

Preparing the Online Course: ALISE Online Pedagogy Workshop

Barbara H. Kwaśnik
School of Information Studies
Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
bkwasnik@syr.edu

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You Can't Just Upload the Lectures and Hope for the Best

Students in the online environment benefit from many advantages:

- Flexibility
- Time for reflection
- Ability to participate more fully
- Ability to bring resources to the class

but they need special considerations to make these advantages come to life. The course may seem clear and obvious to you, but it's amazing how confusing it may seem to students.

The Basic Considerations (besides the Learning Goals)

- In preparing the online course, the instructor must have goals in mind for what is to be learned, but then... there is so much more to consider:
 - Planning the class
 - Navigation and orientation through the material
 - Cues for presence
 - Interactivity and participation
 - Variety
 - Enrichment
 - Managing expectations
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Planning the Class

- Online students access the class at different points. You can't count on things being read sequentially or in the order you entered them. Thus:
 - The entire class must be planned in advance and make sense at whatever spot the student enters.
 - Online is not terrific for on-the-spot innovations and changes.
 - Even slight errors, typos, leftover details from previous semesters, can be very confusing, throwing the class into a dither.
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Planning the Class: My tips

- ❑ Figure 2-3 weeks to get an assignment or exercise submitted and commented on. Thus, you may wind up doing some things in parallel.
 - ❑ Sequence the class as much as possible to make community-building assignments come early. I usually do at least one in the beginning that is required but ungraded.
 - ❑ Plan all the parts so they are in place on day one. I have always regretted postponing the posting of critical components. Remember, students are navigating the class on their own without you there to answer questions.
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Navigation and Orientation through the Material

- ❑ In the typical online course, the postings reach into the many hundreds with a class of 25. By mid semester it can be quite busy for both faculty and class. Several things may be going on at once (discussion, assignment postings, questions...)
 - ❑ Students logging on after even a brief absence, may feel totally overwhelmed.
 - ❑ Students need ongoing directions for navigation through the course. Saying it once in the syllabus and schedule is definitely not enough.
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Navigation and Orientation through the Material: My tips

- ❑ You can't make the schedule and due dates too simple or be too redundant. I have one schedule in the syllabus, another under the schedule icon in two forms: a table, and a week-by-week. In addition I make an announcement every Monday of what's coming up and what's due.
 - ❑ I make all announcements pertaining to the class materials in one place only, so that a student who does not read all the new postings will read at least that one.
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Navigation and Orientation through the Material: My tips

- ❑ I provide links from schedule to the assignment specs, and vice versa.
 - ❑ Document hygiene: I design various parts of the course to go together (e.g., lectures and assignment). Thus, to keep things impeccably correct, when I plan the course, I make lists of all the interrelated parts and read through each to make sure they are correct, especially if they are being reused from previous iterations of the course. E.g., if on the assignment it says “look at page 3 in the lecture”, you should be sure it really is page 3.
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Cues for Presence

- ❑ Typically you prepare assignments, lectures, in-class activities, group projects and so on. In ftf classes you don't have to worry about your presence.
 - ❑ In online classes, many of these are written out in textual form, and unless you insert your "presence" it will feel to the students that you are not there.
 - ❑ You must plan for how your presence will be perceived for every component of the class.
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Cues for Presence: My Tips

- ❑ I check in every Monday for a little chat and update, and frequently on Thursdays as well (office hours day)
 - ❑ I respond to every posted assignment. So that this isn't "empty" time, I design assignment so that my comments can be teaching moments. That is, the students post assignments, and my comments introduce new information to what is in the lecture.
 - ❑ But, I try to stay out of inter-student commentaries because I've noticed that once I say something, it often kills the conversation.
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Cues for Presence: Example of Teaching through Responses

- One of the interesting points Ken brings out is ... The other point which Ken doesn't make, but which I'm piggy-backing off his analysis, is that the aim of commercial websites is not so much to retrieve information accurately but more that you bump into something that you'll BUY. Thus you'll see a huge amount of redundancy, a gazillion access strategies, and the avoidance of having a situation where the system retrieves nothing at all in response to your query. From an indexing perspective it means that by providing redundancy, you can ease up on the accuracy of any one part. Put another way, if one indexing strategy is not quite up to snuff, then some other strategy will pick up the slack and will get you to your destination.
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Interactivity and Participation

- ❑ If you think about it, ftf classes struggle with including interactivity and participation. There usually isn't enough time and it's difficult to orchestrate with a larger class.
 - ❑ Online classes offer many opportunities, but it's possible to overdo, and to make the interaction artificial or contrived.
 - ❑ In preparing for online teaching, think about how each assignment or lecture can benefit from interaction. Don't think it must happen for every one, but you can do double-duty with many of them.
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Interactivity and Participation: My Tips

- ❑ Have students post assignments. To avoid overload, I often have students prepare assignments in two forms: a presentation and a paper. The presentation forces them to be succinct and organize their thoughts as well as present info. in an engaging way – not a bad side effect.
 - ❑ I respond to each assignment privately with corrections and grade, and also “publicly” using the assignment to demonstrate various points, and thereby effectively making the student the teacher.
 - ❑ Have students read the assignments of the next three students after them alphabetically and prepare questions (which are graded).
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Variety

- Over the years, I've tried many new ways of delivering materials and accomplishing class goals:
 - Narrative lectures
 - PowerPoint
 - "Guest speakers"
 - Tutorials
 - Text with commentary in margin
 - Voice over PowerPoint
 - Non-synchronous "chat."
 - Breaking up into groups for part of the work
 - Etc. etc.
 - Some of the techniques are great for some of the students and some of the material.
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Variety: My Tips

- ❑ I've found that students prefer clarity in what is expected and a predictable class "flow" to variety for variety's sake.
 - ❑ If I try something new (and I try every semester), I deliver the material in the old way as well as in the new way, if possible, and ask for comments.
 - ❑ I adopt new techniques in order to solve some problem, not just to try the technique. For instance, I'm looking into how to lead a group exercise in building a thesaurus. What I tried didn't work to my satisfaction.
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Enrichment

- ❑ In an online environment it's easy to provide the class with many additional resources such as readings, tutorials, do-it-yourself exercises, and so on.
 - ❑ Students themselves are often motivated to do the same.
 - ❑ Class discussions can be extensive –ranging far beyond what was originally planned.
 - ❑ As you teach a course over many semesters, things accumulate on the site.
 - ❑ While this is wonderful, it can also cause anxiety.
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Enrichment: My Tips

- ❑ Be absolutely clear on what is required and what is optional material
Create clearly labelled icons, e.g., “extra optional readings” or “optional tutorial.”
 - ❑ Monitor discussions. If necessary, break away to a new discussion board for interesting side discussions so they are clearly identified as such.
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Managing Expectations

- Online students have both fewer and more cues for what is expected. For example:
 - By posting assignments, students can see good ones and not-so-good ones and get cues on quality
 - But, it's easy for them to be misled by a chatty or snide or gushy student as to the norms.
 - Occasional comments on expectations are necessary. Don't take it for granted that "everyone knows."
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Managing Expectations: My Tips

- ❑ In commenting on assignments, explain what was good, specifically. I leave the not-so-good comments to the private responses to students.
- ❑ I explain when I'll be traveling, taking a weekend off... and when assignments will be returned.
- ❑ I use the phrases "quick and dirty overview" or "a look at the main points..." to give cues as to depth of coverage.
- ❑ I promise to monitor the site at least twice a week, and in practice do so much more often, but without always jumping in to answer immediately.

Even If You Prepare...

- ❑ It's never enough! Always surprises.
 - ❑ Each time you teach the same course it's different.
 - ❑ Don't give up on a strategy until you've tried it more than once.
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