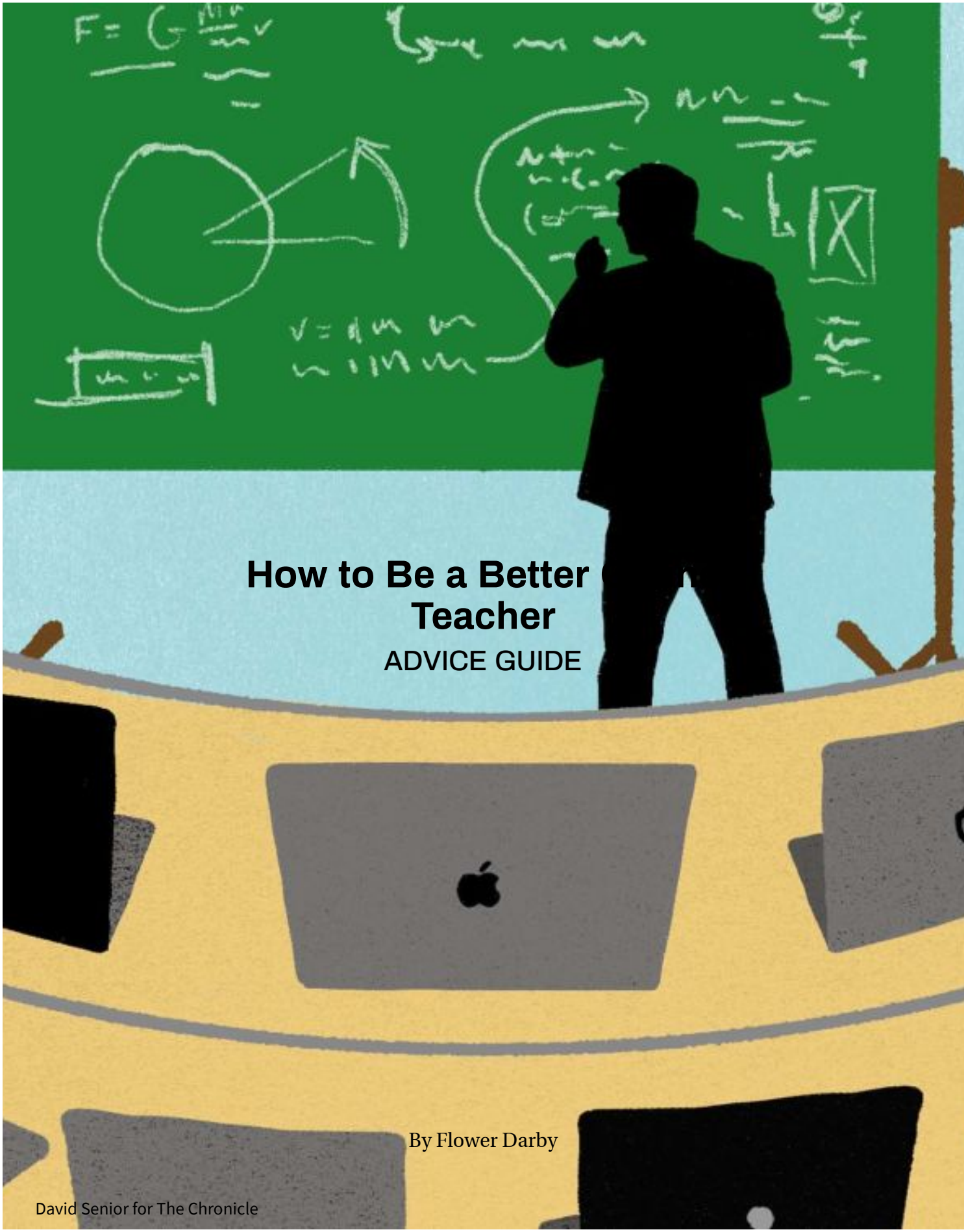


How to Be a Better Online Teacher

ADVICE GUIDE

By Flower Darby

David Senior for The Chronicle

Whether you've taught online a lot or a little, chances are you didn't enjoy it as much as teaching in person. Maybe you didn't experience that fizz after a particularly invigorating face-to-face class. Indeed, according to a 2017 Educause survey (https://library.educause.edu/resources/2017/10/ecar-study-of-faculty-and-information-technology-2017), only 9 percent of academics prefer to teach "in a completely online environment." That means a whopping 91 percent of us don't. And I suspect that a good majority of that 91 percent would prefer to teach anywhere but online.

Clearly, many academics don't see the value of online courses or of trying to become a better online teacher. Almost none of us set out to be great online teachers when we decided to go to graduate school. We've spent years in campus classrooms, but we don't have the same depth and breadth of experience in the online classroom, as either students or teachers. Most of us don't know how to teach online or how to get better at it — and we may not be motivated to learn. Even more likely, we may not feel like we have time to learn.

For all of those reasons, you may not feel fully invested in your online teaching practice. Yet it can be just as rewarding as teaching in a bricks-and-mortar classroom, if in different ways. Good teaching is good teaching.

> *Most of us don't know how to teach online or how to get better at it — and we may not be motivated to learn.*

Which brings me to the purpose of this guide. What you will find here is advice on how to make your online pedagogy as effective and satisfying as the in-person version, including:

- 10 essential principles and practices of better online teaching (#1)
- Common misperceptions (#2)
- How to find help (#3)

Online classes aren't going away — enrollments continue (https://www.usnews.com/higher-education/online-education/articles/2018-01-11/study-more-students-are-enrolling-in-online-courses) to grow (https://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/highered.html) year after year. Further, online

education increases access for students who, with work and family obligations, would not otherwise be able to go to college. Those people are just as much our students as the ones who show up on the campus, and they, too, deserve the best teaching we can offer.

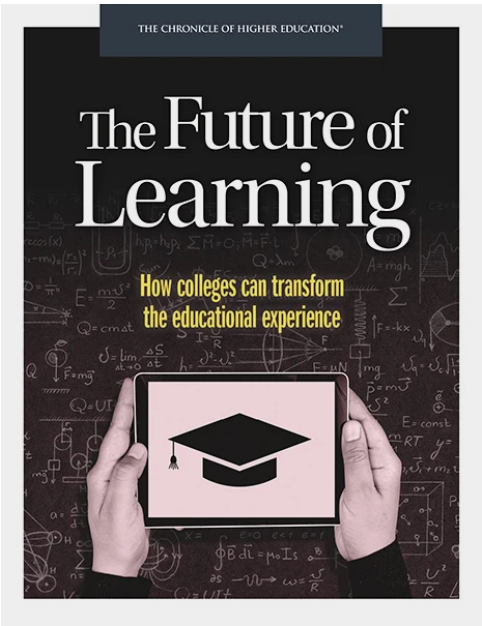
First let's define a few commonly used terms of online teaching.

Learning management system. Otherwise known as an LMS. Online classes typically take place via your institution's chosen learning-management system — a platform that include communication, content delivery, and assessment tools to facilitate the teaching-and-learning process. The specific features of an LMS can vary from campus to campus, but usually you will find the following common elements and functions:

- A grade book to record student progress.
- Web pages or sites that allow you to present text, videos, or links to other sources.
- Assessment tools so students can submit their assignments, or take a quiz or an exam.
- Discussion forums that enable students to engage in conversations about class content with you and with one another.

Module. The most common unit of organization for an online class is a module (it has different naming conventions). If the term is new to you, think of it as tantamount to a unit in your in-person class. Instructors use modules to organize class materials into topics. They're ordered sequentially and contain all course materials and learning activities for that particular topic or unit.

Asynchronous. Most online courses are asynchronous — meaning students aren't all together in class at the same time, and class activities don't take place in real time. Instead, students can complete the tasks whenever their schedules permit. Flexibility is one of the main advantages offered by online education, and a primary reason why many students elect to attend class online.



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The jargon and the setup are similar in many online courses, but there are some differences. For example, some online classes include a synchronous element or two. Some have a small number of students — 30 or fewer — while others have large enrollments, which can be challenging to teach effectively (a difference that also happens to be true of face-to-face courses). Some online courses are entirely homegrown, unique to the individual instructor, while others are highly coordinated across sections or rely heavily on publisher content and activities.

You will also encounter differences among the circumstances of online students. Some are well equipped tech-wise, with a good computer and fast, reliable internet access. Others do all of their coursework in a computer lab on campus. Still others take their laptops to public places with good Wi-Fi (malls, restaurants, libraries) because they don't have internet at home.

Even given such variances in class formats and student circumstances, the fact remains that the flexibility of online education makes it a more accessible option than traditional courses for more than 6.3 million students (https://www.usnews.com/higher-education/online-education/articles/2018-01-11/study-more-students-are-enrolling-in-online-courses), and counting. There are lots of things you can do to be a better online teacher for those students. Read on.

10 Essential Principles and Practices

The teaching suggestions in this guide are not revolutionary. Once you read them, they'll probably seem like common sense. But that's just the point.

Professors often fail to make the connection between what we do in a physical classroom and what we do online. This guide aims to make that connection explicit — to help you think about what you do well in person so that you can do those things in your online classes, too. If you already employ some of these practices, the intent here is to help you think more comprehensively about what else you can do to be an excellent online teacher. With that goal in mind, let's get to work.

Show Up to Class

Fundamentally, good teaching requires you to be in the classroom with your students. When you teach in person, you don't leave students to their own devices. You're with them, engaging in any number of teacherly activities: explaining, guiding, asking, illustrating, answering questions. You arrive early to set up for class. You stay a few minutes afterward to talk one-on-one with a student who needs extra support. You're present and actively involved. You're there for your students.

Many of you haven't translated that to online practice. After all, when teaching in person, you have a set schedule for when to be in class. That schedule also may determine the weekly blocks of time during which you prepare for class and grade students' work. But such a set framework does not exist for an online class. And without intentional planning, you may go several days at a time without engaging in teacherly activities with your online students.

Instead, create a schedule for meaningful and active involvement in your online classes. For example, how many hours a week do you spend teaching an in-person, 15-week course? Maybe it's 10 hours a week, on average — combining the time you spend in the actual classroom with the time you devote to prepping and grading (and, of course, even longer after major assignments and tests).

Schedule the same amount of time each week to be visibly present and engaged in your semester-long online class. And I do mean visible, meaningful engagement. Here are some ways to do that:

- Post a weekly announcement to provide an overview of the coming week's topic or a recap of the previous week's work, or both.
- Respond to questions posted in an online question-and-answer discussion forum or sent to you by email.
- Hold online office hours according to a schedule, by appointment, or both.
- Post a quick video to clarify misconceptions about a class topic or assignment.
- Grade and return students' work in a timely fashion.
- Talk with students in online discussions.

When you are regularly present and engaged in the online classroom, your students are more likely to be, too.

Be Yourself

Most professors enjoy teaching in person because of the opportunity to interact with students, share our passion for a subject, and watch understanding dawn on their faces. Some of us, admittedly, enjoy the performative aspect. We feed off the energy in the room. We use it to fuel our own energetic communication. Many of us have a unique teaching persona — different from the person we are in a hallway conversation or in a department meeting. We employ humor. We vary our delivery to best effect. We pause. We raise our voices. We gesticulate for emphasis.

In an online classroom, your teaching style can get lost in translation. Although this is beginning to change, it is still the case that a primary means of communication in an online course is the written word. A wall of text can be dry and demotivating to students. Where is the vocal intonation? Where are the facial expressions? How do you stride up and down the front of the room to help make your point?

The solution, by the way, is not to post a video of yourself delivering a standard lecture in a classroom. The physical energy gets lost in that medium, too. Instead, capture your personality and your passion in ways that are different from what you might do in person, yet authentic.

Written content is inevitably part of any online course, but strive to use a unique voice in your writing. Mini-lectures, assignment instructions, answers to questions, weekly announcements — you can write those in such a way as to represent your true self:

- **Infuse your writing with warmth.** Convey your support. In your weekly announcement, for example, don't write, *"Some of you have skipped the past few quizzes. You won't pass this class if you continue to do so."* Instead, write, *"Thank you for your work in this class. I know it's a lot to manage. Just a reminder, make sure you're taking all the quizzes to help you be successful here. Please contact me if I can help or answer any questions. Thanks!"*
- **Be human.** Sometimes the inherent distance between professor and student in an online class infects your written communication. But you needn't write in a detached tone. Instead, practice immediacy. For example, at the end of a set of assignment instructions, you could write, *"If you have any questions at all about what you are supposed to do on this assignment, please remember I am here to help. Reach out any*

time so I can support your success." That is more friendly, more caring, and more reassuring than, *"Questions? Post them in the Q&A discussion forum."*

Recording yourself whenever possible is another great way to bring your whole self to class. Whether by audio or video, capture your expertise, your empathy, your teacher persona in a way that comes across with much more impact than in writing (again, I don't mean videos of you lecturing). These recordings don't have to be professionally produced, and you don't have to have a video in every module. Instead, start small. For example, record a quick introduction and greeting to include in the "Start Here" module of your course.

Many learning-management systems include a built-in feature to record audio and video. Or you can capture a quick video on your smartphone using the YouTube app or similar. Either way, experiment with providing guidance and instruction via the technology tools you have at hand.

Students appreciate seeing your face and hearing your voice. Don't worry about making sure every stray hair is in place. If you trip over your tongue while recording, that's OK, too. Pause and start again. After all, you're not always perfectly polished and articulate in the classroom, are you? Those little foibles make your recordings authentic. They show you're a real person. Students need to know you in order to engage with you online. So look for ways to be yourself via technology, just as you do in person.

Put Yourself in Their Shoes

Your online students aren't physically near you or other students when they're "in class." Most do their coursework when they are alone, whether at home or in a public space with Wi-Fi, like a library or a coffee shop. They can't turn to a neighbor for help or raise a hand

to ask a question. That leads to a strong sense of isolation and creates a need for support — different from the kind you offer when you teach in person.

In a physical classroom, you can pick up on nonverbal cues. Are students bored? Tuning out? Confused? You can observe the signals and adjust what you're doing. When students are taking class at home, puzzling over your explanation of a complex concept, you're not there in real time to allay their confusion. You can't observe when you've lost their attention or when your instructions aren't clear. Yet you want to support them just as you would in a campus-based classroom.

How can you do that? By anticipating their isolation and planning for it in your course design.

Imagine that you are the student, on your own, trying to make sense of what is in front of you on the screen. Get outside your own head — where your online class makes sense and everything is clear. Instead, try to envision how your students are experiencing the class. I will talk in more detail below about each of these, but for instance: Are your instructions clear on how long students' discussion posts should be, and on how they should cite sources? Do you include a detailed grading rubric? Do you provide an example of a successful final project, so that students can see your expectations and don't have to muddle through while they wait for a reply from you?

> *In a physical classroom, you can pick up on nonverbal cues. When students are taking class at home, you can't observe when you've lost their attention or when your instructions aren't clear.*

Better yet, have a trusted colleague evaluate your online class. Ask experienced online-faculty members or campus instructional designers to go in and poke around as if they were students. You'll be surprised at what they might see that you can't — a confusing organization of course materials, an overly intimidating tone in textual instructions, a lack of clarity on what to do first to get started with the course. Use their observations to help you make a few tweaks.

Ideally, students should know exactly what you are teaching and what they are supposed to do as a result. That rarely happens by accident, though. You must be intentional, put yourself in your students' shoes, and design for clarity. This principle should guide your

practice for the next few suggestions.

Organize Course Content Intuitively

Try to think like a student when you organize course materials. Commonly, online students become confused, frustrated, and disengaged simply because you or the campus LMS have made it too hard to find the content and activities. When students use a lot of cognitive resources just trying to figure out where to go to access readings, videos, discussions, or quizzes, they have little mental energy left for the content itself. Discouraged and/or irritated students are less likely to learn.

Once again, compare the organization and support services of your in-person courses with what you provide in your online teaching. In both contexts, there should be a method to your madness that is not hidden from students. The design and sequence of content and learning activities in both realms should be methodical, systematic, and purposeful.

> *If they have to click out of a module and into another folder to watch a required video, that can be distracting — or frustrating if it's hard to find.*

In person, you have the advantage of giving verbal explanations, reminders, and nudges. Since that opportunity doesn't exist in quite the same way online, you need to give structural support to head off points of confusion. To identify those points:

- Activate the student-preview function (most LMSs have this feature) and navigate your course as if you were new to online learning in general and to your LMS in particular.

- Is it clear where things are found? Note times when it's not immediately evident what a student should do. In some LMSs, for example, a text heading may actually be a link that students have to click to access a content page or assignment. The need to click to get to more information might not be clear to them. When possible, add a simple line of guidance: *"Click the link above to access the assignment submission area."*
- Remember, online students can't generally ask a quick question in real time. Remove any opacity brought on by the design of the LMS by giving quick pointers wherever you can.
- Think about how the use of menus, modules, folders, and other organizing structures helps or hinders students' progress through the course. Strike a balance between scrolling and clicking. Students should be able to access content, assessments, and learning activities without constantly clicking more and more links. Equally important, use LMS tools such as folders and pages to keep things organized. An online course should not be one giant website of endless scrolling. Nor should it be a warren of nested and subnested folders. Aim for a good mix of navigational approaches so students experience neither scrolling nor clicking fatigue.

Strive for a course organization that is clear, methodical, and intuitive. Help students move through content and activities smoothly and seamlessly, so that their attention remains focused on learning the material. If they have to click out of a module and into another folder to watch a required video, that can be distracting — or frustrating if it's hard to find. Similarly, requiring students to exit from a sequence of content pages and access a quiz by navigating to a different location wastes time and mental energy. Instead, try to order materials and activities such that the flow makes sense for someone new to the course. Ask an online-savvy colleague for help if you are too close to the content and unable to see it from a newcomer's perspective.

Add Visual Appeal

Online courses suffer a well-earned reputation of being ugly, dry, boring, and unappealing. Humans are more likely to want to be in a space if it is pleasant to look at. Plenty of students would rather learn in a new building than in a dingy lecture hall that hasn't been renovated in decades. The appearance of our surroundings affects our enjoyment and therefore our engagement.

That's why you need to give serious thought to the way your online courses look. You may be surprised at the impact a few small touches can make.

When thinking about the visuals of an online class, look to your favorite websites. Study the layouts of books and magazines that you enjoy. A great deal of thought has gone into their design. Why not apply this philosophy to an online class?

> *Online courses suffer a well-earned reputation of being ugly, dry, boring, and unappealing.*

You don't have to be a graphic designer to enhance course appearance. A little attention to presentation goes a long way. Do you have a lot of written lecture notes or instructions? Break up long chunks of text with subheads and space between paragraphs. Embed relevant images. Include thumbnail videos that you've either created or sourced from YouTube, news sites, or library resources. Aim for attractive yet appropriate.

Not sure where to start? Many institutions have media designers who can help. Or approach the campus teaching center or the LMS-support staff. An online course that is visually appealing (or at least not completely ugly) helps students to engage more frequently and more meaningfully. Unfortunately, public links to visually effective online courses are few, but here's an example (open in view-only format): "Modern Mythology and Geek Culture (https://resources.instructure.com/courses/12/pages/course-home-page)." Notice the visual impact of the home page, then click around to observe its logical, student-friendly organization.

Note: All visuals should be accessible to all students. Use the formatting tools in your text editor, such as heads and subheads, to enable screen readers (https://webaccess.berkeley.edu/ask-pecan/what-is-a-screen-reader) (a tool to help blind students). Pictures, graphs, and formulas need alternate text descriptions (again, for screen readers). Videos should be captioned or a written transcript provided. Principles of

Universal Design for Learning (https://medium.com/udl-center) show us that such supports benefit all learners, not just those with disabilities. Work with your local instructional designer and disability-resources specialist for help on this front. By no means should you deny students access to any content just because you want your course to look nicer. Work with the experts on your campus to ensure good looks *and* accessibility.

Explain Your Expectations

When you're standing at the front of a classroom and you assign a task, a paper, or a project, you don't simply hand out written instructions and not say a word about the assignment. Nor do you display the instructions on a PowerPoint slide without explaining more about what you are looking for and what students should do to succeed.

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Yet that is what often happens in online classes: The only instructions come in the form of written text. You might think your writing is clear, but what's missing is the kind of nuanced explanation that you routinely provide in a physical classroom.

Remember, online students typically work by themselves. They can't ask for, or receive, clarification in the moment they first encounter your assignment instructions. Which is why you need to explain what you're looking for as clearly as possible in an online class.

But don't go to the other extreme and create tomes of written instructions, overly detailed directions, pages and pages of material that students won't bother to read. In that case, you haven't really solved the problem. Aim for a balance between thorough and digestible. Here are a few ways to do that:

- Write down the directions as if you were having a conversation with a student, so they don't read like a textbook.
- Create an informal two-minute explainer video to flesh out some details of an assignment.
- Provide a rubric.
- Share an example of student work that earned top marks. Maybe even share an example of mediocre work so students can compare the two.

In short, provide as much meaningful support as you can — without going overboard — so that students don't have to guess what you want them to do.

Scaffold Learning Activities

When you teach in person, you do a lot of modeling that you may not even be aware you're doing. For example, when you demonstrate how to solve an equation, you're explaining your thinking process. When you share examples and analogies, you're showing how you connect concepts for deeper understanding. When you ask critical questions, you're modeling how thinkers in your discipline make sense of theories and approaches.

You explain things — step by systematic step — to help students learn and perform successfully on tests, projects, papers, and other assignments.

> *Look for ways to break down complex tasks so that students make timely progress and receive feedback while there is still time to adjust their approach.*

That kind of modeling and "scaffolding" doesn't happen quite as naturally in online classes, where real-time interactions are limited. To help students succeed, you must be creative. Scrutinize your assessments, both large and small. Have your students had the opportunity to build — step by step, as they would in an in-person classroom — the knowledge and skills they will need do well on those assessments?

Here are some examples of how to scaffold activities in an online course. When possible, make these an opportunity for you to give incremental feedback so students know whether or not they are on the right track:

- Let's say you want students to record a video presentation of their research topics. It's hard enough to give a good presentation without the video-recording element. So help your online students gain practice with the technology *before* they have to use it for a high-stakes project. For example, in the first week or two of class, give them a low-stakes, low-stress assignment: Ask them to record and post a two-minute video introducing themselves to the class.
- As part of an orientation module, ask students to send you a message using the LMS messaging/email system so they know how to do this later in the class if they have a question for you. Ask them to answer a question about the syllabus or to list two goals for their learning in the course. Reply with a short personal greeting so they know you received the message and are available to help.
- During Week 1, ask students to upload a PDF file of their handwritten work solving the first step of a problem. This exercise will help them learn how to turn a photo on their mobile device into a PDF file, and how to submit it as an assignment in the LMS. It's a good way correct any missteps early on.
- At the beginning of the first module, ask students use one of the many free mind-mapping tools (https://mashable.com/2013/09/25/mind-mapping-

tools/#mFOqTnYzx8qD) available on the web to create a concept map of what they already know about the course topic. Then, at the end of each module, assign students to create a summary concept map to help them make sense of each topic.

Look for ways to break down complex tasks so that students make timely progress and receive feedback on their work while there is still time to adjust their approach if needed.

Provide Examples

During an in-person course, if students raise their hands and say they just don't get some concept, you find another way to explain it. You come up with examples, maybe from another realm of life. That variety of examples and explanations helps learners grasp the information in a way that makes the most sense to them. Examples are even more crucial in online teaching.

Consider the first time you taught a college course. Maybe you borrowed a syllabus from a previous instructor to guide you in developing your own. Likewise, the first time you taught online, you may have relied on someone else's content in the LMS so that you didn't have to start from scratch. Those of you who had to create your first online class without any model to emulate know how challenging it is to produce something entirely new.

Online learners, too, benefit from multiple explanations of difficult concepts and multiple examples of the kind of work you want to see. Among other options, you might:

- Source existing videos that put another spin on a particular topic.
- Record a short guest-lecture video to let students hear from another expert in your field.
- Structure ways for students to explain new information to one another — as novice learners, they may come up with examples and illustrations that make more sense to their peers than your explanations do. For example, you could assign semester-long

groups of two and ask students to interact with their partners every week by phone or text to explain course concepts — in an introductory psychology class, for example, how neurons fire in the brain. Students could submit a short summary of their work with their partner and tell how it helped them better understand that week's concepts.

How many examples should you provide? Lots of them, wherever possible. You may want to make some examples optional or supplemental, for students who want more help. Requiring all students to read or watch multiple examples and explanations may feel like busy work for some.

> *How many examples should you provide? Lots of them, wherever possible.*

In addition to sharing explanations of concepts, give as many examples of previous students' work as appropriate. Show their full work or just pieces. For a persuasive essay, you can show examples of effective introductions; for a complex clinical process, provide work showing only the first step.

In your teaching and writing for the course, model the kind of work you wish to see. For example, use a professional yet conversational tone in your discussion posts. Demonstrate how you respect and value diverse perspectives. When you show students what you're looking for, they're likely to be more confident in their ability to succeed on a task, which in turn increases their motivation to engage meaningfully.

Make Class an Inviting, Pleasant Place to Be

Ask yourself: Do you enjoy going into your online classroom? Do you like being there? Do you look forward to communicating with your online students in the same way you look forward to interacting with students in a physical classroom?

Those are hard questions, but they shine a light on an important issue for many faculty members. If we're honest, many of us would have to say that we *don't* enjoy being in our online classes as much as we enjoy teaching in person. Indeed, that could help explain why only 9 percent of us prefer to teach online exclusively. We simply may not enjoy being there as much.

If you struggle to enjoy the online learning environment as an instructor, it's not hard to imagine that this struggle is even harder for students.

> *When you teach in person, you do a lot of things to help students feel welcome. You greet students. Smile. Make eye contact. Apply that same principle to your online classes.*

When you teach in person, you do a lot of things to help students feel welcome and comfortable in the classroom. You greet students. Smile. Make eye contact. Answer questions. You show your support in countless ways. Even when the physical classroom is not particularly attractive, you do a lot to improve the atmosphere in the room to make it more pleasant and therefore more conducive to learning.

Apply that same principle to your online classes. A deliberate effort to make them more inviting and pleasant is likely to result in more interesting classes. Students will want to be in your online class if you:

- Use plenty of visuals, media, interactive tools, and learning activities.
- Streamline course organization and navigation. Organize the furniture in the room, so to speak, to create maximum flow. (The proprietary nature of most online courses makes it difficult for me offer open examples of what I mean, but the "Modern Mythology and Geek Culture (https://resources.instructure.com/courses/12/pages/course-home-page)" course I've already mentioned illustrates many of these design strategies.)
- Convey positivity and optimism that students can succeed.
- Demonstrate compassion and caring for your busy online learners.

- Respect their time and engagement by being present and engaged yourself.

By making your online class more enjoyable, you make students want to show up. And students have to want to be in class before they can learn anything.

Commit to Continuous Improvement

A hallmark of good teaching is the desire to keep getting better at it. Bring that zeal into your online classroom the same way you bring it to your campus classroom. Invest a little time and energy into developing as an online teacher. Even small efforts can have a big impact.

Compared with teaching in person, online teaching is still rather new, but there are things you can do to improve and find fresh ideas to try:

- Participate in workshops offered by your institution's teaching-and-learning center.
- Join book-discussion groups with your colleagues to delve into books about effective online-teaching strategies.
- Subscribe to teaching-related newsletters, such as Faculty Focus (https://www.facultyfocus.com/) and *The Chronicle*'s Teaching Newsletter (https://www.chronicle.com/page/Get-the-Teaching-Newsletter/709). Sometimes they feature articles specifically related to online teaching; other times, reading about a new approach in the physical classroom leads to an idea for your online teaching.
- Explore best practices presented in the Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository (https://topr.online.ucf.edu/).

Demonstrate your commitment to student success by pursuing your own professional development from time to time.

Common Misperceptions

Many dedicated online teachers have figured out some good approaches, but mistaken ideas about online learning persist. Here are some of the most common.

"Online classes are like slow cookers: Set and forget." Despite the efforts of leading online educators and educational developers to debunk this myth, many faculty members still treat it as gospel, consciously or not. Perhaps in part because online courses take so much preparation before the first day of class — ideally, all content (assessments, activities, prompts) is created in advance and in place for a turnkey experience — many academics seem to believe that students should be able to walk themselves through an online course without much active guidance from the instructor.

That is a recipe for disaster.

In the early days of online learning, many online classes were treated like electronic correspondence courses. Students worked through the content alone, submitted their assignments, and received grades only after they had completed the entire course. For some people, correspondence courses work. But they take a high level of motivation, which other online learners, struggling to balance work and family obligations, simply can't muster on their own.

> *Many academics seem to believe that students should be able to walk themselves through an online course without much active guidance from the instructor. That is a recipe for disaster.*

Instead, plan to guide your online class actively and frequently. Just as you advise your students to do, block out time in your weekly calendar as if you were attending class in person. Post announcements, give further explanations, provide tips on forthcoming assignments, answer questions, reply to online discussion posts, grade students' work. When teaching in person, you don't expect students to proceed without regular guidance. The same need for continuous faculty involvement holds true online.

"Online students are lazy/disengaged/(insert negative adjective here)." Many online students *are* prone to minimal engagement or drifting away from class altogether. Does online education attract a certain type of personality, people who are not highly motivated to succeed? Or have we inadvertently created conditions online that contribute to student disengagement? Things like:

- Confusing and unappealing course designs.
- A shortage of faculty expertise in excellent online instruction.
- The inherent technical challenges of learning online.
- A student population that tends to be working and/or raising children while pursuing degrees.

With that combination of circumstances, it's not surprising that some online students do only the minimum required.

Online learning requires high-level executive-function skills that some students may not possess. The lack of social and logistical support that is an inherent part of in-person education — where students interact with the instructor and their peers on a regular basis inside a physical classroom — means that online students must be able to manage their time well, motivate themselves, direct and regulate their own learning, and seek appropriate help when needed. But often they simply can't do all of that on their own, and online courses are their only option to a degree.

Good online teaching requires you to make an extra effort to help those students persist, learn deeply, and experience transformation as a result of your online classes. That takes some awareness of the challenges of online education. It takes careful thought. Planning. Caring. But it *can* be done. And it seems well worth doing.

"Online classes don't work." Almost half of the 13,451 faculty respondents in the 2017 Educause survey (https://library.educause.edu/resources/2017/10/ecar-study-of-faculty-and-information-technology-2017) on faculty and information technology don't agree that online learning is effective. About 45 percent of faculty respondents said that students don't learn as well online as they do in person. In short, they believe that online education just doesn't work. But we have plenty of evidence that online courses can produce student-learning outcomes comparable to those of in-person courses.

Note my use of the word "can." Much like the best in-person courses, the high-quality online versions require excellent online teachers. It's on us to design and teach those highly engaging and effective online classes.

"Teaching online is not as enjoyable as teaching in person." We all know that many academics don't perceive online teaching to be as rewarding as teaching in person. But could that be because we aren't doing it right?

If you find online education to be unsatisfying, that might be because the activities you undertake when "teaching" online resemble administrative tasks more than dynamic co-construction of new knowledge with students. You log in to grade student work, check boxes, go through the motions, manage operational functions. No wonder it doesn't seem fulfilling. Those activities are drudgery.

But online teaching can certainly be rewarding — if in ways different from the face-to-face version. My own experience is a case in point: Most of my online students are working and caring for children or other family members. They're taking online classes because it's the only way for them to earn a degree and improve their lot. One of my students, who was serving in the Air Force, recorded his video introduction from his young daughter's pink-and-purple "princess" bedroom. Yes, he was a little embarrassed, but I was impressed — no, moved — by his resourcefulness. It was the only room in the house where he could find a few minutes of quiet during the family evening routine to do his classwork. So he swallowed his pride and greeted us from the floor of his little girl's bedroom, surrounded by toys and dolls. You just don't get those glimpses into your students' personal lives, those tangible experiences of the challenges they choose to overcome, when teaching classes on campus.

Embracing those differences — the advantages of online classes, the technological opportunities afforded by a classroom without walls — is how we find joy in teaching online.

How to Find Help

Ideally, you're now energized to reinvigorate your online teaching. There's no need to go it alone. Take advantage of resources and support as you seek to grow in this pursuit.

Make friends with your campus instructional designer. You are an expert in your subject matter. Instructional designers (like me) are expert in effective online teaching and learning. Collaborate with this often underutilized colleague to refine your approach. Maybe you attend a workshop, meet for coffee, or pick up the phone for a 15-minute conversation about a new idea. Whatever your preference, this person can significantly improve your experience and satisfaction with teaching online. Go ahead. Give us a call.

Seek an experienced online teaching mentor. Teaching online is a skill different from teaching in person. Find someone who does it well. Learn from that person's expertise. Emulating the example of someone in the online-teaching trenches — who is not only surviving but thriving — can be transformative.

Connect with colleagues who are trying to be excellent online teachers. Interacting with others who are grappling with the same teaching issues can lead to important new insights and ideas. Propose that a five-minute tip about online teaching be a regular agenda item at department meetings. Join a book-discussion group on excellent online teaching. Attend workshops, showcases, and conferences to learn what others at your institution and elsewhere are doing in online education. Talk with your fellow online educators, learn from their approaches, and contribute your own ideas. We're all in this together. Let's commit to learning from and with one another.

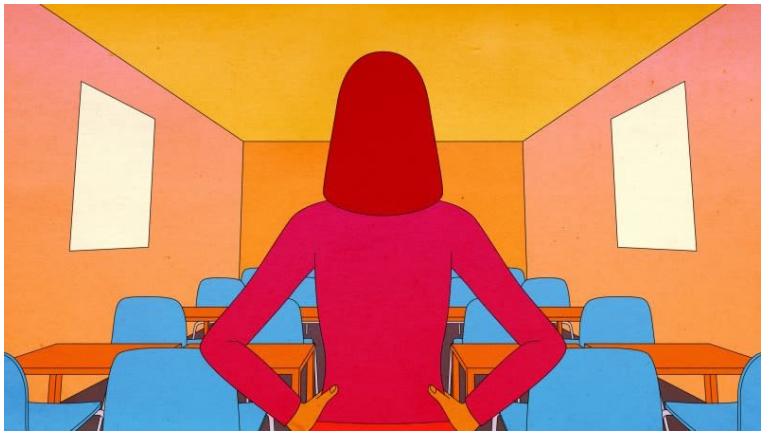
At this point, you may feel overwhelmed by all the ways of improving your online teaching practice. So start small. Pick one thing. When you have that down, choose another. Continue step by step, always striving to get better for the sake of your online students' learning and success. With some effort, with creative thinking, with curiosity and courage, you can discover the fizz of teaching within an online classroom.

Flower Darby, a senior instructional designer at Northern Arizona University, teaches online courses at the university and at Estrella Mountain Community College. She is the author, with James M. Lang, of Small Teaching Online, *forthcoming from Jossey-Bass. Find her on Twitter @flowerdarby* (https://twitter.com/flowerdarby) *or email her at flower.darby@nau.edu* (mailto:flower.darby@nau.edu).

More Advice Guides

How To Create a Syllabus

There's never a bad time to re-examine and rethink how to write your syllabus. This guide walks you through everything you need to know, with specific tips and strategies, to craft an effective syllabus.



How To Teach a Good First Day of Class

The first day of class is crucial both for your students and for you. This guide will help you make opening day as effective as possible.

How to Make Your Teaching More Engaging

Stimulate your students' curiosity — and help them learn — using the tried-and-true techniques in this comprehensive guide.

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