Top 10 Rules for Developing Your First Online Course

By: [John Orlando, PhD](#) in [Online Education](#)

Years of helping faculty pass to the dark side of online education have taught me a few simple rules that I brow beat (in a collegial way) into all new online teachers.

Rule 1: Provide Extra Detail in Your Online Syllabus

Most of us spend much of the first day of class going through the syllabus, taking time to elaborate on different points, and answering questions as we go along. Online classrooms lack this time, and so the syllabus must be more detailed than it would be for a face-to-face class, especially when it comes to procedures. You can also preempt problems and save time answering questions by creating a discussion forum devoted to common questions about the class itself.

Rule 2: Begin with Community Building

Despite appearances, online education is (should be) a fundamentally communal endeavor, with discussion taking center stage. But discussion requires trust, which can be built through community-building exercises. Some educators even recommend spending the first two weeks on community building, asserting that it will pay for itself in better performance over the remainder of the course.

Rule 3: Design for the Web

I remember building my first online course by transcribing the lectures from my face-to-face course into text. Somehow the students managed to get through them, bless their hearts. But, of course, the online environment is fundamentally visual, built on videos, interaction, exploration, etc. All effective communication requires an understanding of the rules of that environment. Don't view the online environment through the paradigm of the face-to-face environment. Rather, design for the web.

Rule 4: Account for Different Systems

It's easy to forget that web pages operate differently on different browsers, and especially on different devices. Ask your instructional designers to go over your course to confirm that everything will work on different systems. It's a good idea to check in with them before designing content so that they can give you a template that will work.

Rule 5: If Someone Can Say it Better Than You, Then Let Them

The first time I taught medical ethics, I wrote a long description of the Human Genome Project for my students to read. It took me hours and was boring. Then I discovered that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) had a beautiful website covering everything in my document and more. I could have saved myself a lot of time and provided better content by sending them to the NIH website.

Faculty often think they must develop every piece of content from scratch, but nearly all of the information in their head is available somewhere else. Use the web to your advantage by curating, rather than creating, content whenever possible.

If you're new to online teaching, Teaching Online: Essential Elements for Faculty will provide you with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed. Learn more »

Rule 6: Use a Consistent Format

Humans are fundamentally pattern-recognition animals, meaning that we will look for patterns to help guide our actions. Create a template of what you will want from students in each module and follow it. It might be that your modules start with a video overview of the material, links to various content, three discussion questions, etc. Changes in midstream invariably lead to students missing content or assignments.

Rule 7: Remember the Workload Parameters

Some faculty seem to think that they need to "make up" for the online format by assigning extra work, or maybe the cornucopia of material available on the web makes them want to assign all of it, less a student miss some detail that they may need 20 years down the line. Either way, faculty commonly assign too much content in an online class. If you assign too much, students will only view part of it, and the part they choose as more important may not be what you think is most important. Define a workload range and stay within it.

Rule 8: Provide Content in Different Formats Whenever Possible

While the premise that people have different learning styles is somewhat controversial, I've found that different people prefer different types of content. For this reason, as well as ADA purposes, it's a good idea to present content in different formats whenever possible. This could be as simple as providing a transcript to accompany a video.

Rule 9: Mix Content and Activities

One disadvantage of the traditional college lecture is that it separates content from engagement. The teacher talks for 50 minutes or longer, and the students engage with the material later as homework. But this is not how we learn. We need practice and reflection every 20 minutes or so to move knowledge from our short-term memory to our long-term memory. In the online classroom, systems like VoiceThread or Articulate Storyline are ideal for allowing teachers to intersperse activities with their content to enable immediate application and better retention.

Rule of Rules (10): It Takes Longer Than You Think

All faculty members, including me, underestimate how long it will take them to develop online content. I tell faculty to develop their content during the semester prior to the course going live, earlier if at all possible.