10x10=100: Best Practices and Lessons Learned from a Decade of Teaching Online Courses

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Abstract

- Drawn from the literature and the Quality Matters rubric as well as the presenter’s own experiences of 10 years of teaching online and in developing 10 courses on a wide variety of subjects
- This presentation will offer a generous number of practical approaches and strategies that can be used to:
  - Enhance instructor-to-student and student-to-student interaction
  - Encourage active learning and accountability
  - Incorporate peer review and self-reflection
  - Assess student learning outcomes
  - Utilize technology most effectively
About the Presenter

- The presenter has been designing and teaching online courses for more than 10 years.
- She has developed 9 online courses for her own school, which cover law, business, technology and ethics (part of legal informatics certificate).
- She also created an online course on music and decorative arts for the American Studies program.
- Several of her courses are required core courses for undergraduate programs and certificates, while others are popular electives.
- Her university’s students are a mixture of traditional-age and returning/adult students and are diverse in terms of gender, race and nationality.
- Campus is part of a large and vibrant urban setting.
Ever since I became aware that something like this was possible, I have been in love with designing and teaching (and taking) online courses.

A novice at first, I have taken many online courses, first through Stanford University and then through a local career services center (Spanish, accounting, drawing).

I participated in both a special training program on my campus to convert two of her existing face-to-face courses to online format (the JumpStart program).

Then in 2007, I took a Sloan–C online workshop on the Quality Matters rubric. (Varonis, 2014)
Problems and Issues with Online Courses

- Misconceptions about online courses – “easier”
- Limited instructor-to-student interaction – can be impersonal – and this allows students to be disengaged.
- Limited student-to-student interaction.
- Lack of peer review opportunities.
- No opportunity for self-reflection.
- Passive learning.
- Lack of student accountability.
- Can be difficult to match student learning outcomes with evidence-based assessment.
- Not using available technology as robustly as possible.
- Not using a framework like Quality Matters (QM) in online course design.
Other Challenges with Online Courses

- Although there were initial concerns about the quality and rigor of online courses, this format is now well-established, but there may still be questions from constituents and the public-at-large.
- Develop once, use course content again and again and have graduate students teach (but not in specialized and fast-changing disciplines like law, technology, informatics, etc.)
- Course caps – set at 50, but optimal number of students is more like 20–30, depending on the course and content.
- Cookie-cutter approach to all online courses as opposed to faculty being allowed maximum creativity and freedom.
Increasing Instructor–to–Student and Student–to–Student Interaction

- One of the underlying principles behind online courses is that student success and student satisfaction are greatly influenced by instructor–to–student and student–to–student interaction. (Varner, 2013; Cuthbertson & Falcone, 2014).
- Group projects and peer review are key opportunities.
- The best way to learn– teach someone else.
- The best way to hone your writing skills, etc. – critique someone else’s work.
One of the significant features of successful courses is the approaches faculty take to really connect with students on an individual and personalized level.

A peer reviewer referred to this as a “low-tech, high-touch approach” because it does not require specialized or fancy technology tools.

The ability to create a “persona” online is reflected in techniques successful instructors use to organize and plan their courses, communicate with students, incorporate collaborative work, encourage self-direction and develop learning relationships between and among students. (Casey & Kroth, 2013).
Incorporate Self–Reflection into Online Courses

- Use a Pre–test at the beginning of the semester and a Post–test at the end of the semester and have students compare their responses and reflect on similarities and differences in their responses.
- Ask students their opinions as part of Discussion Forum questions and why.
- Ask a final, open–ended question at the end of each Discussion Forum, which also provides feedback about the impact that the course is making:
  - Any other surprising or interesting points from Module 5 or the reading assignment.
Increase Active Learning in Online Courses

- One study resulted in a comprehensive set of essential instructional strategies for tools, processes and content development through a trajectory with the goal of creating a virtual community of engaged learners. (Niess & Gillow-Wiles, 2013).

- There are particular issues with how to prepare and provide guidance for online learners, especially if it is their first experience with this course modality. (Vaill, 2013).
One of the hallmarks of successful online courses is a highly interactive weekly discussion forum where students review and provide feedback to each other, provided they are designed appropriately. (Dalelio, 2013; Tran, 2011; Salter & Conneely, 2015; Ekahitanond, 2013; Krull, 2013).

For example, Dalelio found a positive relationship between online participation and student performance in an online discussion board, with students categorized as starters and responders receiving higher grades than activators or latecomers.

Case studies are popular, as are opportunities to search databases, summarize legal cases and articles, evaluate software, etc. – anything that ties the assignment to something related to a career interest.
Set expectations at the beginning of the semester.

If this is your first online course, please understand that the burden is on you to stay organized, to know what needs to be done each week and to pay attention to the deadlines for assignments. I will use the Announcements and Pages features in Canvas to let you know when Modules are available and to remind you when assignments are due.

Try using an Accountability self-assessment questionnaire at mid-point of semester.
Match Student Learning Outcomes with Assessment in Online Courses

- Principles of Undergraduate Learning (PULs) for every undergraduate course at IUPUI.
- Each course has a PUL of Major Emphasis, of Moderate Emphasis and of Some Emphasis.
- PULs of Major and Moderate Emphasis must be assessed and reported – I do this each semester for all of my online courses.
- Student learning outcomes matched to PULs.
- Assignments matched to PULs and student learning outcomes.
- Student learning outcomes for each weekly Module and then tied to assignments.
Encourage Active Learning

- Another feature of successful online courses is real-world assignments, such as case studies, scenarios and using software tools so that students clearly see the connection between what they are learning and their future careers. (Casotti, Benesi, & Knabb, 2013).

- This approach not only promotes course content and critical thinking, but also the value of “soft skills” like interpersonal communication, time management and teamwork. (Myers, Blackman, Andersen, Hay, Lee, & Gray, 2014).
Online courses present an overarching challenge to higher education in terms of how to most effectively integrate technology so that it supports pedagogical best practices and enhances student success. (Marcy, 2014; Keengwe, 2013).

An extensive load of teaching online can result in stress and burn–out, but there are various strategies and resources that can be used to make course development and delivery as streamlined and well–organized as possible. (Portugal, 2013)

Successful online courses **ARE** more labor–intensive than face–to–face courses – don’t let anyone try to convince you otherwise!
I attended QM training session back in 2007, which informed the continued development of my online courses.

QM will now be used to assess all online courses at Indiana University, but especially any courses offered as part of degrees, certificates and programs that are part of the IU Online initiatives.

This includes five of my courses (the legal informatics courses) and will soon include four more courses (as part of the Collaborative B.S. in Informatics).

Additional training on QM in December 2014.

Even if you do not go through the QM training, the eight general standards of the rubric is helpful.
QM: The Eight General Standards

1. Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives (Competencies)
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Instructional Materials
5. Course Activities and Learner Interaction
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility and Usability

See https://www.qualitymatters.org/rubric
Personalize whenever possible.
Give individualized feedback as much as you can, even though it takes time.
Set expectations for how often you check and respond to email, questions, grading, etc.
Online chat room – or any technology available through your learning management system.
Make yourself “human” and “real”. Use your photo and/or an avatar.
Blend in all of the aspects of VARK:
  ◦ Use visual elements, icons, color scheme, images and layout
  ◦ Incorporate audio and/or video
  ◦ Have opportunities for reading as well as writing text
  ◦ Provide hands-on, real world projects, using software, etc.
More Strategies and Techniques

- Students provide feedback to each other’s responses in the Discussion Forum – this increases participation and competition, because the students with the best and earliest responses tend to get the most feedback from their peers.
- This also eliminates students submitting their responses late, because then they don’t get feedback from their peers.
- Discussion Forum questions provide opportunity for students to share their own thoughts, opinions and experiences, rather than just being objective questions about the reading assignment.
- Student accountability questionnaire at mid-semester.
- Keep consistent organization and flow throughout.
More Strategies and Techniques

- Ease fears by having first assignments (first Discussion Forum questions, quiz, etc.) be fairly easy.
- When taping audio, pretend you have an audience. Use good voice inflection, blend in personal experiences and insights, tell a funny story that highlights the material.
- Use the Announcements feature – also protects you when students claim that they “didn’t know that was due then.”
- Give full and timely feedback.
- Thank students for their email, concerns, etc.
- Use the student’s name in feedback:
  - Exceptionally nice responses to the Discussion Forum questions for Module 6, Joe!
More Strategies and Techniques

- Provide something for students to do every week so that they stay engaged in the course.
- Provide weekly feedback so students stay engaged in the course.
- Have online courses parallel face-to-face courses:
  - Modules open even Monday
  - Responses to Discussion Forum questions due on Sundays
  - Timed quizzes
  - Homework assignments due on Fridays at 5:00 p.m.
- In other words, keep those activities flowing!
More Strategies and Techniques

- Be radically, obsessively well-organized – this self-discipline will save you.
- I stockpile relevant articles, blogs, etc. in a binder throughout the year to interleave into my course content, which keeps the material fresh.
- Start with the positives – with acknowledging what the student did well. (This is really important in an online course, where students cannot see your facial expression, body language, etc. – criticize more gently, because the printed words seem to hit much harder and they last much longer.)
- Pay attention to everything – because everything matters.
- Let your enthusiasm radiate!
More Strategies and Techniques

- Take online courses yourself – I do, on a regular basis!
- This way:
  - You practice what you preach.
  - You experience first-hand how other faculty are constructing their online courses and get great ideas.
  - You see online courses from the perspective of a student.
  - You can empathize with students about what it takes to be successful in an online course.
  - There can really be no excuses from students in an online course when the faculty member is also taking online courses!
Botanical Illustration – Cornell University

- Requires weekly drawing assignments to scan and upload
- Substantial and timely feedback from the faculty member.
- Weekly Modules – nice blend of short videos, text, images, examples; very well organized
- Weekly reflective journal.
- Weekly student discussion forum.
- Reading assignments, mini-lectures with examples, short videos.
- First assignments are quite easy – to get students used to drawing supplies and tools, mark-making, etc.
- Lots of activities every week, including finding specimens, visiting gardens, taking photographs, supplemental readings, etc.
Faculty member is very enthusiastic about the subject of the course.
It is clear that she cares about her students.
Course Modules parallel face-to-face courses.
Complete syllabus with student learning outcomes.
Sets expectations for communication, etc.
Consistent organization and flow.
She starts with the positives, but then also offers her criticisms and suggestions.
Clear guidance on expectations, due dates, etc.
Keeps those activities flowing!
Final portfolio: see https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/handle/1805/6647
Acer rubrum

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What Makes an Online Course Successful?

- Gather suggestions from participants.
- Add list to conference website.
What Strategies and Approaches Have You Tried?

- Gather suggestions from participants.
- Add list to conference website.
Any Questions?

Thank you for attending my presentation!
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