

How Can I Become a Better Online Instructor?

Presented by:

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As a faculty member and a senior instructional designer at Northern Arizona University, Flower Darby designs in-person, online, and blended classes that support students in their learning. She loves to apply effective teaching and learning principles across the disciplines both in her classes and in those of the faculty she supports at NAU. Darby is the co-author, with James M. Lang, of *Small Teaching Online* (Jossey-Bass, 2019).



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To help us find the fizz of teaching in our online classes, and to help students engage more, learn better, and be more successful, we can improve our online teaching with these five practical strategies.

1. Make your class an inviting place to be

Greet your students at the 'door' – post a short video to say hi that students see as soon as they click into your course.

Post an informal video, less than a minute long, on the landing page of your online course. Just say a quick hello, glad you're here, and invite students to reach out to you if they have any questions. Smile and convey a warm and welcoming attitude of support.

Write the text that is found in your online course in a supportive and encouraging tone of voice.

Sometimes the written content and instructions in our online courses can be dry and uninspiring, maybe because we think we should create an academic tone. Instead, wherever appropriate, write in your own voice, in an encouraging and positive tone of voice. You can write course and module overviews, your biography, discussion posts and replies to students, and announcements in a way that students can get to know you, when you write in your own, supportive voice.

Create a psychologically welcoming environment in your online course.

Recent research has shown that including pictures of women, and pictures that represent diversity, in course graphics for online STEM classes improve the sense of belonging and successful participation in these classes for culturally diverse female students. (Kizilcec & Saltarelli, 2019). This held true even these pictures only showed people in the background. Apply this principle in your online course by intentionally including images of a diverse range of people in your course graphics. Enhance the effect by incorporating explanatory text or captions written in a way that indicates all students are welcome and can be successful.

As another way to create a psychologically welcoming environment, conduct a simple social belonging intervention.

Help students feel like they belong in your class, that they're supposed to be there, and that they can be successful, by asking them to do a simple exercise. First, collect testimonials from students about how they were worried about being able to succeed when they first started the class, but later came to feel as if they belong and could be successful. Have current students read these testimonials from former students, write about their experience reading these testimonials (how did this activity change their

thinking), then write notes to incoming students to reassure them of their ability to succeed in this class.

Teach culturally responsive online classes to help all students feel welcome.

Often, online classes do little to acknowledge cultural differences in our learners (Plotts, personal communication, 2019). We can help all our diverse learners feel welcome and confident by asking students to do a “name stories” exercise as part of an introduction post, in which they explain the story behind their name including pronunciation tips and any cultural significance. In our own discussion posts, we can also model respect for all people and viewpoints, and we can monitor discussion forums for posts which marginalize other students and take appropriate action (delete or hide offensive posts, reach out to students who may be unaware of the effect of their words, contact students who may feel marginalized and offer extra support).

What is one new strategy you plan to try to help all students feel welcome and supported in your online class? Describe your approach or make a few notes to document your thinking here.

2. Show up to class.

Create a weekly schedule for when you will engage visibly in class, interacting with your students and showing them you’re there to support their learning and success.

Consider how many hours per week you spend on class-related activities when teaching an in-person class. Include time spent prepping for class meetings, teaching the class, grading and assessing student work, holding office hours, answering student emails, etc. Intentionally schedule an equivalent amount of time per week for your online class. Schedule blocks of time on multiple, non-consecutive days per week, possibly even one weekend day since many online students do classwork on weekends.

Engage in activities that your students can see so they know that you’re present with them.

- Make frequent announcements with module summaries, reminders of upcoming assignments, clarification on learning activities, etc.
- Post in the discussion board in order to engage with your students there. Facilitate their conversation and learning by asking guiding questions, recognizing exemplary contributions, clarifying misunderstandings that may develop in the discussion forums, etc.
- Grade student work and give meaningful feedback.
- Respond to students’ emails and phone calls promptly.

- Send text notifications using an app such as Remind if you don't prefer to use your own phone number.
- Hold optional synchronous videoconference sessions to answer students' questions real-time. These might be scheduled strategically; for example, it may not be necessary to hold virtual office hours every week, but a review session twice during the semester before major exams might be very useful for your students.

What is one new strategy you plan to try engage visibly and frequently with your students? Describe your approach or make a few notes to document your thinking here.

3. Be yourself.

Help your students get to know who you are as a person.

Consider posting photos of yourself or representative images and a short biography with some professional and personal information you're comfortable sharing: family, pets, hobbies, favorite vacation destinations, etc.

Again, write announcements and other class material in your own voice. Let your personality show through wherever possible and appropriate.

Experiment with video and audio to better communicate with your students, both about class material and who you are as a person.

- Capture short, informal video mini-lectures and announcements. Although you may initially feel uncomfortable teaching in this format, with practice you'll improve, just as we become more comfortable teaching in person with experience.
 - Students prefer to see your face and hear your natural and conversational voice; short videos (fewer than 6 minutes long) are optimal for student engagement and learning (Guo et al, 2014).
- Record audio feedback to convey more support and give more information to students than is possible in writing, with no vocal emphasis or intonation. Many Learning Management Systems allow you to record right in the assignment grading screen. Ask your local Instructional Designer or LMS support team for help.

What is one new strategy you plan to try to help students get to know you as a person? Describe your approach or make a few notes to document your thinking here.

4. Put yourself in your students' shoes.

Remember that your students are likely doing their online classwork by themselves, with no one to ask for help in real time, most of the time that they're doing their work.

Design for clarity. Think about places in the class that students may have questions or be confused. Try to prevent confusion in the way you organize the class components.

Wherever possible, explain the context or the purpose of class materials and activities. When we teach in person, we offer lots of transitions and explanations to help tie different concepts and activities together for our students. Add written and media explanations to help your online students understand why they're doing what they're doing, and how class concepts relate to each other.

Get a peer review: ask a trusted faculty colleague or your local instructional designer to look at your online course from a student's perspective. They'll likely suggest possible improvements that you didn't see before.

What is one new strategy you plan to try to put yourself in your students' shoes? Describe your approach or make a few notes to document your thinking here.

5. Make your expectations crystal clear.

We can help our students be successful, and we can reduce anxiety, when we do everything we can to make our expectations clear.

Research shows that transparent assignments help all students be more successful. Mary-Ann Winkelmas founded The Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) higher education project. Visit the TILT website (www.tilthighered.com) to learn more about the research findings and find supporting materials and example assignments.

Provide checklists and rubrics to help your students know exactly what they should do on a task or assignment.

If possible, provide examples of student work. You might provide an “A” paper, with notes or commentary on what was done well, or a “C” paper, which students can review for themselves and submit an assignment in which they identify what that student might have done differently to strengthen the paper.

Create a pre-assignment task in which you ask students to ask any questions they have about the assignment, or summarize in their own words what you’re asking them to do, or create a plan for successful completion of the assignment. Have students turn in this pre-assignment task so you can take the pulse of student understanding and clarify your instructions if needed.

What is one new strategy you plan to try to make sure your expectations are clear? Describe your approach or make a few notes to document your thinking here.

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Example assignment checklist

CHECKLIST FOR ESSAY DRAFT (from studylib.net)

Title

Is the title original and does it capture the essence of the essay?

Introduction

Is hook effective?

Does it grab reader's attention?

Have you provided enough background information?

Is the thesis statement clear?

Does it make an argument or present a central idea?

Body Paragraphs

Does each paragraph have a clear topic sentence?

Do topic sentences relate back to the thesis?

Are all ideas relevant and connected to the main idea of each paragraph?

Have you allocated sufficient evidence to minor and major supporting points?

Are sentences consistent in length and easy to read? (not too long, short, or wordy)

Conclusion

Does it summarize the thesis and key points?

Does it discuss the overall significance or meaning of topic?

Is it convincing and powerful?

Does it make the reader think more deeply about the topic?

Does the conclusion agree with thesis?

Content & Audience

Does the essay answer the question(s) of the assignment?

Does it address a central issue or problem?

Do any ideas need further development?

Does it consider the readers' background knowledge or attitude toward the topic?

Is the point of view appropriate for your purpose?

(1st, 2nd person etc.)

Have you checked for redundancy and eliminated unnecessary words or details?

Are your sources correctly cited in the text and do you have the right bibliographic entries

(Works Cited, References, Bibliography) according to the citation style assigned by your instructor?

Coherence & Unity

Do ideas follow a logical progression?

Is there a central idea that guides your writing?

Do examples illustrate, clarify, explain or support your main idea?

Does the essay maintain a consistent tone, writing style, and point of view?

Have you used appropriate transition words to connect one idea to the next?

Information for this checklist came from: Hacker, D. & N. Sommers. (2012). *Canadian writer's reference* (5th ed.). Boston: Bedford-St. Martin's.

Retrieved from studylib.net

<https://studylib.net/doc/6725741/before-you-hand-in-that-essay--%E2%80%93-checklist>

Speech and Presentation Grading Rubric

Public Speaking and Oral Presentation Component

	Emerging (0-12 points)	Developing (13-16 points)	Advanced (17-20 points)	Score
1. Organization (20 points)	Ideas may not be focused or developed; the main purpose is not clear. The introduction is undeveloped. Main points are difficult to identify. Transitions may be needed. There is no conclusion or may not be clear the presentation has concluded. Conclusion does not tie back to the introduction. Audience cannot understand presentation because there is no sequence of information.	Main idea is evident, but the organizational structure may need to be strengthened; ideas may not clearly developed or always flow smoothly and the purpose is not clearly stated. The introduction may not be well developed. Main points are not clear. Transitions may be awkward. Supporting material may lack in development. The conclusion may need additional development. Audience has difficulty understanding the presentation because the sequence of information is unclear.	Ideas are clearly organized, developed, and supported to achieve a purpose; the purpose is clear. The introduction gets the attention of the audience and clearly states the specific purpose of the speech. Main points are clear and organized effectively. The conclusion is satisfying and relates back to introduction. (If the purpose of the presentation is to persuade, there is a clear action step identified and an overt call to action.)	
2. Topic Knowledge (20 points)	Student does not have grasp of information; student cannot answer questions about the subject. Few, if any, sources are cited. Citations are attributed incorrectly. Inaccurate, generalized, or inappropriate supporting material may be used. Over dependence on notes may be observed.	Student has a partial grasp of the information. Supporting material may lack in originality. Citations are generally introduced and attributed appropriately. Student is at ease with expected answers to all questions but fails to elaborate. Over dependence on notes may be observed.	Student has a clear grasp of information. Citations are introduced and attributed appropriately and accurately. Supporting material is original, logical and relevant. Student demonstrates full knowledge (more than required) by answering all class questions with explanations and elaboration. Speaking outline or note cards are used for reference only.	
3. Audience Adaptation (20 points)	The presenter is not able to keep the audience engaged. The verbal or nonverbal feedback from the audience may suggest a lack of interest or confusion. Topic selection does not relate to audience needs and interests.	The presenter is able to keep the audience engaged most of the time. When feedback indicates a need for idea clarification, the speaker makes an attempt to clarify or restate ideas. Generally, the speaker demonstrates audience awareness through nonverbal and verbal behaviors. Topic selection and examples are somewhat appropriate for the audience, occasion, or setting. Some effort to make the material relevant to audience needs and interests.	The presenter is able to effectively keep the audience engaged. Material is modified or clarified as needed given audience verbal and nonverbal feedback. Nonverbal behaviors are used to keep the audience engaged. Delivery style is modified as needed. Topic selection and examples are interesting and relevant for the audience and occasion.	
4. Language Use (Verbal Effectiveness)	Language choices may be limited, peppered with slang or jargon, too complex, or too dull.	Language used is mostly respectful or inoffensive. Language is appropriate, but	Language is familiar to the audience, appropriate for the setting, and free of bias; the presenter may "code-	

(20 points)	Language is questionable or inappropriate for a particular audience, occasion, or setting. Some biased or unclear language may be used.	word choices are not particularly vivid or precise.	switch” (use a different language form) when appropriate. Language choices are vivid and precise.	
5. Delivery (Nonverbal Effectiveness) (20 points)	The delivery detracts from the message; eye contact may be very limited; the presenter may tend to look at the floor, mumble, speak inaudibly, fidget, or read most of the speech; gestures and movements may be jerky or excessive. The delivery may appear inconsistent with the message. Nonfluencies (“ums”) are used excessively. Articulation and pronunciation tend to be sloppy. Poise of composure is lost during any distractions. Audience members have difficulty hearing the presentation.	The delivery generally seems effective – however, effective use of volume, eye contact, vocal control, etc. may not be consistent; some hesitancy may be observed. Vocal tone, facial expressions, clothing and other nonverbal expressions do not detract significantly from the message. The delivery style, tone of voice, and clothing choices do not seem out-of-place or disrespectful to the audience or occasion. Some use of nonfluencies are observed. Generally, articulation and pronunciation are clear. Most audience members can hear the presentation.	The delivery is extemporaneous -- natural, confident, and enhances the message – posture, eye contact, smooth gestures, facial expressions, volume, pace, etc. indicate confidence, a commitment to the topic, and a willingness to communicate. The vocal tone, delivery style, and clothing are consistent with the message. Delivery style and clothing choices suggest an awareness of expectations and norms. Limited use of nonfluencies is observed. Articulation and pronunciation are clear. All audience members can hear the presentation.	

From Marquette, www.marquette.edu/library/services/oral.doc 2005. Adapted with permission from Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (1998).