BURN BRIGHT, NOT OUT: TIPS FOR MANAGING ONLINE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Managing the online classroom presents new challenges for faculty members. New online faculty members can become confused with the process of teaching and creating content online due to a lack of support and ignorance of tools and strategies. Issues often arise in online teaching due to the ubiquity of the online classroom and finding appropriate tools to help transfer face-to-face strategies to the digital classroom. By integrating both digital tools and personnel support, faculty can flourish in the online environment.

Keywords: online teaching, online classroom, ubiquitous classroom, instructional design

INTRODUCTION

Online education is an integral part of 21st century learning. There are many ways for students to take online courses, from enrolling in a massive online open course (MOOC) to taking classes through a local university. Courses range as much in variety as they do in price, including an increasing number of free options that support global learning opportunities (Samala, 2015). As offerings and options for online education and learning continue to multiply, so does the need for prepared online educators (Brennan et. al, 2014).

Due to the growth of online courses, more faculty members who teach in a traditional ground setting are being asked to support online learning in addition to their current teaching loads (ACE, 2014). While some faculty members have been early adopters of online education, others are just beginning to teach in the new modality (Trust, 2016). The switch from teaching face-to-face to online can be daunting and cause educator burnout (Hogan & McKnight, 2007). Not only are there new technologies to learn, but there are new teaching techniques to master. Many of the andragogical (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005) approaches that worked in the in-person classroom can translate to the digital classroom but others cannot. Similarly, time management and instructional habits formed from years of face-to-face practice may fail in the online classroom. These factors, together with the common stress of change, can lead many faculty members to burn out and underperform in the online environment (Hogan & McKnight, 2007).

While current research focused on online teacher burnout is inconclusive (McCann & Holt, 2009). The practitioner-based literature identifies burnout as a very real phenomenon (Murugan & Noura, 2018). Several reasons for burnout amongst online instructors emerge from the literature: workload issues, such as too many classes or overly large sections of students; issues related to the isolation of online teaching, including the inherent distance in asynchronous discussion forums and the lack of daily in-person interactions with peers; and challenges surrounding the ubiquity of the online classroom and the fuzzy borders between teaching and personal domains (Hogan & McKnight, 2007; McCann & Holt, 2009).

Similarly, in a recent study examining both in-person and online teaching burnout rates, Dunbar (2018) outlined the common contributors to faculty fatigue, including "six overarching domains of job-person mismatch: (a) workload, (b) control, (c) reward, (d) community, (e) fairness, and (f) values" (Dunbar, 2018; Maslach, Leiter, & Jackson, 2012, p. 296). Another study discussed how working in an online format can "exhaust faculty" and potentially lead to problems (Dunbar,

2018; Maier, Laumer, & Eckhardt, 2015). Lack of resources, especially technology within the online environment, was identified as a common factor in online faculty burnout (Salami & Ajitoni, 2016). In short, faculty burnout is an emerging phenomenon amongst online educators and seems to be caused by several factors. These factors fall within three general categories: workload issues, problems of isolation, and the ubiquity of the online classroom and the associated blurring of profession/personal boundaries (Dunbar, 2018; Hogan & McKnight, 2007; McCann & Holt, 2009). In this article we hope to address two of these common challenges: the ubiquity of the online classroom and workload by providing practical tips for burning brightly as an online instructor rather than burning out.

MANAGING ONLINE TEACHING

The Ubiquitous Online Classroom

Part of the disconnect between teaching online and face-to-face is that digital learning has become much more student-centric (at least in most asynchronous or semiasynchronous online courses) (Barbosa, Barbosa, & Rabello, 2016). Students are conditioned to find information online and on-demand (Dahlstrom, 2015). This "on-demand" expectation can create stress for online instructors. The first large challenge to successful online teaching lies in the very structure of online courses; namely, that they are ubiquitous in nature (Phumeechanya & Wannapiroon, 2014). In other words, because students and faculty can access the classroom anytime, the boundaries between class time and nonclass time become blurred. This ubiquity produces a large window of time for students to learn and engage with their peers and instructors (Brennan et.al, 2014), but it also creates a host of problems for faculty members.

As the classroom remains always "on," both students and faculty may also be encouraged to be "on" for extended periods of time. When the boundaries of the online classroom become blurred, both students and faculty can be negatively impacted (Dunbar, 2018; Maslach et al., 2012). For instance, faculty members may feel that they must be available to their students on a continual basis, which can lead to exhaustion. Also, students may expect that faculty will respond whenever the student is online, thus creating unrealistic expectations and bad study habits. For example, a student may wait until the last moment to submit an assignment because they do better without the constraints of time (Phumeechanya & Wannapiroon, 2014). Assignments might be submitted late as a result of faculty response time. This can create a ripple effect where students become more reactive than proactive. In turn, faculty may mirror the same behavior as their students and post during all hours of the day. Managing grading, discussion posts, and other communication response time is just one problem the ubiquitous classroom poses. Below are some tips for managing a classroom that is always "in session."

Course Design

Good course design is key to overcoming the challenges of teaching online. Creating a clearly outlined syllabus is usually a good place to start. In designing a course syllabus, it may be wise to consult the Quality Matters Rubric or other standardized tools. In addition, it is often helpful to use a backward planning approach to laying out a course that starts with over-all learning objectives that map to module objectives, discussions, learning activities, and assessments. Also, working in teams with instructional designers can help streamline the course creation process and make sure that learning outcomes are aligned with assessments (Barbosa et al., 2016). In reality, prioritizing course design and creation can help mitigate many of the frustrations caused by the ubiquity of the online classroom (Brennan et.al, 2014). Not only is it key to organize course materials and make sure that course structure is set up in advance, it is also helpful to create various policies about class communication norms and the expectations of student and faculty roles.

In order to arrive at these roles and policies, we suggest using "student journey mapping." This practice borrows from the world of user-centered design and design thinking (Kolko, 2015). The idea is to think through the process of a student entering the online classroom and moving through each of the required discussions, activities, readings, videos, and assignments. By stepping into the student's shoes we can create a map of the "student journey." Often this journey is best visualized as a flow chart or other graphic chart.

After mapping the student journey through the eyes of the faculty member and instruction

designer, it is important to interview current or past students. This collaborative process helps develop the online learning environment (Barbosa et al., 2016). During a group or one-on-one interview, plot out the draft of the journey map in front of the students. Ask them if the sequence makes sense. Ask what they think they would learn from the readings and assignments and see if that matches the learning objectives. Then adjust the map and the class as needed. By bringing in students, the planning and design of the class can better meet student needs and iron out kinks before a class is fully built.

Another tactic that can be useful in proactively planning the course is to create a paper Minimum Viable Product (MVP) (Moogk, 2012). A paper MVP is a low cost/low effort way to imagine what a learning artifact, web page, assignment, etc., might look like. For example, instructors can create a sketch of a learning activity on paper and put it in front of a few students. Faculty can explain the concept of the learning activity and ask students to explain what they understand, how they might change the activity, and what learning they might glean from it. By putting a low-resolution product in front of students/users, the course materials can be tailored to meet learning outcomes while increasing ease of use for students. In essence, managing the ubiquity of the online classroom is first a function of design and preparation and second a function of testing. Consider using these tactics:

- Prioritize course design and creation
- Work in teams with instructional designers to create learning objectives
- Create a "student journey map" to understand student experience
- Test learning artifacts using the Paper MVP method

Time Management

The next step in effectively managing the ubiquity of the digital classroom is finding tactics to manage yourself as an instructor. Because many aspects of an online class are always open for business, there is a tendency as an instructor to always be working. The remedy involves managing time and energy. This is not always easy, especially when we consider that teaching online takes more instructional time than traditional courses (Kenny & Fluck, 2017), but there are several tactics that can help.

Setting limits is key. One of the best ways to manage time is to set a schedule within the online course. Faculty who set a schedule for themselves within the classroom effectively set boundaries. Communicated ahead of time, the faculty's schedule should include set times during the week to respond to students, when grades can be expected, and any office hours. When students know what to expect from the faculty, they can better manage their time. This seems obvious, but it is very important to make the teaching schedule explicit and to over communicate the schedule. In addition, it is not enough to create a schedule and communicate it, faculty must adhere to it. This can be tricky. Here are a few tips for sticking to your teaching schedule:

- Block out times on your calendar for each teaching activity (decline meetings that conflict)
- Create autoresponders for your email during times when you are grading or prepping for class to let people know you are unavailable
- Compartmentalize the online classroom by using one specific internet browser for online teaching and another for everything else
- Enlist a colleague as an accountability partner to hold you to your schedule
- Test a few different schedules to see what really works for you

Managing Workload

Another aspect of time management is managing the workload. Faculty often are asked to teach large online sections and/or multiple classes with or without teaching assistant help. While the problems of managing workload are related to how many students an instructor is in teaching, workload is also related to the nature of the digital classroom where repetitive tasks must be completed in order to grade assignments, communicate with students, and correct learning errors. These problems can be managed by automating the process as much as possible.

Instructors can save large amounts of time by automating as many tasks as possible. This way we can leverage the online setting to our advantage. Many things that cannot be automated in the face-to-face classroom can be in the online framework. Start with automating content delivery. Prior to the

start of the course, the faculty member can place curriculum content on a scheduled delivery. This allows course content (video, readings, discussion questions, assignments) to populate either ahead of time or on a time-delayed basis (most learning management systems have this feature). Also, having content that is already prepared frees up the faculty to reuse the same content in the future (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2014). For example, weekly articles and discussion topics can be preloaded with a specific time and date to post so that the faculty does not have to worry about deploying content the same day.

Another way to automate teaching tasks is to enlist help, which can come in the form of a teaching assistant if available or via technology. By employing TAs, automating really becomes outsourcing. A TA can answer routine questions and/or grade assignments. However, it is important for TAs to have prepared answers to use in response to students, timeframes for feedback, and samples of graded assignments for them to follow. The idea is not to have the TA create all the solutions but rather have them implement the faculty member's solutions in a semistandardized way. Similarly, there are technology solutions that can help save time. For example, setting up google alerts to scan the web for relevant articles for class can save research time. Also, using a news feed aggregator can make finding new course content more efficient. An instructor might use Flipboard (flipboard.com) to aggregate articles and Pinterest (pinterest.com) to save the ones they want to share in a particular course. It may also be helpful to set up a Slack channel (slack.com) to share articles or other resources with other instructors. Another idea is to use a task automator like "If This Then That" (IFTTT) (ifttt.com) to create rules that will run tasks automatically. There is even one set up to pull BlackBoard messages into an email digest. Last, automate some of your email sorting. Set up "rules" in Outlook for certain types of email to be sent to particular folders or pay a service like Sanebox (sanebox.com) to crawl your email inboxes, summarize the content, and send to you on a proscribed schedule. In short, automating tasks can save lots of time and create more consistent performance. Try the following:

- Automate course content via the LMS delayed-posting feature
- Reuse content as appropriate
- Enlist a TA or other helper
- Leverage technology like aggregators, automators, and email rules to save time on repetitive tasks

Digital Tools

When automating a process is not possible, it is helpful to use digital tools to make the manual or semimanual tasks more efficient and effective. Faculty should seek out external resources to support their success within the online classroom (EdTech, 2017). Some of the most popular types of software available to online faculty are centered on time management and support for faculty classroom interaction. Software programs such as Screencast-o-matic, Jing, Zoom, TypeItIn, and Presto are some that can help save time and energy. These tools can help faculty deal with recording online content, lectures, and videos, and speed up the typing of repetitive feedback.

In terms of recording content, may universities require faculty members to use on-site studios; however, other video content can be very useful in explaining tough concepts, pointing out common mistakes on assignments, summarizing how to find items in the classroom, or sending personalized feedback videos to groups or specific students. There are several free tools to record computer screens or faculty presentations. Two easy ones to use are Zoom and Screencast-o-matic. Zoom (Zoom.com) is a "go-to-meeting" like service that provides a virtual meeting space using VoIP technology. It also has recording functionality that allows for both video and screen capture. Screencast-o-matic (screencastomatic.com) is a video recording and editing software that can be downloaded and used in place of a recording studio. Faculty can use this type of software and learn to record, edit, and post their own videos. Both Zoom and Screencast-o-matic allow users to download videos that can then be hosted on Dropbox (dropbox.com) or other cloud services so students can have access to content via a link.

Digital tools can also be useful in facilitating rapid responses to student questions. Faculty members receive numerous questions from students and often receive similar questions from multiple students. For faculty who are time starved, having a quick way to respond to multiple students with the same questions can be helpful. TypeItIn (wavget.com/typeitin) provides a way for faculty to capture

commonly given responses as well as frequently asked questions, categorize them, and use them to respond to students. Using software such as TypeItIn can help faculty create a list of quick "go to" answers. Having prepared these responses and resources in advance, faculty can pull from their own curated database to respond quickly to students in the online classroom. These types of text-expanding tools can also be used in giving feedback to students. Not only can frequently asked questions be loaded into a text expander tool, but also feedback for papers. This will allow repetitive comments to be inserted easily and efficiently and save the instructor time, but it also gives the student the opportunity to receive lengthy comments that the faculty member might otherwise not provide due to time and energy constraints. In short, tools should be leveraged to provide robust student feedback and communication and to convey lectures and facilitate group activities and other presentations of course content.

It is worth learning speech-to-text tools as well. These tools can be helpful when instructors are tired of typing, not fast at typing, or just want to vary their methods of working. Using Dragon Naturally Speaking (nuance.com/dragon) or Mac's built in speech-to-text function (hint—on a Mac push the function button twice to open it) can save time and provide longer responses with more detail for students. In addition, recording voice notes can be a great way to give asynchronous feedback with a more personal touch. Recording messages to students can help make the faculty member seem more personable. Tech tools can help save time and allow for better presentation of materials and greater feedback detail and length.

Try a few of these tools:

- Screen sharing and recording tools such as Zoom and Screencast-o-matic
- Text inserting tools such as TypeItIn
- Speech-to-text programs such as Dragon Naturally Speaking (Macs now have built in speech-to-text)

SUMMARY

Managing the online classroom presents new challenges for faculty members. Online faculty may find the idea of teaching and creating content online to be cumbersome due to a lack of support and ignorance of tools and strategies. Issues often arise in online teaching due to the ubiquity of the online classroom and the challenge of finding appropriate tools to manage the workload of digital teaching (Dunbar, 2018; Hogan & McKnight, 2007; McCann & Holt, 2009). However, with the use of digital tools and other support, faculty can flourish teaching online. Tools such as text inserters, speech-to-text software, screen capture applications, and so forth, combined with time and classroom management strategies, can help faculty members find a balance between teaching and personal time. With practice and after adapting to using these tools and resources, online faculty have the ability to create engaging and connective content and classroom experiences while not becoming overly taxed by teaching demands and repetitive tasks.

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