

## Online Facilitation -- An Introduction

Distance learning is not new. In fact, over 100 years ago, distance education courses were offered in the United States at the University of Wisconsin. Other countries, such as England, have perfected correspondence courses. In these courses, the student is mailed a textbook and the assignments. The student mails the assignments back to the instructor. If the course is more elaborate, a video is mailed with the book. There is usually no face-to-face contact with the instructor, and there is very little interaction.

The Internet has changed all of this. With the ability of instructors and students to interact via email, discussion boards, live chat rooms, and graphical whiteboards, distance learning has become a very viable, powerful means of instruction. It's so popular, that the Chronicle of Higher Education has reported that most colleges now offer some online courses, and the demand for them keeps growing.

Let's start by looking at some of the ways an online course differs from a traditional one. You'll note that the main difference is that you need to compensate for the fact that you are not physically present. Note that I say *physically*. **You must still be present. I cannot stress this enough.**

In order for an online course to succeed, you must be there for your students. You must be present in the asynchronous discussions. You must be available via email. You'll need to have office hours. You might want to schedule a live chat. In short, your students will get to know you -- and you'll know each one of them -- before the first few weeks are over.

### Differences between online and traditional courses

Traditional courses	Online courses
Many students in traditional college courses offered throughout the United States are 18-22 and are enrolled full-time. Some hold part-time jobs.	Many students are working, have families, and come to the online world with real-world experience. They look for courses that can help them advance in their career or begin a new one. It is interesting to note that they fit the typical City Tech student profile.
Classes meet face-to-face. Students and faculty see each other and can read facial expressions and body language.	Classes can meet completely online or partially online with some face-to-face meetings. Completely online relies on textual (written) contact, as well as graphical images. The telephone can and should be used for any emotionally charged discussions.
The professor sets the pace of the course, and the scheduled time and location of the course determines when the learning will take place.	Students can learn at their own pace. It is necessary for the professor to set deadlines for when students must be at the same point in the course. This is typically done by setting assignment deadlines, as well as deadlines for posting to the discussion board.
The classroom is the meeting place.	Usually, the asynchronous discussion board is the central meeting place. Sometimes a live chat room -- with a scheduled meeting time -- can be used.
Collaborative work is done in the class or in small groups that meet privately.	Collaborative work can be done totally online. Small groups can post to a private discussion area when it is convenient for them.

Guest speakers and experts can visit the class if their schedule permits.	An online chat can be arranged to meet the schedule of a guest speaker. This allows for a zero-dollar travel budget, as well as much more flexibility. Note that Blackboard Collaborate allows you to send an email with the Collaborate link to any guest you choose when you set up the online Collaborate classroom.
Students have access to university resources, such as the library.	Students have access to the library, but may rely on the university providing an online library. The Internet is also used as a research tool.
Assessment, such as exams, are given in the classroom.	Assessments, such as exams, need to be proctored. In the case of the hybrid course, exams can be delivered in the classroom. It should also be noted that assessments that encourage critical thinking, such as essays, eportfolios, and projects should be used more frequently.

### Getting closer to your distance learning students

Think about the first time you encountered a student who challenged and questioned you in front of the entire class. Were you slightly intimidated or were you inspired? Did you react immediately or did you give yourself a moment to reflect on the question and its intent? Chances are, you became deeply involved with the student and wanted to answer the question in a way that was meaningful to the student and the class. One of the key methods of engaging your students online is to add a good deal of interactivity to your course. Common ways of adding interactivity that are unique to the online experience include:

- Short online quizzes with immediate individual feedback
- Online discussions
- Links to sites that encourage student inquiry and research
- Group projects that make use of email and chat rooms
- Web pages created and posted by students
- Wikis
- Blogs

If these Web-based activities become the fabric of your course rather than last-minute add-ons, you can create a structured learning environment that is supportive and productive. Here are some other activities you may use:

Activity	Description
Questioning	The shift is from sage on the stage (lecturer) to guide on the side (facilitator). Questioning strategies that encourage students to discover answers need to be used. Vary questions between very specific ones that reflect an understanding of the subject matter and very open-ended ones that promote critical thinking.
Case Studies	Real-world examples are useful to illustrate concepts.
Collaboration	Students have much experience to share with each other. Since some already hold jobs in the areas they are studying, sharing their work experience can be invaluable.

Role playing	It is useful to have students take a role in solving a problem. For example, one student could act as the dental hygienist and another as the dentist in researching the information that is needed to solve a problem.
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In addition to the activities described above, you should continue to do what has always been successful for you. If you like to use illustrations to make your point, include PowerPoint presentations and graphics. To demonstrate a procedure, use a video clip that you create or use one from YouTube. If you like lecturing or using case studies, post that content on the Web. (Be sure to include all of the anecdotes and comments that made your lectures so interesting.) Don't forget assignments, essays, and quizzes.

Essentially, you don't want to stop doing what has always worked. You just want to improve your courses by refining them and adding greater levels of interactivity.

### **What makes a good online learner?**

Many universities have found that a successful course not only requires a skilled professor, but also needs a good team of students. You might want to screen students before allowing them into your class. Here are some of the qualities you should look for:

- Is the student self-motivated and able to work independently?
- Is the student punctual with assignments? This is critical and one of the most important behaviors of an online learner since most of the problems with online courses have to do with students falling behind.
- Can the student communicate his or her thoughts in writing? The student does not need to be a brilliant writer, just comfortable writing. Of course, better writing skills are helpful and are more important than great computing skills.
- Is the student comfortable browsing the Internet? Note that the student does not need great computing skills, and almost all students are now comfortable using the Internet.
- Does the student have Internet access at home?
- Can the student cooperate and collaborate with other students to complete group projects?
- Is the student willing and able to put in the time necessary to complete the course (usually 10 hours or more per week)?
- Will the student share personal and professional experiences that relate to the course material?
- Is the student a good problem solver, researcher, and strategic thinker?
- Is the student mature?

If your students fall short in any of these areas, you will need to put in extra effort to help them.

### **What makes a good online facilitator?**

Some of the same qualities that make a good student make a good professor. The main difference is that you will have to have a thorough knowledge of your subject material and you will need to be a very skillful communicator.

In the online world, feelings can get hurt more easily. There are no visual cues, no soft voices, no smiles. (Actually, you can use emojis☺, but they can become distracting quickly, so use them sparingly. ) Since

you are mostly relying on text, it is advised that you avoid jokes and humor. If you do use humor, be sure it is not at someone's expense. Beware of being too arrogant, too argumentative, or too anything. This doesn't mean you can't have a personality. However, you need to create a supportive, friendly environment. If you joke, your students may, too. And they may not be as careful as you are. Remember, many online classes have failed because the professor thought they were being funny. The students thought they were being mean, and a few of these cases have come to court.

**Another point I must stress: Create a friendly, supportive online environment through online communication**

Students are not the same online as they are in a face-to-face class. Shy ones are often much more expressive online. The ones who talk most in class might be less visible online and have little to write. You want to encourage everyone to participate in the beginning, so answer the first posts of everyone in a helpful, supportive manner. As time goes on, you will only need to respond to keep discussions going or query students further, but start them off knowing that you are reading what they write and wanting them to succeed. Here are some thoughts:

- Be supportive, respectful, and thoughtful in your responses.
- Try to give as much positive feedback as possible without being gratuitous.
- Keep your questions and comments relevant to the focus of the discussion.
- When quoting another person, mention the person's name. (In Blackboard, you can use the QUOTE button instead of Reply.)
- If a student posts a comment or question that is off-subject, do NOT reply to keep the off-subject conversation going. If you find it continues with other students, you may make a brief comment to draw the discussion back to the relevant topic.
- When a student criticizes a posting, look for anything factual in the criticism and state your understanding of the facts. Highlight what is subjective and emotional about the criticism, and remind students that this is an opinion.
- If a post irritates you, wait a few hours before responding. You need time to think about how to answer the post. Do NOT just react. Remember that posts are meant for constructive exchanges of ideas.
- If you will not be present for a day or two online, let your students know. You will be missed.
- Enjoy yourself. Managing an online discussion is hard work, but if you create a friendly, supportive environment, students will respond well.

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Now let's suppose that the discussion board is thriving with good ideas and many posts. Suddenly, you find you can't keep up with all of the messages. Here are some proven tactics to help students help themselves.

- Consider creating small groups for discussions. Assign a group leader to the small discussions, and rotate this leader. The leader is responsible for posting a summary of the discussion and this summary is graded.
- Share tasks in the small groups, and make groups responsible for different parts of an assignment. Have members of the group reflect on the work of other members. Have the group post a general summary. You only respond to the summary.

- Write privately to individual students who are active participants and ask them to make contact with less active participants.
  - Write privately to any students who do not observe online netiquette.
  - Create a Student Cafe thread where students can freely discuss issues without you needing to respond. Let them know that this is their area.
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If you want the communication to be meaningful, grade it. Here are some final tips:

1. Base part of the grade on communication, but be sure to clearly specify how you are determining the grade. For example, you may require that students submit at least two posts per week and reply to at least one other student to receive a satisfactory grade. Rubrics, which can be found in this module, are especially useful.
2. In addition to discussion groups, consider using blogs, wikis, and chats. You may conduct live chats during office hours, so you are available online at a specific time.
3. You can invite an online expert for a chat.
4. A chat can be useful before a final exam or a midterm. This way, students can collectively express and solve any problems.

I suggest you run your first section of a course in the hybrid modality, so you can still meet with your students and make adjustments before running it fully online. Talk to your Chair about this, too.

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