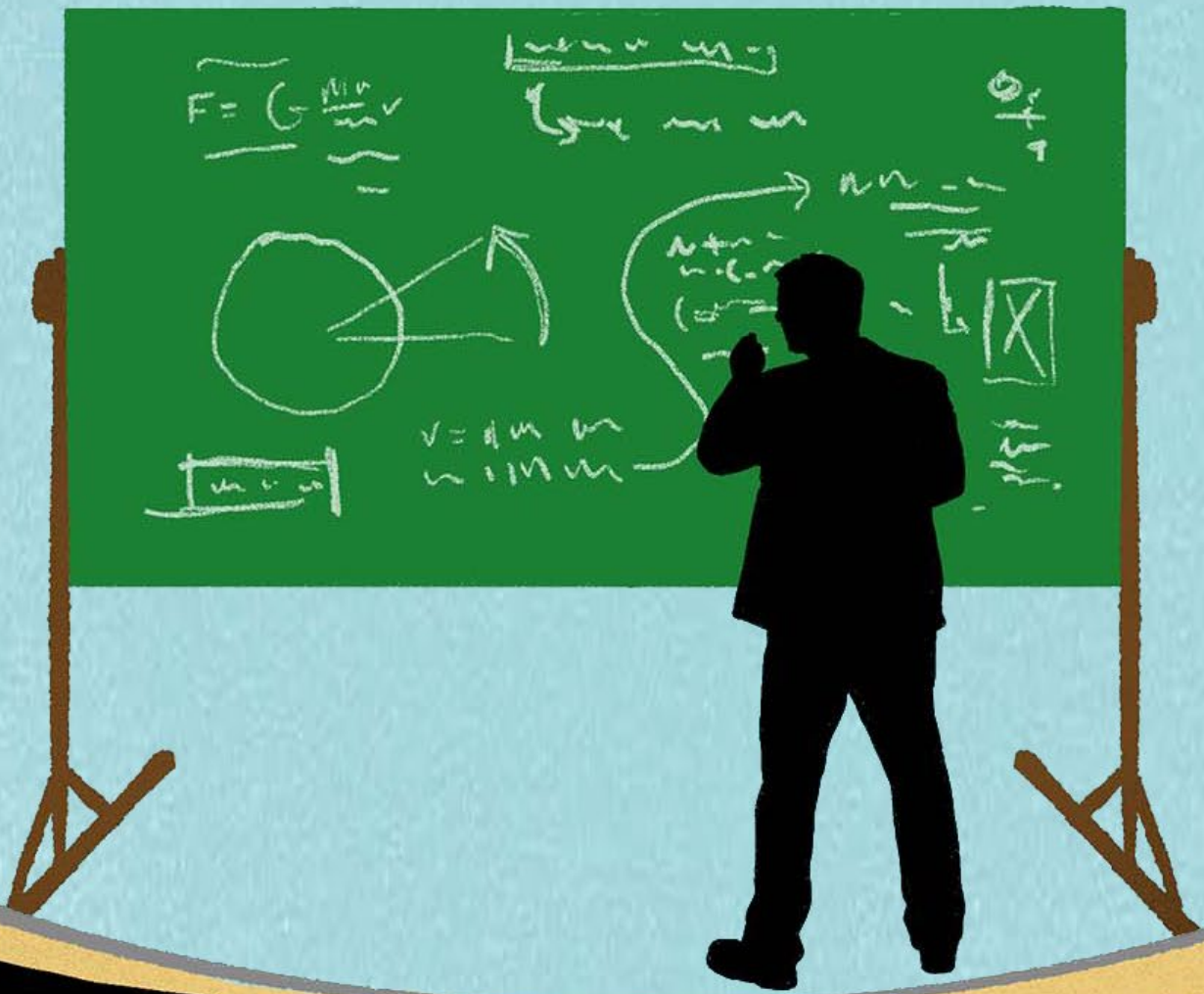
These are all good questions for another day, but for now, the focus is on students, and on using what we know to help them move forward under some really difficult circumstances. This is a time for online instruction to shine, and I think it will. Those of us who've stepped up can be advocates for quality, while still helping our institutions manage what could be one of the larger and longer interruptions to instruction that we've seen in this country. Keep the advice coming, everyone: [#Instructional-Continuity](#). ■

*Michelle D. Miller is a professor of psychological sciences at Northern Arizona University and co-creator of its First Year Learning Initiative. Her latest book is Minds Online: Teaching Effectively With Technology, published by Harvard University Press.*

ADVICE GUIDE

# How to Be a Better Online Teacher

By FLOWER DARBY



Whether you've taught online a lot or a little, chances are you didn't enjoy it as much as teaching in person. Maybe you didn't experience that fizz after a particularly invigorating face-to-face class. Indeed, according to a 2017 Educause survey, only 9 percent of academics prefer to teach "in a completely online environment." That means a whopping 91 percent of us don't. And I suspect that a good majority of that 91 percent would prefer to teach anywhere but online.

Clearly, many academics don't see the value of online courses or of trying to become a better online teacher. Almost none of us set out to be great online teachers when we decided to go to graduate school. We've spent years in campus classrooms, but we don't have the same depth and breadth of experience in the online classroom, as either students or teachers. Most of us don't know how to teach online or how to get better at it — and we may not be motivated to learn. Even more likely, we may not feel like we have time to learn.

For all of those reasons, you may not feel fully invested in your online teaching practice. Yet it can be just as rewarding as teaching in a bricks-and-mortar classroom, if in different ways. Good teaching is good teaching.

Which brings me to the purpose of this guide. What you will find here is advice on how to make your online pedagogy as effective and satisfying as the in-person version, including:

- 10 essential principles and practices of better online teaching.
- Common misperceptions.
- How to find help.

Online classes aren't going away — enrollments continue to grow year after year. Further, online education increases access for students who, with work and family obligations, would not otherwise be able to go to college. Those people are just as much our students as the ones who show up on the campus, and they, too, deserve the best teaching we can offer.

First let's define a few commonly used terms of online teaching.

**Learning-management system.** Otherwise known as an LMS. Online classes typically take place via your institution's chosen learning-management system — a platform that include communication, content delivery, and assessment tools to facilitate the teaching-and-learning process. The specific features of an LMS can vary from campus to campus, but usually you will find the following common elements and functions:

- A grade book to record student progress.
- Web pages or sites that allow you to present text, videos, or links to other sources.
- Assessment tools so students can submit assignments, or take a quiz or an exam.
- Discussion forums that enable students to engage in conversations about class content with you and with one another.

**Module.** The most common unit of organization for an online class is a module (it has different naming conventions). If the term is new to you, think of it as tantamount to a unit in your in-person class. Instructors use modules to organize class materials into topics. They're ordered sequentially and contain all course materials and learning activities for that particular topic or unit.

Most of us don't know how to teach online or how to get better at it and we may not be motivated to learn.

**Asynchronous.** Most online courses are asynchronous — meaning students aren't all together in class at the same time, and class activities don't take place in real time. Instead, students can complete the tasks whenever their schedules permit. Flexibility is one of the main advantages offered by online education, and a primary reason why

many students elect to attend class online.

The jargon and the setup are similar in many online courses, but there are some differences. For example, some online classes include a synchronous element or two. Some have a small number of students — 30 or fewer — while others have large enrollments, which can be challenging to teach effectively (a difference that also happens to be true of face-to-face courses). Some online courses are entirely home-grown, unique to the individual instructor, while others are highly coordinated across sections or rely heavily on publisher content and activities.

You will also encounter differences among

the circumstances of online students. Some are well equipped tech-wise, with a good computer and fast, reliable internet access. Others do all of their coursework in a computer lab on campus. Still others take their laptops to public places with good Wi-Fi (malls, restaurants, libraries) because they don't have internet at home.

Even given such variances in class formats and student circumstances, the fact remains that the flexibility of online education makes it a more accessible option than traditional courses for more than 6.3 million students, and counting. There are lots of things you can do to be a better online teacher for those students. Read on.

## 10 Essential Principles and Practices

The teaching suggestions in this guide are not revolutionary. Once you read them, they'll probably seem like common sense. But that's just the point.

Professors often fail to make the connection between what we do in a physical classroom and what we do online. This guide aims to make that connection explicit — to

help you think about what you do well in person so that you can do those things in your online classes, too. If you already employ some of these practices, the intent here is to help you think more comprehensively about what else you can do to be an excellent online teacher. With that goal in mind, let's get to work.



### Show Up to Class

Fundamentally, good teaching requires you to be in the classroom with your students. When you teach in person, you don't leave students to their own devices. You're with them, engaging in any number of teacherly activities: explaining, guiding, asking, illustrating, answering questions. You arrive early to set up for class. You stay a few minutes afterward to talk one-on-one with a student who needs extra support. You're present and actively involved. You're there for your students.

Many of you haven't translated that to online practice. After all, when teaching in person, you have a set schedule for when to be in class. That schedule also may determine

the weekly blocks of time during which you prepare for class and grade students' work. But such a set framework does not exist for an online class. And without intentional planning, you may go several days at a time without engaging in teacherly activities with your online students.

Instead, create a schedule for meaningful and active involvement in your online classes. For example, how many hours a week do you spend teaching an in-person, 15-week course? Maybe it's 10 hours a week, on average — combining the time you spend in the actual classroom with the time you devote to prepping and grading (and, of course, even longer after major assignments and tests).

Schedule the same amount of time each week to be visibly present and engaged in your semester-long online class. And I do mean visible, meaningful engagement. Here are some ways to do that:

- Post a weekly announcement to provide an overview of the coming week's topic or a recap of the previous week's work, or both.
- Respond to questions posted in an online question-and-answer discussion forum

or sent to you by email.

- Hold online office hours according to a schedule, by appointment, or both.
- Post a quick video to clarify misconceptions about a class topic or assignment.
- Grade and return students' work in a timely fashion.
- Talk with students in online discussions.

When you are regularly present and engaged in the online classroom, your students are more likely to be, too.



## Be Yourself

Most professors enjoy teaching in person because of the opportunity to interact with students, share our passion for a subject, and watch understanding dawn on their faces. Some of us, admittedly, enjoy the performative aspect. We feed off the energy in the room. We use it to fuel our own energetic communication. Many of us have a unique teaching persona — different from the person we are in a hallway conversation or in a department meeting. We employ humor. We vary our delivery to best effect. We pause. We raise our voices. We gesticulate for emphasis.

In an online classroom, your teaching style can get lost in translation. Although this is beginning to change, it is still the case that a primary means of communication in an online course is the written word. A wall of text can be dry and demotivating to students. Where is the vocal intonation? Where are the facial expressions? How do you stride up and down the front of the room to help make your point?

The solution, by the way, is not to post a video of yourself delivering a standard lecture in a classroom. The physical energy gets lost in that medium, too. Instead, capture your personality and your passion in ways that are different from what you might do in person, yet authentic.

Written content is inevitably part of any

online course, but strive to use a unique voice in your writing. Mini-lectures, assignment instructions, answers to questions, weekly announcements — you can write those in such a way as to represent your true self:

- **Infuse your writing with warmth.** Convey your support. In your weekly announcement, for example, don't write, "Some of you have skipped the past few quizzes. You won't pass this class if you continue to do so." Instead, write, "Thank you for your work in this class. I know it's a lot to manage. Just a reminder, make sure you're taking all the quizzes to help you be successful here. Please contact me if I can help or answer any questions. Thanks!"
- **Be human.** Sometimes the inherent distance between professor and student in an online class infects your written communication. But you needn't write in a detached tone. Instead, practice immediacy. For example, at the end of a set of assignment instructions, you could write, "If you have any questions at all about what you are supposed to do on this assignment, please remember I am here to help. Reach out any time so I can support your success." That is more friendly, more caring, and more reassuring than,

“Questions? Post them in the Q&A discussion forum.”

Recording yourself whenever possible is another great way to bring your whole self to class. Whether by audio or video, capture your expertise, your empathy, your teacher persona in a way that comes across with much more impact than in writing (again, I don't mean videos of you lecturing). These recordings don't have to be professionally produced, and you don't have to have a video in every module. Instead, start small. For example, record a quick introduction and greeting to include in the “Start Here” module of your course.

Many learning-management systems include a built-in feature to record audio and

video. Or you can capture a quick video on your smartphone using the YouTube app or similar. Either way, experiment with providing guidance and instruction via the technology tools you have at hand.

Students appreciate seeing your face and hearing your voice. Don't worry about making sure every stray hair is in place. If you trip over your tongue while recording, that's OK, too. Pause and start again. After all, you're not always perfectly polished and articulate in the classroom, are you? Those little foibles make your recordings authentic. They show you're a real person. Students need to know you in order to engage with you online. So look for ways to be yourself via technology, just as you do in person.



## Put Yourself in Their Shoes

Your online students aren't physically near you or other students when they're “in class.” Most do their coursework when they are alone, whether at home or in a public space with Wi-Fi, like a library or a coffee shop. They can't turn to a neighbor for help or raise a hand to ask a question. That leads to a strong sense of isolation and creates a need for support — different from the kind you offer when you teach in person.

In a physical classroom, you can pick up on nonverbal cues. Are students bored? Tuning out? Confused? You can observe the signals and adjust what you're doing. When students are taking class at home, puzzling over your explanation of a complex concept, you're not there in real time to allay their confusion. You can't observe when you've lost their attention or when your instructions aren't clear. Yet you want to support them just as you would in a campus-based classroom.

How can you do that? By anticipating their isolation and planning for it in your course design.

Imagine that you are the student, on your

own, trying to make sense of what is in front of you on the screen. Get outside your own head — where your online class makes sense and everything is clear. Instead, try to envision how your students are experiencing the class. I will talk in more detail below about each of these, but for instance: Are your instructions clear on how long students' discussion posts should be, and on how they should cite sources? Do you include a detailed grading rubric? Do you provide an example of a successful final project, so that students can see your expectations and don't have to muddle through while they wait for a reply from you?

Better yet, have a trusted colleague evaluate your online class. Ask experienced online-faculty members or campus instructional designers to go in and poke around as if they were students. You'll be surprised at what they might see that you can't — a confusing organization of course materials, an overly intimidating tone in textual instructions, a lack of clarity on what to do first to get started with the course. Use their observations to help you make a few tweaks.

Ideally, students should know exactly what you are teaching and what they are supposed to do as a result. That rarely happens by accident, though. You must be in-

tentional, put yourself in your students' shoes, and design for clarity. This principle should guide your practice for the next few suggestions.



## Organize Course Content Intuitively

Try to think like a student when you organize course materials. Commonly, online students become confused, frustrated, and disengaged simply because you or the campus LMS have made it too hard to find the content and activities. When students use a lot of cognitive resources just trying to figure out where to go to access readings, videos, discussions, or quizzes, they have little mental energy left for the content itself. Discouraged and/or irritated students are less likely to learn.

Once again, compare the organization and support services of your in-person courses with what you provide in your online teaching. In both contexts, there should be a method to your madness that is not hidden from students. The design and sequence of content and learning activities in both realms should be methodical, systematic, and purposeful. In person, you have the advantage of giving verbal explanations, reminders, and nudges. Since that opportunity doesn't exist in quite the same way online, you need to give structural support to head off points of confusion. To identify those points:

- Activate the student-preview function (most LMSs have this feature) and navigate your course as if you were new to online learning in general and to your LMS in particular.
- Is it clear where things are found? Note times when it's not immediately evident what a student should do. In some LMSs, for example, a text heading may actually be a link that students have to click to access a content page or assignment. The need to click to get to more information might not be clear to them. When possi-

ble, add a simple line of guidance: "Click the link above to access the assignment submission area."

- Remember, online students can't generally ask a quick question in real time. Remove any opacity brought on by the design of the LMS by giving quick pointers wherever you can.
- Think about how the use of menus, modules, folders, and other organizing structures helps or hinders students' progress through the course. Strike a balance between scrolling and clicking. Students should be able to access content, assessments, and learning activities without constantly clicking more and more links. Equally important, use LMS tools such as folders and pages to keep things organized. An online course should not be one giant website of endless scrolling. Nor should it be a warren of nested and subnested folders. Aim for a good mix of navigational approaches so students experience neither scrolling nor clicking fatigue.

Strive for a course organization that is clear, methodical, and intuitive. Help students move through content and activities smoothly and seamlessly, so that their attention remains focused on learning the material. If they have to click out of a module and into another folder to watch a required video, that can be distracting — or frustrating if it's hard to find. Similarly, requiring students to exit from a sequence of content pages and access a quiz by navigating to a different location wastes time and mental energy. Instead, try to order materials and activities such that the flow makes



sense for someone new to the course. Ask an online-savvy colleague for help if you are

too close to the content and unable to see it from a newcomer's perspective.



## Add Visual Appeal

Online courses suffer a well-earned reputation of being ugly, dry, boring, and unappealing. Humans are more likely to want to be in a space if it is pleasant to look at. Plenty of students would rather learn in a new building than in a dingy lecture hall that hasn't been renovated in decades. The appearance of our surroundings affects our enjoyment and therefore our engagement.

That's why you need to give serious thought to the way your online courses look. You may be surprised at the impact a few small touches can make.

When thinking about the visuals of an online class, look to your favorite websites. Study the layouts of books and magazines that you enjoy. A great deal of thought has gone into their design. Why not apply this philosophy to an online class?

You don't have to be a graphic designer to enhance course appearance. A little attention to presentation goes a long way. Do you have a lot of written lecture notes or instructions? Break up long chunks of text with subheads and space between paragraphs. Embed relevant images. Include thumbnail videos that you've either created or sourced from YouTube, news sites, or library resources. Aim for attractive yet appropriate.

Not sure where to start? Many institutions have media designers who can help. Or ap-

proach the campus teaching center or the LMS-support staff. An online course that is visually appealing (or at least not completely ugly) helps students to engage more frequently and more meaningfully. Unfortunately, public links to visually effective online courses are few, but here's an example (open in view-only format): "[Modern Mythology and Geek Culture](#)." Notice the visual impact of the home page, then click around to observe its logical, student-friendly organization.

**Note: All visuals should be accessible to all students.** Use the formatting tools in your text editor, such as heads and subheads, to enable [screen readers](#) (a tool to help blind students). Pictures, graphs, and formulas need alternate text descriptions (again, for screen readers). Videos should be captioned or a written transcript provided. Principles of [Universal Design for Learning](#) show us that such supports benefit all learners, not just those with disabilities. Work with your local instructional designer and disability-resources specialist for help on this front. By no means should you deny students access to any content just because you want your course to look nicer. Work with the experts on your campus to ensure good looks and accessibility.



## Explain Your Expectations

When you're standing at the front of a classroom and you assign a task, a paper, or a project, you don't simply hand out

written instructions and not say a word about the assignment. Nor do you display the instructions on a PowerPoint slide

without explaining more about what you are looking for and what students should do to succeed.

Yet that is what often happens in online classes: The only instructions come in the form of written text. You might think your writing is clear, but what's missing is the kind of nuanced explanation that you routinely provide in a physical classroom.

Remember, online students typically work by themselves. They can't ask for, or receive, clarification in the moment they first encounter your assignment instructions. Which is why you need to explain what you're looking for as clearly as possible in an online class.

But don't go to the other extreme and create tomes of written instructions, overly detailed directions, pages and pages of material that students won't bother to read. In that

case, you haven't really solved the problem. Aim for a balance between thorough and digestible. Here are a few ways to do that:

- Write down the directions as if you were having a conversation with a student, so they don't read like a textbook.
- Create an informal two-minute explainer video to flesh out some details of an assignment.
- Provide a rubric.
- Share an example of student work that earned top marks. Maybe even share an example of mediocre work so students can compare the two.

In short, provide as much meaningful support as you can — without going overboard — so that students don't have to guess what you want them to do.



## Scaffold Learning Activities

When you teach in person, you do a lot of modeling that you may not even be aware you're doing. For example, when you demonstrate how to solve an equation, you're explaining your thinking process. When you share examples and analogies, you're showing how you connect concepts for deeper understanding. When you ask critical questions, you're modeling how thinkers in your discipline make sense of theories and approaches.

You explain things — step by systematic step — to help students learn and perform successfully on tests, projects, papers, and other assignments.

That kind of modeling and “scaffolding” doesn't happen quite as naturally in online classes, where real-time interactions are limited. To help students succeed, you must be creative. Scrutinize your assessments, both large and small. Have your students had the opportunity to build — step by step, as they would in an in-per-

son classroom — the knowledge and skills they will need do well on those assessments?

Here are some examples of how to scaffold activities in an online course. When possible, make these an opportunity for you to give incremental feedback so students know whether or not they are on the right track:

- Let's say you want students to record a video presentation of their research topics. It's hard enough to give a good presentation without the video-recording element. So help your online students gain practice with the technology *before* they have to use it for a high-stakes project. For example, in the first week or two of class, give them a low-stakes, low-stress assignment: Ask them to record and post a two-minute video introducing themselves to the class.

- As part of an orientation module, ask students to send you a message using the LMS messaging/email system so they know how to do this later in the class if they have a question for you. Ask them to answer a question about the syllabus or to list two goals for their learning in the course. Reply with a short personal greeting so they know you received the message and are available to help.
- During Week 1, ask students to upload a PDF file of their handwritten work solving the first step of a problem. This exercise will help them learn how to turn a photo on their mobile device into a PDF file, and how to submit it as

an assignment in the LMS. It's a good way correct any missteps early on.

- At the beginning of the first module, ask students use one of the many free [mind-mapping tools](#) available on the web to create a concept map of what they already know about the course topic. Then, at the end of each module, assign students to create a summary concept map to help them make sense of each topic.

Look for ways to break down complex tasks so that students make timely progress and receive feedback on their work while there is still time to adjust their approach if needed.



## Provide Examples

During an in-person course, if students raise their hands and say they just don't get some concept, you find another way to explain it. You come up with examples, maybe from another realm of life. That variety of examples and explanations helps learners grasp the information in a way that makes the most sense to them. Examples are even more crucial in online teaching.

Consider the first time you taught a college course. Maybe you borrowed a syllabus from a previous instructor to guide you in developing your own. Likewise, the first time you taught online, you may have relied on someone else's content in the LMS so that you didn't have to start from scratch. Those of you who had to create your first online class without any model to emulate know how challenging it is to produce something entirely new.

Online learners, too, benefit from multiple explanations of difficult concepts and multiple examples of the kind of work you want to see. Among other options, you might:

- Source existing videos that put another spin on a particular topic.
- Record a short guest-lecture video to let students hear from another expert in your field.
- Structure ways for students to explain new information to one another — as novice learners, they may come up with examples and illustrations that make more sense to their peers than your explanations do. For example, you could assign semester-long groups of two and ask students to interact with their partners every week by phone or text to explain course concepts — in an introductory psychology class, for example, how neurons fire in the brain. Students could submit a short summary of their work with their partner and tell how it helped them better understand that week's concepts.

How many examples should you provide? Lots of them, wherever possible. You may want to make some examples option-

al or supplemental, for students who want more help. Requiring all students to read or watch multiple examples and explanations may feel like busy work for some.

In addition to sharing explanations of concepts, give as many examples of previous students' work as appropriate. Show their full work or just pieces. For a persuasive essay, you can show examples of effective introductions; for a complex clinical process, provide work showing only the

first step.

In your teaching and writing for the course, model the kind of work you wish to see. For example, use a professional yet conversational tone in your discussion posts. Demonstrate how you respect and value diverse perspectives. When you show students what you're looking for, they're likely to be more confident in their ability to succeed on a task, which in turn increases their motivation to engage meaningfully.



## Make Class an Inviting, Pleasant Place to Be

Ask yourself: Do you enjoy going into your online classroom? Do you like being there? Do you look forward to communicating with your online students in the same way you look forward to interacting with students in a physical classroom?

Those are hard questions, but they shine a light on an important issue for many faculty members. If we're honest, many of us would have to say that we don't enjoy being in our online classes as much as we enjoy teaching in person. Indeed, that could help explain why only 9 percent of us prefer to teach online exclusively. We simply may not enjoy being there as much.

If you struggle to enjoy the online learning environment as an instructor, it's not hard to imagine that this struggle is even harder for students.

When you teach in person, you do a lot of things to help students feel welcome and comfortable in the classroom. You greet students. Smile. Make eye contact. Answer questions. You show your support in countless ways. Even when the physical classroom is not particularly attractive, you do a lot to improve the atmosphere in the room to make it more pleasant and therefore more conducive to learning.

Apply that same principle to your online classes. A deliberate effort to make them more inviting and pleasant is likely to result in more interesting classes. Students will want to be in your online class if you:

- Use plenty of visuals, media, interactive tools, and learning activities.
- Streamline course organization and navigation. Organize the furniture in the room, so to speak, to create maximum flow. (The proprietary nature of most online courses makes it difficult for me offer open examples of what I mean, but the "Modern Mythology and Geek Culture" course I've already mentioned illustrates many of these design strategies.)
- Convey positivity and optimism that students can succeed.
- Demonstrate compassion and caring for your busy online learners.
- Respect their time and engagement by being present and engaged yourself.

By making your online class more enjoyable, you make students want to show up. And students have to want to be in class before they can learn anything.



## Commit to Continuous Improvement

A hallmark of good teaching is the desire to keep getting better at it. Bring that zeal into your online classroom the same way you bring it to your campus classroom. Invest a little time and energy into developing as an online teacher. Even small efforts can have a big impact.

Compared with teaching in person, online teaching is still rather new, but there are things you can do to improve and find fresh ideas to try:

- Participate in workshops offered by your institution's teaching-and-learning center.
- Join book-discussion groups with your

colleagues to delve into books about effective online-teaching strategies.

- Subscribe to teaching-related newsletters, such as [Faculty Focus](#) and *The Chronicle's* [Teaching Newsletter](#). Sometimes they feature articles specifically related to online teaching; other times, reading about a new approach in the physical classroom leads to an idea for your online teaching.
- Explore best practices presented in the [Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository](#).

Demonstrate your commitment to student success by pursuing your own professional development from time to time.



## Common Misperceptions

Many dedicated online teachers have figured out some good approaches, but mistaken ideas about online learning persist. Here are some of the most common.

**“Online classes are like slow cookers: Set and forget.”** Despite the efforts of leading online educators and educational developers to debunk this myth, many faculty members still treat it as gospel, consciously or not. Perhaps in part because online courses take so much preparation before the first day of class — ideally, all content (assessments, activities, prompts) is created in advance and in place for a turnkey experience — many academics seem to believe that students should be able to walk themselves through an online course without much active guidance from the instructor.

That is a recipe for disaster.

In the early days of online learning, many online classes were treated like electronic correspondence courses. Students worked through the content alone, submitted their assignments, and received grades only after they had completed the entire course. For some people, correspondence courses work. But they take a high level of motivation, which other online learners, struggling to balance work and family obligations, simply can't muster on their own.

Instead, plan to guide your online class actively and frequently. Just as you advise your students to do, block out time in your weekly calendar as if you were attending class in person. Post announcements, give further explanations, provide tips on forthcoming assignments, answer questions, reply to online discussion posts, grade students' work.

When teaching in person, you don't expect students to proceed without regular guidance. The same need for continuous faculty involvement holds true online.

**“Online students are lazy/disengaged/ (insert negative adjective here).”** Many online students are prone to minimal engagement or drifting away from class altogether. Does online education attract a certain type of personality, people who are not highly motivated to succeed? Or have we inadvertently created conditions online that contribute to student disengagement? Things like:

- Confusing and unappealing course designs.
- A shortage of faculty expertise in excellent online instruction.
- The inherent technical challenges of learning online.
- A student population that tends to be working and/or raising children while pursuing degrees.

With that combination of circumstances, it's not surprising that some online students do only the minimum required.

Online learning requires high-level executive-function skills that some students may not possess. The lack of social and logistical support that is an inherent part of in-person education — where students interact with the instructor and their peers on a regular basis inside a physical classroom — means that online students must be able to manage their time well, motivate themselves, direct and regulate their own learning, and seek appropriate help when needed. But often they simply can't do all of that on their own, and online courses are their only option to a degree.

Good online teaching requires you to make an extra effort to help those students persist, learn deeply, and experience transformation as a result of your online classes. That takes some awareness of the challenges of online education. It takes careful thought. Planning. Caring. But it can be done. And it seems well worth doing.

**“Online classes don't work.”** Almost half

of the 13,451 faculty respondents in the 2017 Educause survey on faculty and information technology don't agree that online learning is effective. About 45 percent of faculty respondents said that students don't learn as well online as they do in person. In short, they believe that online education just doesn't work. But we have plenty of evidence that online courses can produce student-learning outcomes comparable to those of in-person courses.

Note my use of the word “can.” Much like the best in-person courses, the high-quality online versions require excellent online teachers. It's on us to design and teach those highly engaging and effective online classes.

**“Teaching online is not as enjoyable as teaching in person.”** We all know that many academics don't perceive online teaching to be as rewarding as teaching in person. But could that be because we aren't doing it right?

If you find online education to be unsatisfying, that might be because the activities you undertake when “teaching” online resemble administrative tasks more than dynamic co-construction of new knowledge with students. You log in to grade student work, check boxes, go through the motions, manage operational functions. No wonder it doesn't seem fulfilling. Those activities are drudgery.

But online teaching can certainly be rewarding — if in ways different from the face-to-face version. My own experience is a case in point: Most of my online students are working and caring for children or other family members. They're taking online classes because it's the only way for them to earn a degree and improve their lot. One of my students, who was serving in the Air Force, recorded his video introduction from his young daughter's pink-and-purple “princess” bedroom. Yes, he was a little embarrassed, but I was impressed — no, moved — by his resourcefulness. It was the only room in the house where he could find a few minutes of quiet during the family evening routine to do his classwork. So he swallowed his pride and greeted us from the floor of his little girl's bedroom, sur-

rounded by toys and dolls. You just don't get those glimpses into your students' personal lives, those tangible experiences of the challenges they choose to overcome, when teaching classes on campus.

Embracing those differences — the advantages of online classes, the technological opportunities afforded by a classroom without walls — is how we find joy in teaching online.



## How to Find Help

Ideally, you're now energized to reinvigorate your online teaching. There's no need to go it alone. Take advantage of resources and support as you seek to grow in this pursuit.

**Make friends with your campus instructional designer.** You are an expert in your subject matter. Instructional designers (like me) are expert in effective online teaching and learning. Collaborate with this often underutilized colleague to refine your approach. Maybe you attend a workshop, meet for coffee, or pick up the phone for a 15-minute conversation about a new idea. Whatever your preference, this person can significantly improve your experience and satisfaction with teaching online. Go ahead. Give us a call.

**Seek an experienced online teaching mentor.** Teaching online is a skill different from teaching in person. Find someone who does it well. Learn from that person's expertise. Emulating the example of someone in the online-teaching trenches — who is not only surviving but thriving — can be transformative.

**Connect with colleagues who are trying to be excellent online teachers.** Interacting with others who are grappling with the same teaching issues can lead to im-

portant new insights and ideas. Propose that a five-minute tip about online teaching be a regular agenda item at department meetings. Join a book-discussion group on excellent online teaching. Attend workshops, showcases, and conferences to learn what others at your institution and elsewhere are doing in online education. Talk with your fellow online educators, learn from their approaches, and contribute your own ideas. We're all in this together. Let's commit to learning from and with one another.

At this point, you may feel overwhelmed by all the ways of improving your online teaching practice. So start small. Pick one thing. When you have that down, choose another. Continue step by step, always striving to get better for the sake of your online students' learning and success. With some effort, with creative thinking, with curiosity and courage, you can discover the fizz of teaching within an online classroom. ■

*Flower Darby, a senior instructional designer at Northern Arizona University, teaches online courses at the university and at Estrella Mountain Community College. She is the author, with James M. Lang, of Small Teaching Online (Jossey-Bass, 2019).*

# 4 Lessons From Moving a Face-to-Face Course Online

By **KEVIN GANNON**

**W**here I teach — a small, primarily residential liberal-arts college — there was a time when professors would have avoided online teaching like the plague.

Five years ago I wasn't teaching any online courses. This semester, my entire course load is online. And so is next semester's.

What's interesting is how many of us who work at "traditional" colleges — where dorms and dining halls occupy equal pride of place with classrooms and laboratories — are now trying to figure out how to create an online version of a face-to-face course we've been teaching for years.

Online courses were once well outside the higher-education mainstream, derided as glorified distance-education or trumped-up correspondence courses by those who saw them as the opposite of what a college experience should be. In the last 10 to 15 years, however, spiraling enrollment pressures and a brutal fiscal environment have pushed many colleges and universities into an online presence they might never have anticipated a few planning cycles ago.

There are several positive aspects to this development:

- Online learning means increased access to higher education, which is an indisputable social good.



GETTY IMAGES

Kevin Gannon

- Now that online education is "a thing," institutions with teaching at the heart of their missions are indispensable parties in the conversation. We are now at the online table in larger and larger numbers.

But the trend has produced its fair share of challenges as well:

- Campus administrators might see online courses primarily as a cost efficien-



cy, for example, and ignore the very real need for the support and time it takes to teach them well.

- So long as there are still predatory, for-profit, financial-aid thieves masquerading as colleges and universities, online courses will still be held in suspicion in many quarters of academe.
- Aside from such macro-level concerns, online teaching presents significant challenges to faculty members. And one of the most significant is the myriad complexities involved in moving a face-to-face course into the online realm.

That last challenge was the one I faced when I taught my first fully online course five years ago. As I looked at the class — an upper-level U.S. history seminar — and began to think about how I would teach it online, my heart sank. How was I going to preserve what I thought was most essential — the regular student interaction, the free-wheeling give-and-take as we discussed a particular source or topic — if none of us would be together in the same physical space at the same time? How could I take a course that seemed to depend on synchronous activity and make it work in a completely asynchronous environment? And even if I was able to figure out acceptable answers to those questions, where would I even begin?

Fortunately, I had the assistance of colleagues who were more familiar with the online world than I was. I was able to tap their expertise, and get introduced to a [valuable collection of resources](#) about online teaching and learning. That, in turn, helped me develop an online version of the course that far surpassed my expectations — and students' as well, judging from the positive end-of-semester course evaluations.

The experience convinced me that online courses could work well, and I have regularly taught them since.

I vividly recall, though, how overwhelming the task seemed initially, and the sheer volume of questions I had about how all of this would work, exactly. And I'm reminded regularly of those anxious moments now when I work with colleagues new to online

teaching. There are a lot of factors to consider, and the work can differ greatly depending upon the type of course and discipline. If you are in the process of moving your courses online — or just mulling how your course design and teaching would look in an asynchronous, digital learning space — chances are you're wading through the same questions and factors, too.

What follows, then, are some of the most important things I learned in the process of changing from a teacher who taught exclusively traditional, face-to-face courses to one who does both and is often immersed in the online environment.

### **Avoid seeing online teaching exclusively through the lens of face-to-face courses.**

Initially I was stuck in that very mind-set. It suffused all of my judgments and really limited my imagination when it came to designing an online course.

**Now that online education is “a thing,” institutions with teaching at the heart of their missions are indispensable parties in the conversation.**

No, I can't exactly replicate a synchronous seminar-style discussion in an online course. But the thoughtful, deliberative analysis and deep conversation which arise out of asynchronous online discussions can't be replicated in a face-to-face class, either. It turns out online teaching and learning isn't inherently better or worse than the face-to-face variety — just different. And in both types of courses, you'll get more out of teaching them if you focus on the opportunities they present rather than the obstacles.

Taking the value judgments out of the equation allowed me to escape the limits I'd artificially imposed on the process. When I stopped thinking about what I couldn't do online, and started asking what I could do, I found I was able to think of ways to accomplish online the goals I had set for the course when I was teaching it face-to-face. My learning outcomes were the same in both realms — I just needed to take different vehicles to get there.

**Online teaching isn't less time-consuming than the traditional kind.** We know that effective teaching isn't the product of circumstance, but rather a significant investment of time in preparing the learning space, as well as encouraging what develops within that space. It may seem like I'm belaboring the obvious by suggesting that's true online as well but, all too often, we hear online teaching framed in terms of "efficiency."

Deciding to house your courses on the institution's learning-management system (LMS) involves far more than simply posting things on Blackboard or Canvas and calling it a day. For example, putting a course online means you have to consider even more carefully both the substance and tone of your written documents. You'd be amazed at how the absence of things like vocal inflection, hand gestures, and facial expressions can cast your words in a much different light for students. For example, gently guiding a student to a more skillful or accurate response in a discussion is a lot easier to do in person than via written feedback, where sometimes even carefully phrased comments can come across as harsh or impersonal. If you use video material, you need to ensure captioning or transcripts are included.

Good discussion spaces, course blogging platforms, curated materials to accompany each module — all of those take time to build. And it's a different process than simply compiling lecture notes loosely based on a textbook chapter.

Furthermore, the time commitment doesn't go away after the course is built. Throughout the semester, you have to spend a considerable amount of time creat-

ing and then maintaining meaningful engagement with your students.

**Know your tools better than you think you need to.** The ed-tech arena is a crowded one. At any given time there's at least one app or platform screaming about how it's the newest, best, easiest tool for your online course. And that app or platform is just as likely to be gone within a year as it is to become and remain a valuable teaching tool.

That said, you can find good digital tools that (a) afford students the means of interacting substantively with you and with one another, and (b) enable a deep engagement with course materials or applications. Perhaps you elect to use a web annotation tool like Hypothes.is, or a collaborative digital space like Padlet. Maybe you're using the wiki space in your LMS, or have decided that a WordPress blog will be the main course forum. Whichever tools you adopt, integrate them into your course in a way that complements rather than subverts your pedagogy. Choose your tools to help accomplish a specific learning goal in your course, not simply because they're trendy or free, or because you've had colleagues who swear by how cool they are.

**So long as there are still predatory, for-profit, financial-aid thieves masquerading as colleges and universities, online courses will still be held in suspicion in many quarters of academe.**

You'll also need to know the technology well enough to be the main troubleshooter for your students when — not if — they encounter difficulties setting up or using a tool themselves. At any rate, only through

using and experimenting with a digital tool can you really know if it's the right one for your course and learning outcomes.

**Above all, presence matters.** An online course can absolutely be a powerful learning experience, with students as deeply engaged as they would be in a seminar-style class. But that outcome isn't the product of chance; it's only accomplished when both you and your students are present in the course and with one another. Presence is perhaps the single most important ingredient in meaningful learning online. Research has shown that two types of presence in particular — social and cognitive — are key in online teaching.

Online courses may be asynchronous, but they don't have to be impersonal or atomized. There are plenty of ways to build and maintain a meaningful presence for both you and your students. (Hint: It goes well beyond relying on threaded discussions.) Tools such as personalized avatars, creative introductory posts, and video comments can be important personalizing features, while assignments designed for interaction and collaboration ensure everyone's presence is a vital part of the course's routine.

Absent any social or cognitive presence, online courses resemble the worst of face-to-face pedagogy: hundreds of students crammed into impersonal lecture halls, merely the passive recipients of "content." If that's all online courses aspire to be, we might as well just have students watch YouTube.

Ultimately, teaching online combines

all the usual challenges of designing and leading courses with the issues particular to a digital environment. Yet it's also an excellent opportunity to refine your teaching

**You'd be amazed at how the absence of things like vocal inflection, hand gestures, and facial expressions can cast your words in a much different light for students.**

practice in general. Moving a course online challenges you to consider exactly why you do what you do — from course goals to discussion questions to assignments and tests. In that process, you'll likely find you need to do things differently online. You may even conclude that your face-to-face teaching needs an overhaul, too. Either way, the experience should spur you to reflect critically about teaching, and that's never a bad thing. ■

*Kevin Gannon is a professor of history at Grand View University and director of its Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.*

*Originally published on March 24, 2019*

# Live From My Living Room, It's My Classroom!

By ESTHER C. KIM

For the past two years, I have been teaching live, video graduate courses online through a platform called 2U. It had become such a routine that I didn't pay much attention to the differences between online and "on the ground" courses until this past semester, when I started to notice several sharp distinctions. Without a physical classroom presence, the task of truly engaging students can be daunting. So with some reflection (and the aid of many captivating YouTube tutorials), I have developed several strategies that have helped me better motivate my students on live video platforms. Among them:

**Pay attention to facial expressions.** I learned a lot by watching how a few highly popular YouTubers maintained my attention. Most notably, the best video lecturers are animated in the way they speak and present their material, whether their topic is how to use scales of measurement in statistics or how to apply bronzer so it looks like a natural tan. While you may think this isn't what you signed up for when you decided on a lifelong career in thinking, writing, and teaching great minds, there are a few tricks I've adopted to become more animated.

Since our online students cannot assess our body language, we should use our facial expressions to affirm and engage with them. Now I aim to smile more (when appropriate), nod, and make nonlexical conversation sounds such as "hmm" and "uh huh." In the same way, I pay close attention to what my students' facial expressions show they're thinking about our particular classroom material. For this reason, I ask students to be on audio and on camera for the duration of the class, as it helps me read and understand their facial expressions.



Esther C. Kim

**Open your class early.** In a traditional "on the ground" classroom, both instructor and students have the option of arriving early or staying after class. This is one of those invisible features of classroom culture that does not exist online — unless it is purposefully created. So I "open" my online class about 10 minutes before the official start time to allow students to

"arrive" early, ask questions, or chat with one another (about anything, course-related or not). It's a great way to create a sense of community, because the alternative looks something like this: Students log in via audio one minute before class, wait silently for class to start, turn on the

camera, and, when class is over, promptly log off. Such a format may be efficient, but it impedes positive instructor-to-student as well as student-to-student relationships, which, research has shown, help facilitate learning.

**Provide suggestions for a strong classroom climate.** At the start of the semester, I offer ways for students to stay engaged in an online classroom environment, and I explain the importance of remaining on camera and on audio. Without a proper explanation, students mistakenly think that they can multitask during live class sessions. Among the tips I offer them:

- Refrain from opening email, texting, or browsing the web.
- Choose a space where you don't encounter distractions, which could include family members, laundry, dirty dishes, or a busy street outside your window.
- Avoid sitting on a comfortable couch or bed.
- Pay close attention to peers' comments and ask yourself if you agree or disagree, and why. Add to the dialogue by sharing your thoughts.
- Avoid taking class from coffee shops or other public spaces. The background noise can create a distraction both for you and for the entire class. Also, internet connections may be inconsistent in public spaces.

**Don't use the chat box when you can speak instead.** On my university's platform, there's a chat box in which students can type messages in real time. This could be a useful tool if used properly. But I often find it difficult to simultaneously read the chat box while listening to a student who's speaking. The same goes for when I am speaking and someone is typing comments or questions in the chat box. If there's a robust dialogue happening among a few of the students and others want to interject, they can place their comments in the chat box. Otherwise, I ask that they take advantage of the face-

to-face online time by verbalizing their questions or comments.

At times, students use the chat box to joke or have side conversations with one another. Since I feel it is important to create an amicable classroom culture, I ask them to verbalize these jokes as well and to restrict chat-box content to topic-related material. That way the whole class can chuckle and then move on, without students' competing to outsmart a joke.

**Make participation mandatory.** As instructors, we all face the problem of silence at some point during class, or of discussions' becoming dominated by a few students. To encourage participation and the completion of reading assignments, I use random selection: I write each student's name on a slip of paper and put the slips in a large container. Whenever I ask key discussion questions and do not have volunteers, I pull

I “open” my class about 10 minutes early, to allow students to ask questions and chat with one another.

a name from the bowl. To add a little animation to the task, I sometimes take a few seconds to shake up the bowl, then stick my hand in and call out the name. Students' anticipation of having their name pulled out of a jar is less scary than being directly called upon.

**Make use of external online tools such as Google Drive.** Some online-classroom platforms are limited when it comes to sharing documents in real time. When I assign students to work in small groups, I post a link to a Google Drive page for each small group. They will remain connected via camera and audio through the platform, but can open the external link to work on assignments together. Since they will

have access to the Google Drive even after class, they can revisit what their group has worked on during class.

**Prepare for technology failures.** Whether it's problems with the online platform or Wi-Fi connections, technology can fail. During the first few semesters of teaching online, I frantically tried to fix the problem while remaining on camera. Unless you are certain that it will be a quick fix, it's best to post a message on the chat box or say (if your audio is working) that you are facing technological problems, and then offer a five-minute break. Include a time stamp in case the platform freezes; for example: "Hi all, I'm having technical difficulties. It's 5:55 p.m. right now — let's take a five-minute break and regroup at 6 p.m." In my experience, five minutes is enough time to restart the platform, restart your computer, or contact your online-support staff. On that note, make sure you have your real-time online-support phone numbers saved in your phone's contacts.

Another helpful tech support is a battery backup unit into which you can plug your computer and your router or modem. I bought mine for less than \$50, and it has already saved me through a temporary power outage.

Online education is a growing field, and, with some effort, it can emulate the feeling of students and instructor being together in a physical classroom. While YouTubers have the advantage of being able to edit their videos and upload the best versions, instructors who teach via video have a greater benefit in being able to interact with their online students. Teaching people how to apply makeup so they look like they're not wearing any might make someone a YouTube star, but creating student engagement that looks and feels natural is truly satisfying. ■

*Esther C. Kim is a lecturer in the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California.*

*Originally published on April 8, 2018*

## Resources for Giving Students Online Feedback

*The following excerpt and list of tech tools are from The Chronicle's Advice Guide "[How to Give Your Students Better Feedback With Technology](#)." The authors are Holly Fiock, an instructional designer in the College of Education at Purdue University, and Heather Garcia, an instructional-design specialist at Oregon State University Ecampus.*

Technology has the potential to make course feedback better — more effective, more engaging, more timely — but that won't happen automatically. Technology must be thoughtfully applied, not just used for the sake of using it. As an instructor you may have a variety of feedback tools already at your disposal, via your institution's online platform or learning-management system (LMS), such as Google Classroom, Blackboard, Moodle, Desire2Learn, or Canvas...

What follows is a list of applications and technologies found to be most useful in providing feedback. We do suggest that you first check with your department and/or institution to see what is already available (and locally supported) for instructors on your campus.

### A starter kit:

For newbies to digital feedback tools, here are the best resources to get you started:

- A list of [75 digital tools and apps](#) that instructors can use to assess student performance and provide them with feedback.
- *The Chronicle's* guide, "[How to Make Smart Choices About Tech for Your Course](#)," by Michelle D. Miller.
- A column from The Hechinger Report, "[Has Video Killed the Red Grading Pen?](#)"
- [MERLOT](#): Part of the California State University system, the acronym stands for Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching. It of-

fers thousands of online-learning materials for educators around the world.

### Free tools:

- [SoundCloud](#): An easy audio-recording tool that you can embed in your learning-management system so students can click an arrow and play your recording.
- [Vocaroo](#): A simple, PC-friendly tool for recording your voice. You can immediately get a link to the recording and give it to students.
- [Screencast-O-Matic](#): A screencasting tool that allows you to record up to 15 minutes.
- [Kaizena](#): A site that helps you provide verbal feedback directly on student documents and track their progress by comparing your feedback history over multiple assignments.
- [Screencastify](#): A screen recorder for Chrome (via extension) that requires no download.

### Paid tools:

- [VoiceThread](#): A learning tool that allows the instructor and the students to participate in a pre-uploaded presentation by providing text, audio, and/or video discussions.
- [Snagit](#): A screenshot program by TechSmith that captures both video and audio.
- [Camtasia](#): Another program by TechSmith that allows users to create video via screencast or direct recording.
- [Panopto](#): A program that provides recording, screencasting, and video streaming for users.
- [Hippo Video](#): An all-in-one, cloud-based, video-management system that allows users to capture, edit, and share video, audio, and screen recordings.

