

Title: **How to Be an Effective Online Instructor?**

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Abstract: Drawing evidence from a survey study she conducted in her own online classes as well as from current literature, the author, who has developed and taught several MA TESOL online courses, argues that the effectiveness of online instruction is not determined by the technology but by the instructor. An effective online instructor is one who is truly devoted to the success of the learner and who understands the dynamics of virtual learning. Several factors are identified as essential for effective online instruction: clarity of course design, instructor's accessibility and presence, timely feedback, and learner's sense of learning community. The article then focuses on specific strategies, based on the author's years' online teaching experience, on how to design a well-organized online course that contains substantial instructor input; how to be an effective communicator in a virtual classroom; and how to provide timely and constructive feedback for students' academic work, especially for asynchronous online discussion, which is a major learning vehicle in an online class. (164)

A recent study (Allen and Seaman, 2007) indicates that 3.5 million or nearly 20 percent of U.S college and university students were taking at least one online class in the fall of 2006. This report, titled *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning*, was based on responses from over 2500 colleges and universities in the U.S. The current move to online education has a tremendous impact on higher education and its teaching force. More and more university professors face the challenge to deliver courses via the Internet. This new mode of instruction presents challenge to many instructors because teaching online is not merely a matter of uploading lecture notes on the website; instead, it involves a vastly different process that requires instructors not only to acquire new skills in using technology but, more importantly, to develop a new understanding of learning and teaching that leads to “changes to both pedagogy and teaching practice” (Oliver, 2001, p. 214).

I am one of the many instructors who have been impacted by the current trend. In the past few years, I have adapted several MA TESOL courses to online settings and now teach an average of three online classes per semester. Starting with a few courses through continuing education program in the mid 1980s, the MA TESOL at Southeast Missouri State University is primarily a distance learning program with the overwhelming majority of its students being full-time classroom teachers. Courses were mainly delivered via interactive TV before the program initiated its efforts to move courses online at the turn of the century to meet the increasing demand to prepare classroom teachers to work with the growing population of linguistically and culturally diverse learners. After a few years’ efforts, we have successfully turned the program into an online one. The program is currently providing courses for more than one hundred students and over 95 percent of them are classroom teachers, who are working for their ESL

certification or Master's Degree in TESOL. What has happened to our program over the past few years reflects what is happening to many programs in the higher education institutes today. As an instructor, I have witnessed the move and been very much involved in the "going online" process. I have been challenged and been forced to learn new skills and, from time to time, to reexamine my philosophy of teaching and my role as an instructor. Trying to meet these challenges has been a demanding but at the same time rewarding experience. I have learned some valuable lessons and gained some useful insights.

Online education —does it work?

For many first time online instructors, a question they often have is how an online course works and whether online education can provide learners with the same, if not better, quality education. Those were exactly the questions that lingered in my mind when I first started to teach online courses. In spite of our current enthusiasm for online teaching, online education is "a relatively new frontier of education" (Tallent-Runnel et al, 2006, p.117) and our understanding of e-learning and e-teaching is still quite limited.

To answer these questions in mind, I designed a questionnaire and used it to survey my students on their perceptions of the Web-based courses I developed and delivered. As research indicates, student perception is an important source of understanding learning and teaching. We can hardly achieve a true understanding of online education without listening to what learners have to say about their experiences and opinions. Student satisfaction is also one of the two most commonly used measures of teaching effectiveness (Pucel & Sterz, 2005). Using the questionnaire that includes 31 open and close-ended questions, I surveyed 12 sessions of 6 different online courses I taught during the years from 2003 to 2006. The survey was designed to elicit student responses to two major questions: 1. To what degree are students satisfied with the

online course in terms of the quality of the content as well as the learning experience itself? 2. Among several given factors, which factor(s) do students perceive as the key(s) to their satisfactory online learning experience? The survey was administered at the end of the semester and the responses were anonymously saved in the database. One hundred twenty four students responded to the survey and the response rate was over 50%. The study yielded some very positive and encouraging results. The majority of students surveyed seemed to embrace the online courses enthusiastically as seen in their positive responses to four overall satisfaction questions. For instance, overwhelming majority (87 %) of the participants described their “overall satisfaction” with the course either “very satisfied” or “satisfied”; 84.5% of the students found the quality of the content “very satisfactory” or “satisfactory”; 81.5% of the participants either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that “overall, I am satisfied with the learning process in terms of participation, interaction with peers and instructor”; 78.5% of them either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they gained positive experience from online learning. While many participants claimed that online courses require more time and efforts, they, at the same time, seemed to enjoy their learning experience and appreciated the benefits online education can offer, such as accessibility, flexibility, and convenience. In addition, they also seemed to see advantages of online learning in promoting participation and active learning. For instance, one student commented that “I think one of the biggest advantages is that you have in-depth discussion with peers than you do in a regular face to face course” and another student wrote that “I do like the fact that in online discussion, a shy person cannot sit in the back of the room and be excluded from the discussion. Everyone has a voice online.” The results of my study seem consistent with many other studies on online education. For instance, Tallent-Runnels and her colleagues (2006) reviewed 68 studies on online courses and reported that students have positive

attitudes towards online teaching. Their review indicates that well designed Web-based courses produce positive learning outcomes and are related to overall student satisfaction.

Does online education work? The answer seems a very positive “yes.” I, however, feel that the question itself seems to indicate a misconception that there is a “one size fits all” online education that either works or does not work. Just as there are high quality and poor quality face-to-face classes, there are online courses that are well received by students and work effectively and courses that are poorly received and do not work. Over these years as an online instructor I have come to believe that technology is just a tool and the tool itself does not determine whether the class works or not. It is true that there are many differences between a virtual learning environment and a conventional face-to-face one, but online teaching is not so different from conventional classroom teaching in that factors accounting for quality face-to-face teaching work the same for online courses. What determines the quality or the effectiveness of a course is not the format, not the technology, but the teacher, the teacher’s devotion, expertise, caring for students, willingness to learn and openness to change. An effective online instructor is one who is willing to go extra miles and who is devoted to the success of his/her students. If my online courses have been positively received by students, I attribute it largely to the many extra hours and efforts I have invested in these courses and students.

Teaching online —how does it work?

While a teacher’s devotion is crucial for being an effective online instructor, simply working hard is not enough. Delivering a course online does differ in many ways from teaching in a face-to-face classroom, and a good understanding of the new learning environment is important for anyone who wants to go online and be an effective online instructor. The good news is that considerable research has been done over the past decade and an increasing amount

of information has accumulated that provides instructors with useful insights on what is involved in online teaching and what is crucial to make it work.

A cursory review of literature reveals that several factors seem to have been most commonly identified with effective online instruction. These factors include the quantity and quality of interaction with the instructor and peers, instructor's timely feedback, course organization and structure, activities that promote cooperative and active learning, and learners' sense of community. For instance, in her study of factors affecting student satisfaction and perceived learning in 73 asynchronous online courses, Swan (2001) found that clarity of course design, interaction with instructors, and active discussion among course participants "significantly influenced students' satisfaction and perceived learning" (p. 306). Moffett (2004) conducted a study on student perceived quality of a graduate educational leadership course and found that courses that were designed to elicit high interaction with the instructor and other students were most positively received by the participants. In the survey study I conducted, students were given seven factors to rank their relative importance to their satisfaction with an online course. Three factors are directly related to the instructor: instructor's presence and accessibility, instructor's input; instructor's attitudes towards learners; two factors related to the course: course design in terms of the content and organization and the assignments or the amount of course work required to complete the course; and two factors related to students themselves: student previous online experience and student learning styles. The results indicate that students perceived instructor's presence/accessibility, instructor's input and timely feedback, course design and organization as the three most important factors affecting student satisfaction toward online learning, followed by instructor's attitudes toward students and the amount of work for completing the course. Student prior online experience and students' learning styles are

perceived relatively less important. These findings seem to confirm the instructor's crucial role in determining the quality of an online course. As Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, and Dunlap have pointed out, instructors are a key component of asynchronous online courses because instructors

- Provide the infrastructure for learning (syllabus, calendar, communication tools, and instruction resources);
- Model effective participation, collaboration, and learning strategies;
- Monitor and assess learning and provide feedback, remediation, and grades;
- Troubleshoot and resolve instructional, interpersonal, and technical problems; and
- Create a learning community in which learners feel safe and connected and believe their contributions are valued. (Cited in Hogan and McKnight, 2007, p. 118).

To be effective in online teaching, the instructor needs to take into consideration of all the factors that account for high quality online learning. The better an instructor understands the expectations of online learners and the dynamics of virtual learning, the more successful the instructor will be in reaching the learners.

The first step: developing an effective online course

Quality education is to provide learners with well-planned educational experiences. A careful planning lies at the heart of any effective instruction, and it is even more so with online teaching. Research consistently indicates that course design is a determining factor leading to learner satisfaction and effective learning. Creating a thoughtfully designed and well structured

online course is the very first step for anyone who wants to be an effective online instructor. A well designed course can help reduce the anxiety of online learners, promote the quality and quantity of interaction and improve learner satisfaction. While many factors might need to be taken into consideration, here are a few tips I have found useful from my own teaching experience.

First, how course content is organized has an impact on learning. ***Organizing course content into several meaningful units helps improve learning effectiveness.*** Organizing content into meaningful units, instead of presenting it as fragmented pieces of tasks, helps the learners to focus on central issues, stick with “the big picture,” and promote in-depth learning. Adapting courses online forced me to reexamine more carefully the goals and objectives of each course, essential knowledge to be covered, key issues to be addressed, and important skills to be developed; I then organized course content around several central topics. Each of the online courses I developed contains no more than eight units or central topics. Students have approximately two weeks’ time to work on a topic. This arrangement allows sufficient time for students to read, reflect, and participate in the discussion and complete other assignments. This time frame seems to work very well with full-time classroom teachers. As a teacher commented in the survey, “The instructor presented a very well organized course. All of the assignments were meaningful and relevant to the subject matter. I really enjoyed this course”; another student concurred that “I loved the topic discussions. The assignments were meaningful because there were not a lot of ‘busywork’ assignments, I was able to take the time I needed to really delve into the papers and do a good job.”

Second, when designing an online course, it is also important for the instructor to ***give careful thoughts to what input can be provided to facilitate learning.*** A well designed online

course should be one with solid substance, not just a few assignments for students to complete. One essential component in instruction involves the learner's active interaction with course materials, and for such interaction to take place or to take place effectively, instructor's support and facilitation is crucial. In a face-to-face class, the instructor gives lectures, orchestrates discussions, initiates questions, comments student responses, clarifies misconceptions, etc. The challenge for an online instructor is how all these types of facilitation can be transformed to the virtual classroom. A well designed online course should be one with a thoughtful instructor's input that provides students with ample support and guidance. Here are a few things I have been doing in my online course and found useful.

- **Course orientation** – I start each course with a course orientation. It is a brief description of the nature of the course (theoretical, technical, or practically-orientated, etc), central issues to be addressed, and best approaches to success of the course, etc. The purpose of the orientation is to help draw learners' attention to the major objectives and also help students to see how the particular course relates to other courses and how it fits in their whole training program.
- **Study guide** – In addition to the course orientation, a study guide is provided for each unit (or topic). It usually includes a brief topic orientation, pre-reading activities (questions relating to their prior knowledge, self-checking quizzes, etc.), key terms and focus questions for readings, chapter notes or PPT presentations, links to supplementary readings, etc. These study guides are on average 2-3 pages long. The purpose of the guide is to help activate students' prior knowledge, arouse interest for the topic, draw attention to the core concepts or issues, stimulate thoughts and promote reflection. Students' frequent use of these study guides as shown by the *web counter* (most of these pages

were visited more than 100 times each semester) seems to indicate that the instructor's input is much welcomed.

- ***Providing learning activities that are thoughtfully designed and well planned*** –Well-designed learning activities are essential to promoting learning and this is even more crucial for effective online learning. Asynchronous online discussion, for instance, is a learning activity unique to online instruction. The forum or bulletin-board is the virtual classroom where students meet and interact with course content and with their peers and the instructor. For online discussion to be a truly effective learning vehicle, careful planning is essential. A well structured discussion is much more effective than free chatting. For each topic discussion in my online class, I provide several questions, but I do not confine students to these questions. The major purpose of these questions is to help student stay focused on the important issues. To achieve this goal, these questions need to be carefully designed. They should be general, broad in scope and thought-provoking. I usually provide 3 or 4 set of questions for each topic and each set contains a few interrelated sub-questions written in the way that require students to read carefully the assigned chapters, think critically and make meaningful connection to their personal experience. Well designed questions promote the quality of discussion and deep learning. In the survey I conducted, students commented very positively on online discussion and some reported that it was “the most enjoyable learning experience” because the questions were “relevant”, “practical” and “personally meaningful.” In addition, effective online discussion should be carefully monitored. Expectations, policies and evaluation criteria should be established and clearly explained to students at the very beginning of the class. The more specific and detailed, the less anxiety and confusion the students will

experience, and the more effective the activity will be. Cooperative learning, as all studies have emphasized, is the key to the success of online instruction. Workshops, peer-reviewing, mini-conferences are all good activities. But for these activities to work effectively, the instructor's input and careful designing should never be underestimated.

- **Resources.** A great advantage of the Internet technology is the almost unlimited and easy access to various educational resources provided by universities, professional organizations or government agencies that are public and free of charge. These resources can be used to enrich course content and help students keep abreast of the most current trends in the field. This is another area where the instructor can promote learning by providing well-selected supplementary readings and/or directing student attention to these resources. For each online course, I provide dozens of full-text articles as well as links to websites of governmental or professional organizations that are relevant to the field. I also encourage students to add links and useful materials to the lists. These materials are well used by students.

Finally, the layout or organization of the online course also has an effect on online learners. As a thumb of rule, the simpler the structure is, the easier it is for learners to follow.

Be an effective communicator

A well designed course is half done. However, to be an effective online instructor, there are other factors that deserve careful thought. Studies on online instruction indicate that instructor's presence and accessibility is an important factor affecting online learners' satisfaction. What differentiates, essentially, a virtual classroom from a conventional one is the physical presence of the instructor and the learner's opportunity to interact with the professor directly, to ask a

question and to receive an immediate feedback. First-time online learners typically experience anxiety about the fact that they are going to take a class without a teacher standing in front of them. This is particularly true with older and non-traditional learners, who tend to have less experience with modern technology compared to the younger generation. I used to receive dozens of emails daily at the beginning of the semester when I first started teaching online courses from students who felt either panic or disoriented in the new learning environment. Instructor's support is essential to helping ease the anxiety of the learners. Students will more likely have a positive attitude towards online learning when they perceive the instructor is available and responsive to their needs. One challenge the online instructor faces is that students often expect you to be there 24 hours a day and 7 days a week! Effective communication strategies are therefore extremely important for online instructors. Sometimes a small thoughtful effort can make a big difference. For instance, *reaching out to learners early on* might significantly help reduce a learner's anxiety and save the instructor's time as well – a lesson learned from my own experience. Now I no longer receive many emails before the class starts, because I always make our course available at least a week before the semester officially begins. Students have access to all the information they need to get started, for instance, how to get username and password, where to seek help and whom to contact if a problem is encountered, etc. I also reach out to the learners early on by sending the class a short greeting email note when the course website becomes available. A good beginning is very important for the success of a class. Besides, throughout the semester, I *communicate with students frequently and on a regularly basis* via email as well as through the website. I have a space on each course website where I post announcements or reminders. I also send out an email notification whenever anything new is posted on the web to keep students well informed. Most of such communication is for

administrative purposes, for instance, an acknowledgement of receiving student submitted work, a reminder of the approaching deadline for a project, a notification of the availability of a grade or feedback for student work, etc. Such regular communication does not only help eliminate potential problems, increase a student's opportunity to succeed in a course, but also help save the instructor's time.

Another important thing I have learned as an online instructor is that online teaching does not have to be impersonal as many have thought it might be. Effective online communication is informational; it can also be personal and emotional to help establish a warm and supportive learning environment that is essential for student satisfaction and success in a class. *A welcome letter* at the beginning of a class from the instructor, for instance, connects the instructor with the students; *a gentle private reminder* to a student not performing at the level as expected conveys a message of the instructor's caring for the student; *a note of encouragement* to one who is making good progress helps raise the learner's confidence; and *a short thank-you email* to a student who has made good contribution to a discussion might inspire the learner's desire to do an even better job. I use all these small tips in my online classes and they help to create a good rapport between me and my students. Positive relationship promotes learning and education would lose much of its value without such positive human interaction. Anyone who wants to be an effective online instructor should pay at least as much attention to these social and emotional aspects of communication as to other aspects.

Providing timely academic feedback

An instructor interacts and communicates with learners for various purposes: administrative, social, emotional and academic. Timely and constructive feedback for students' academic work is a key factor affecting learner satisfaction and quality of learning. The greatest

challenge I have experienced as an online instructor over the years is how to respond to students' weekly online discussion in a timely and effective fashion without entirely burning myself out! Well structured online discussion is a powerful instructional tool that promotes learning through collaboration and interaction, but reading and responding to students' online discussions can be extremely overwhelming for the instructor not only because written communication is more time consuming but also because online exchange is different from face to face communication. How much should or could an instructor respond, especially when the instructor has to teach three or even four online courses? What types of feedback work more effectively? These questions have forced me to reexamine more carefully my belief of teaching and my role as an instructor. Effective strategies certainly do not come easily. I am still in the process of learning and exploring. But experience does have taught me a few things. First, I realize that it is important for the instructor to remember that our role is a facilitator, not a knowledge provider. *Effective feedback should aim at promoting interaction and facilitating learning.* Second, *feedback will be more effective if students perceive the instructor as a participant and a member of the learning community.* Third, *positive feedback is more effective in promoting learning.* Finally, *effective feedback can take many forms.*

The success of online discussion is determined by learner participation and the quantity and quality of learners' interaction with the content as well as with each other. One important purpose of feedback is to make such interaction take place and in an effective manner. Such feedback can take many forms, for instance, a note of encouragement when the discussion is doing well, a gentle reminder when more participation is anticipated; a constructive suggestion when the discussion needs some redirection, etc. I visit student forum regularly so that I know how the discussion is going on and I use all these small tips to provide timely feedback to the

students. In addition, “seeing” the instructor is “listening” to the discussion also helps motivate student participation. I also participate in the forum discussion as a member and share my own perspectives on the issues in discussion. I respond selectively to individual students’ responses in each discussion but make sure that every student has an equal opportunity to receive such individualized feedback over a period of time. I always seek for thoughtful responses and well articulated messages and give timely positive feedback. For a response that lacks substance, I post a private note to remind the student of the expectations and evaluation criteria or give some suggestion how improvement can be made. At the end of each topic discussion, I summarize the major ideas and make suggestions for future thinking or provide resources for students who want to explore the topic further. Online discussion is a graded activity in all my online courses. I always grade the discussion right after it is over and I provide reason for a reduced grade. These efforts are greatly appreciated by students, as one student wrote, “I love online discussion! Students’ feedback was nice to read. I especially appreciate the instructor’s comments. This helped tremendously in many ways, confidence, understanding”; another student commented, “The instructor did an excellent job. His expectations were clear. Even though I didn’t see the instructor, I felt his presence in every discussion. His postings and grades were done in time and positive feedbacks were promoting learning.”

Teaching online has been a challenging as well as a rewarding experience for me. There is still a long way for me to go but experience has given me the confidence that we can provide our learners with a quality learning experience and we can be effective instructors if we truly care for the success of our learners, are open to change, and are willing to walk a few extra miles.

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