

Ten facts of life for distance learning courses

I have been integrating technology into my classroom for twenty years — a Web-based class can't be that much different, right? Wrong! Each learning environment has unique problems and frustrations. Although your classroom experience will be extremely valuable, you will need to adjust how you think about student-teacher communication, class preparation, and many other things you may take for granted in your traditional classroom.

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Whether you are planning a technology course for teachers or a business management course for MBA students, your mission is the same. You want to develop a course where all students can be successful regardless of their prior experiences with distance learning technologies.

The following ten tips review things you already know about teaching but may not have considered as you plan for your distance learning course.

1. STUDENTS ARE INDIVIDUALS

Each student and each class is unique. Never is this more apparent than in a distance learning environment. Each student brings a different level of preparedness for the class, and you must be prepared for each individual.

There will be variations in technology experience, content entry skills, and preparedness for the unique characteristics of the distance learning environment. Some students will enter your course with few technology skills, while others will be Webmasters ready to expand their knowledge. In such an environment students who might excel in a traditional classroom may find themselves disoriented among Web-page readings and frustrated with online discussions. It is impor-

tant to help these students learn to deal with this new class environment. For example, during an initial face-to-face meeting, you might guide students through the online syllabus (see Figure 1), calendar, requirements, and assignments. Demonstrate how they can use the calendar (see Figure 2) to gain access to readings and requirements. Discuss strategies for exploring, skimming, and reading in a Web environment. Talk about the differences between live discussions and listserv interactions. A reassuring face-to-face meeting the first week of the semester can go a long way toward making students feel comfortable.

Although most students have little difficulty getting used to this new method of learning, the adjustment period may be long for some students. As an instructor you must be ready to identify potential problems and respond quickly with appropriate, effective help. You may encounter a student who needs almost daily e-mail support and encouragement, while other students may work independently throughout the entire course.

Be prepared to do some remedial work with students who lag behind from the outset. Like all classrooms, there will be variations in the preparedness of the students to deal with the content of the course. These variations are magnified in the distance learning environment because one-on-one, face-to-face help sessions are not available. Consider a help listserv or Web page where students can post questions and help each other.

2. TECHNOLOGIES CHANGE AND EVOLVE

Be prepared to deal with a variety of technologies that are con-

stantly changing. During any particular semester, new Web browsers will appear, alternative versions of systems will be available, and advanced presentation formats may evolve. Although you may be tempted to take advantage of each new technology as it comes along, consider your students, their skills, and their access to technology. Make sure you and your students are confident in a new product before making a commitment halfway through a course.

Distance learning can take place using many different technologies. While a course may start out as a video-based course, it is likely that one or more additional technologies will be available by the next time you teach it. You might add a Web element and later a threaded discussion page or a live chat. There will often be pressure to use new technology, whatever it might be. You should make an informed decision about whether the new technology really contributes to the course and is worth the learning time, development time, and expense to you and your students. The best way to "Be Prepared" is to continuously monitor your learning environment to be aware of which new technology would be of most benefit.

3. TECHNOLOGY FAILS

Be prepared for failure. Whether it is your Internet connection, printer cartridge, or a video projector, you can be sure it will be down, out, or just plain dead at the most unexpected and inconvenient time.

Distance learning requires contingency planning. Think through what you will do when technological disaster strikes your class. This planning may be as simple as having a spare bulb handy, carrying a

zip drive with a backup disk, or being prepared to postpone a due date if the server goes down. Another approach is to have an alternative plan — perhaps backup technology. Transparencies of a PowerPoint presentation, a print copy of your outline, or a fax machine are possibilities.

This kind of planning is especially important for courses that are dependent on a particular technology. What will you do if the server is down for an extended time? You might, for instance, keep a backup copy of your Web class pages on another server or a hard drive.

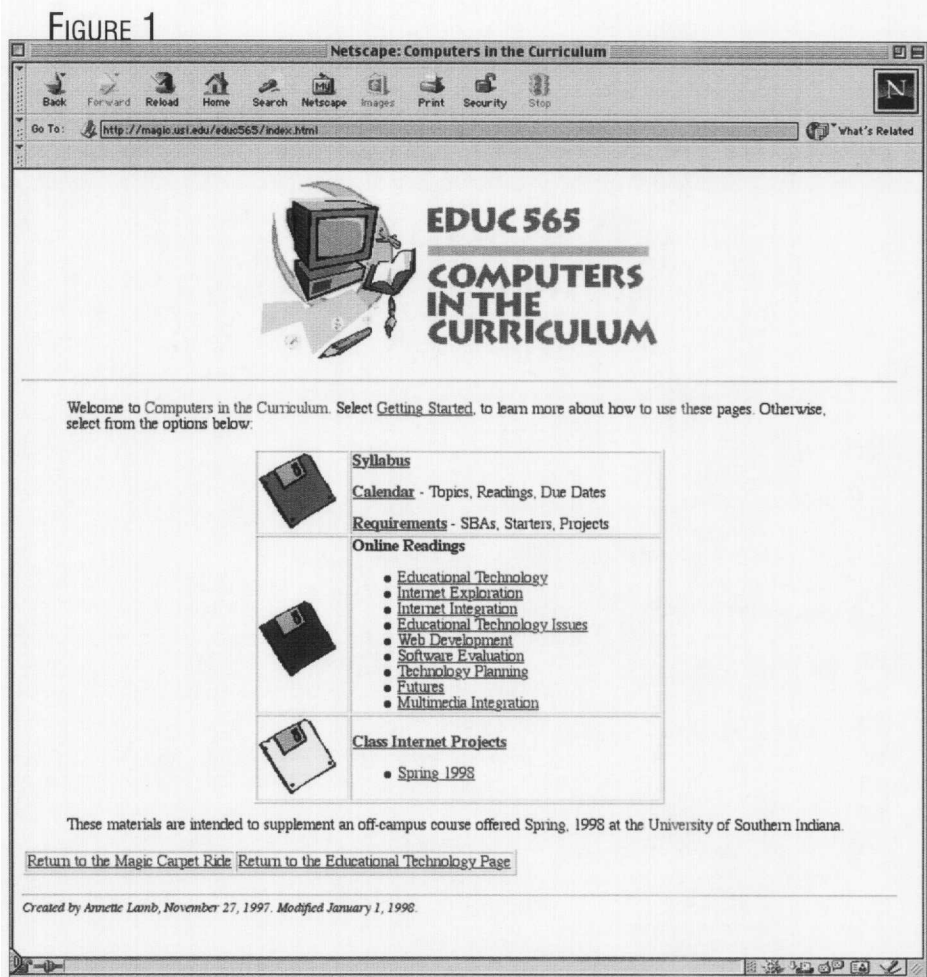
4. PLANNING SHOWS

Careful instructional design and development is critical for an effective distance learning course. The better the planning, the more successful the implementation.

How often have you been just one week ahead of your students? Do you remember developing course materials the night before class? Have you ever run to the copy center five minutes before class to pick up handouts? This type of procrastination does not work in a distance learning environment. All details of the course should be fully planned and prepared before the course starts.

The distance learning environment tends to exaggerate both the positive and the negative aspects of all the elements of instruction. Anything left to chance will become a major pitfall. Any lack of planning will be exposed. Adhering to the basics of instructional design is essential to success in distance learning.

In an Internet-based course it is essential to have the completed Web pages — including activities, projects, readings, and links — in a final form from the beginning. Although in some courses the pages and projects may evolve and build as students make contributions, the skeleton must be in place from the beginning. An active announcement, discussion, or chat arrangement is essential in communicating changes, updates, and evolution of



the site. If your site will be evolving, build in a mechanism to be sure that students are constantly working with the materials. You may find that some students will print pages and not check the electronic bulletin board or announcements as often as you would like.

Good students will appreciate your planning. They like to be able to see the “big picture” before the course begins — including all the assignments, projects, and requirements. With careful planning, the course will run smoothly and students will complete assignments on time with little difficulty.

5. STUDENTS PROCRASTINATE

Establish deadlines for each project and activity ahead of time. You can always waive or alter deadlines, but it is difficult to add requirements after the fact.

It is probably not surprising that a disturbingly large number of students will not do assignments until they are under pressure from a firm due date. This situation, too, is exaggerated in the distance learning environment. Because you are not able to see students regularly, look them in the eye, and remind them to get the work done on time, even good students may wait until the last minute. E-mail messages of reminder do not have the same impact, even if you take the time to send them on a timely basis. Also, students will not always read your messages when you expect them to. Use a course calendar as the core page of your course, and include reading and requirement links as well as specific due dates. Encourage students to turn in projects early rather than on the due dates. Use guilt and competition to your ad-

Figure 1: Course overview from Computers in the Curriculum (<http://magic.usi.edu/educ565/index.html>).

FIGURE 2

Face to Face?	Date	Topics	Web and Book Readings	Due
	1/13	Intro Ed Technology Internet Basics	Educational Technology	
	1/20	Internet Exploration	Read Cruisin' Intro, 1-2	
	1/27	Internet Integration	Read Cruisin' Chapter 3 Internet Exploration	SBA1: Pricing Due
	2/3	WebQuest Exploration	Read Cruisin' Chapter 4-5	Starter A Due
	2/10	Educational Technology Issues	Internet Integration Educational Technology Issues	SBA2: Web Starter B Due
	2/17	Internet Project Development	Web Development	Starter C Due SBA3: Take a Stand
	2/24	Basic Web Page Development		
	3/3	Advanced Web Page Development Educational Software Evaluation	Read Magic Chapter 1 Software Evaluation	
	3/10	USI Spring Break		Starter D Due
	3/17	Educational Software Evaluation		Internet Integration Project Due

Figure 2:
Course calendar from Computers in the Curriculum (<http://magic.usi.edu/educ565/dates.html>).

vantage by praising good work on your discussion list. When students do good work, include a quote or sample of their work in an online discussion. Encourage students to conduct peer reviews and share their experiences. This type of interaction encourages students to get their work in on time.

Although a Web-based course is a great opportunity for a truly self-paced individualized learning environment, we have found that very few undergraduate or graduate students have the self-discipline to set their own deadlines and complete a course in a reasonable amount of time. This is particularly true when they are taking other courses that contain firm due

dates and requirements. It is easy for them to put the "flexible" course on the back burner, and it never seems to get promoted to the front burner.

6. TRACK THEM OR LOSE THEM

Monitor each student's progress regularly. Because you do not see each student in person, it is essential that a planned process be established to monitor students at some specified interval.

If you do not receive an assignment on time, you will have an additional reason to check on a student to be sure he or she is still there and doing okay. Students will "disappear" for a variety of reasons. Illness, personal difficulties, and con-

flicting work schedules are common problems. A student might even move away and not notify you of the change. The more regular your contacts, the more likely you are to hear from the student in these unusual situations. In addition, it is helpful to have multiple ways to contact each student. At the beginning of the class, be sure to get all students' phone numbers and mailing addresses.

Consider using electronic post cards as a way to maintain contact with students. Greeting cards companies like Blue Mountain (<http://www.bluemountain.com/>), authors such as Jan Brett (<http://www.janbrett.com>), and companies such as Troll (<http://www.troll.com/cardworks/index.html>) provide free "post card" services that can brighten a student's day and encourage him to stay on track.

7. STUDENTS APPRECIATE FEEDBACK

It is a student's responsibility to get assignments in on time. In return, it is your responsibility as the instructor to provide prompt, useful feedback.

A process for quick response and appropriate feedback should be planned into the course. This feedback lets students know that you are concerned about their progress and pleased to get their assignments on time. This communication may be through e-mail, fax, snail mail, phone, or Web page posting.

If students are posting their projects on Web pages, you could open a student's Web page and provide feedback right on her page. You could even highlight ideas in red or green text. Some instructors like to post general feedback for the class to see. For example, you might indicate that Susan has cool clip art on her page that everyone should check out or that David's article review contains some important points that everyone should read.

There are at least three common

options for communicating with students through e-mail about their progress. One approach is to respond to student input and inquiry as soon as possible and practical. This option applies the time-management strategy of dealing with paper immediately rather than letting it stack up. In other words, when an e-mail assignment arrives, grade it on the fly, reply immediately, record the grade, and delete the message. You only have to deal with the message once and it is gone. Some instructors find this task difficult, because they need to get into a particular frame of mind to "grade." Others find it difficult to mix tasks. In other words, personal, professional, work, play, and class e-mail is all mixed together, and it may be hard to move from reading a forwarded joke to grading a student project.

Another approach is to set a particular time each week to respond to all accumulated student input and inquiries. For example, you might find that Sunday night is a good time to quietly go through and respond to all student assignments. The problem with this approach is that it lacks timeliness. A student may have to wait for six days for a response to a simple question. Instead of one day, you may choose three days such as Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings at 9AM. If students are aware of your "virtual" office hours, they can plan for feedback during those times.

A third option is to use a separate e-mail account or folder for student assignments. In this way, you can grade projects as they come in, but they are not mixed in with other mail.

You should decide which approach best meets the needs of your students and yourself during each term. The important thing is to set a standard for each class, communicate it to the students early, and follow through during the course. This way, the students will have realistic expectations regarding feedback.

8. TECHNOLOGY TAKES TIME

Whether you are developing the course, reading a Web-based article, doing an assignment, or grading a project, it will take you twice as long as you think. Although there are many times when technology can be a time saver, at least in the beginning technology can be a time drainer.

Students can get bogged down with reading from the screen. They may complain about "all the reading," when the articles they are reading are no longer than traditional articles on paper. Prepare students by discussing the differences between Web and paper reading.

Distance learning students seem to lose a lot of time trying to solve problems that could be answered immediately in a regular classroom situation. Provide students with time-saving strategies. For example, some students do not realize that they can have the Web and a word processor open at the same time for taking notes. If they are having trouble, it may not occur to them to e-mail another student for help. Encourage students to develop a cohort group and coordinate weekly online study groups.

9. ACTIVE LEARNING IS CRITICAL

Active involvement, student interaction, and varied activities are important for all types of learning, but they are essential in working with students at a distance.

Active involvement is critical in learning. Rather than just assigning a reading, get students to do something with the information they are asked to read. One option is to provide Web pages that contain study guides, Web quests, and other activities that use class materials. Rather than requiring that each assignment be graded by the teacher, use self evaluation, peer evaluation, or selective grading. For example, students might complete ten "idea exploration" activities but only be required to submit their favorite five activities for a grade.

Keep students interacting through the use of a class listserv, threaded discussion, or other communication tool. Try to get students to *choose* to participate rather than *requiring* participation. In other words, if the discussions are helpful to their assignments, projects, or learning, they will participate without an assignment that requires them to "send at least three message to the listserv." Start with nonthreatening discussions that help students get to know each other. Consider developing a Web page, or pages, containing the names and pictures of students so that visual learners can "see" their classmates. Another way to encourage interaction is through the use of peer evaluation, help sessions, and collaborative projects.

Vary your class activities. E-mail messages, a listserv discussion, a threaded Web discussion, Web page development, and a PowerPoint presentation may all be assignments within a business management course. Each assignment would focus on a different aspect of the course. The listserv and threaded discussions might be used to synthesize the course reading materials, and the Web page and PowerPoint projects would be used to focus on a particular topic of interest.

10. STUDENTS HAVE GREAT IDEAS

Listen to students. They have great ideas for your course. Encourage them to constantly evaluate the course and provide suggestions. For example, an activity might take twice the time that you planned. Why? Ask your students. Be prepared to trim one assignment, expand another, or cut an activity entirely to meet their needs.

Let students take a leadership role in the class. When things are going well, encourage them to go in expanded directions. If the course is getting off-track, ask students to help refocus activities or assignments. You will be surprised at how motivated they will be when they see that you care enough to involve them in decision making.