

ADVICE

Teaching Online Will Make You a Better Teacher in Any Setting



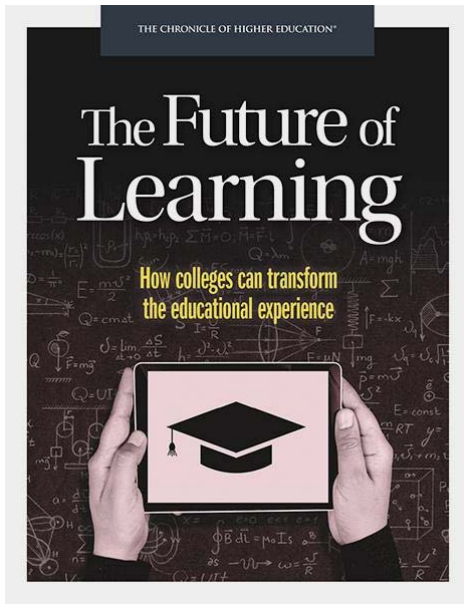
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By Kevin Gannon | SEPTEMBER 02, 2019

When I first began teaching online courses, I did so with a fair amount of uncertainty and trepidation. Could I replicate in a digital environment what I believed was essential for an in-person course? What I learned, however, was that I didn't need to replicate my face-to-face pedagogy exactly. I could find different, albeit related, techniques and practices to achieve a similar outcome online.

That lesson — that an intentional and reflective flexibility was crucial for designing and teaching online courses — was an essential one for me, and the first of many I would learn as I gained experience in the digital realm.

When it comes to online teaching and technology, however, many academics remain leery. They continue to suspect it's where good teaching goes to die. My own experience — as well as that of thousands of other faculty members who've taught dynamic and meaningful online courses — offers a counternarrative. We've found that elements of online pedagogy not only help us become better instructors in a fully digital learning space, but better at the craft of teaching in general.



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It may seem obvious that what makes one a better teacher in one particular setting makes them a better teacher, period. But without thinking about why that's the case, you miss an opportunity to critique and modify, or affirm and expand, the way you operate in a classroom.

Three aspects of online teaching, in particular, have made me a better instructor, no matter the setting. For newcomers to digital classrooms and for the remaining skeptics, teaching online can:

Help you design a better course, and assess it better, too. When I first taught online, I knew that I would have to modify some of the things I'd done over the years when I taught the course in a physical classroom. What I didn't know was just how extensive that modification process would be.

More than just deciding whether something will work the same way in a digital environment as it does in person, teaching online asks you to thoughtfully consider every decision you make about course design and implementation:

- Why did I allocate two weeks to Topic A, but only a week for Topic B?
- What do I really want my essay assignments to help students accomplish?
- Do I need to use exams? Or are there other ways of assessing students' engagement with course content?

In adapting my face-to-face courses for an online setting, I would ask myself those questions. Sometimes I had compelling answers, and other times ... not so much. I discovered that some of the most important aspects of my "traditional" courses looked the way they did essentially by default. For example, my exams tended to replicate the type of tests I'd shepherded in graduate school as a TA, with their emphasis on brief objective questions. Was that really how I wanted to assess student learning? Or were my tests like that because that's "how I've always done it?" Inertia is not a sufficient reason to continue a practice.

Considering whether a teaching technique or assignment would work online sometimes led me to ask if it was really working the way I'd always assumed it had in my face-to-face courses. For example:

- Developing exams for my online students led me to reassess why I used timed, closed-book exams in the first place. Now, whether I'm teaching online or in person, I use redesigned, untimed, open-resource exams because they accurately assess how students are actually learning.

- In my online courses, instead of the usual threaded discussions via the LMS, I expanded my use of blogs, developing a system in which students essentially ran the blog and were responsible for most of its content throughout the course. That method worked so well to spark thoughtful and interesting discussions that I've adopted the blog system in my face-to-face courses, too.

Such modifications were sparked by my teaching a fully online course, but they've now come to shape both the design and teaching of my face-to-face courses, too.

It's never a bad idea to ask yourself why you're doing a particular pedagogical thing, and then to reconsider if it's truly the best way to do it or the only available option.

Reveal the importance of how you "speak" with students. One of the earliest lessons I learned from teaching online was just how much I'd come to depend on nonverbal cues in the classroom. Eye contact, nodding heads, softly spoken *mm-hmms*, slumping in the chairs, heads on the table — those were all reliable indicators of student engagement (or lack thereof) with what was happening in class.

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Online, those cues were unavailable. In an asynchronous course, much of the engagement — between students and the material, between me and the students, between the students themselves — was mediated through text.

Without my usual methods of gauging interest, certainty, confusion, or presence, I had to rethink the types of questions I was asking to spark discussion, as well as the methods I was using to draw students into a particular document or activity. I quickly realized that many of my discussion prompts — that I thought were encouraging deep thinking on a topic in my in-person teaching — weren't actually producing that much deep thinking without me in the room prompting it. On their own in an online "classroom," my discussion prompts often fell flat.

I also learned that an asynchronous discussion could be even richer than a face-to-face one. An online course creates the space for intentionally deliberate discourse to unfold over time. The result: Students' conversations — with both the course material and with one another — are richer and more reflective than in-person. When students had the time (and permission) to really think before articulating their thoughts and responses, the result was a discussion in which participants were genuinely "listening" to one another rather than just listening to formulate a quick response.

I've taken that insight into my face-to-face classroom, where discussions now feature periods of silence as I ask students to free-write their thoughts, or to wait for a certain amount of time before responding to my prompt in order to think through various possibilities. The effects have been significant, especially after students get over their initial discomfort with silence. I've found that class discussions are not only more substantive, but marked by a wider degree of student participation than had previously been the case.

Prompt you to explain things better in *every*course. Teaching online revealed how much I had internalized about the way I did things in class and on my course materials. Things that were obvious to me weren't nearly as clear to my online

students. Things like: Why did I use particular course materials? What was the logic that went into the assessments? What purpose did the final course project serve?

I'd taught these courses in a physical classroom for so long that I assumed the answers were self-evident ("it's on the syllabus!"). In reality, my course materials weren't as clear as I'd always assumed. In revising my syllabi, assignments, and other resources for use online, I found myself having to be much more explicit.

For example, how I framed an assignment's learning goals and described what students needed to do in my online courses was much different than for my in-person classes. Among the factors I had to consider:

- Was I assuming too much about how well students would understand the course materials and assignments?
- Did my assignments, as drafted for a physical classroom, rely too much on the fact that I could answer students' questions after class?
- Should I try to deal with potential uncertainties about an assignment ahead of time, with more careful instructions, instead of expecting students to perform that extra labor?

For me, this process underscored the importance of transparency in all types of teaching — that is, of clearly explaining both (a) why you do things the way you do in your courses and (b) how students might complete the learning tasks in front of them. Once I began making my syllabi, procedures, and assignments as open and explicit as possible for online students, it didn't take long to widen my lens and re-examine those same materials for my face-to-face courses.

I've been giving students more choice in my in-person courses for years — such as offering a range of options for completing a semester-long project. I've even invited them to collaborate with me on setting course expectations — for

example, asking students to help me frame the "rules of the road" for our class discussions. Giving students more say has clear benefits for their learning, yet I had never fully explained the rationale or the benefits to students.

In short, I was asking them to do things in my traditional courses and assuming they understood the benefits. It wasn't until after my foray into online teaching that I stopped assuming that students would "get" the point behind my practices and started explaining the why.

Metacognition is most effective when learners realize they're engaging in it. That deceptively simple observation actually unlocked the full potential of these types of decisions for me. Scholarship in "critical pedagogy" talks about how easy it is to uphold the "hidden curriculum" — the implicit assumptions, biases, and power imbalances that suffuse the structures of our educational institutions — through seemingly routine decisions about, for example, how we present course expectations and learning opportunities to students.

You're on shaky pedagogical ground if you assume that students understand why you want them to do certain things in the classroom, merely because that's the way you've always done them — even if the practices are good ones and come from the best intentions.

Teaching online helped me grasp all of that. Far more than simply "moving material" into a learning-management system (LMS) or some other digital space, teaching online — and doing it well — demands the type of critically reflective practice that can transform you into a better teacher overall. Whether or not you're in the same physical space as your students, you can still work at your craft and develop practices that make for successful teaching and learning in any medium.

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