

Practical Advice for Going from Face to Face to Online Teaching

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Developing an online course based on an existing face-to-face course requires more than learning how to use the technology and loading the material into the learning management system because, as Catherine Nameth, education outreach coordinator at the University of California-Los Angeles, says, “not everything will transfer directly from the face-to-face environment to the online environment.” This transition requires the instructor to rethink and reconfigure the material and anticipate students’ needs.

Roadmap to the course

Nameth recommends beginning the course design process with the syllabus—the “roadmap” both for the instructor when designing the course and for students when they take the course. “There is a lot that we do as instructors face to face that perhaps we don’t realize we do and don’t realize its importance. In an online course, particularly in an asynchronous online course, there’s not that real-time feedback or guidance. Because of this, I came to regard my syllabus as a roadmap that really defines the course both for myself and my students,” Nameth says. “As students read through it, particularly before registering for the course, they can really get a sense of what the course will be about.”

To that end, Nameth includes information about the following elements in the syllabus:

- welcome message
- objectives
- assignments
- class norms
- communication methods
- technical requirements
- skills needed to take the course
- course structure
- log in information
- technical support

Having an extensive syllabus is important because from time to time student may not be able to access the course management system. For example, some assignments—such as readings from the textbook or essays—may not require students to work within the course management system. When the syllabus contains detailed information about the assignments, students can continue their progress in the course even when they are temporarily unable to access the course management system.

Nameth lists assignments in the syllabus and in the course management system by week and assignment number (e.g., W1 01 refers to week 1, assignment 1), which makes it easier for students to navigate the course.

What works?

Not everything that works in the face-to-face classroom will work online. Some elements will need to be reworked to fit

the medium, and others will require an entirely different approach. “Remind yourself of the purpose of the course—the goals and objectives you set for yourself and the students,” Nameth says.

For example, a discussion activity that you normally do in the face-to-face class may not be suitable to the online format. A substitute may be having students watch a video clip and discuss it in a threaded discussion or write a short essay.

As with the face-to-face environment, once the course is created it will require changes. “I think some people still have the notion that because you’ve taught the course face to face many years it’s easy to [create an online version]. I’ve heard many times, ‘Once I get the lectures recorded and everything uploaded in Blackboard set the way I want it, I won’t really have to work on the course much any more. I won’t have to think about it. It will be easy. This will be a one-time transfer.’ I think that’s definitely a mistake. Just as in the face-to-face environment it takes tweaking. You might need to change your teaching style for a particular group of students. One group may need more scaffolding than another,” Nameth says.

When creating an online course it’s important to have realistic expectations. It would be great to include video clips in each module, but you need to consider the resources required to make that happen and how it will affect the learning experience and the level of support students might need as a result.

Nameth recommends starting with a simple design and focusing on the learning outcomes and guarding against becoming overly excited about what various technologies can do. She recommends looking at the course from the perspective of the instructor, student, and educational technology expert. Access the course as a student and check to see if the instructions are clear, and try to anticipate what kind of support students might need if you include certain multimedia elements.

“Think about keeping it simple, true to your purpose, your learning objectives, and your enthusiasm for the course. When you put in a technical component, double-check the website. Make sure that it’s still working and easy to navigate. If you embed video, make sure that it can be viewed on a PC and a Mac. I do some things that require a Java update. Can I explain to students how to do that? Having one video in there can lead to hours of questions. Ask yourself, ‘If I were a student what would my questions be? What are the possible problems?’ As the instructor you should be prepared to answer those questions or point students to resources that can answer those questions,” Nameth says.

This is not to suggest that you should avoid using a variety of multimedia elements or tools that require some getting used to. They can be essential course elements. For example, in Nameth’s online pronunciations course, it was necessary for students to be able to record their voices, and one of the biggest problems was students plugging in their microphones incorrectly. The first few times she taught the course, Nameth received three to five emails per week (in two courses of 15 students each) asking for help setting up the microphone. Now, instead having to answer each email, she provides students with a diagram and a video that demonstrates the proper way to install the microphone. “The more experience we have and the more pitfalls we encounter, the better we become as instructors and communicators,” Nameth says.

Excerpted from [Online Classroom](#) (Dec. 2010): 1,3.