

# Ten Tips for Teaching Online

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"Inspired" by watching David Letterman while checking in on an online course, I offer my top ten tips for teaching online. These have been gleaned from the literature, from colleagues, and/or experience while teaching Computer Applications in Natural Resources and Urban Forestry online. Unlike David Letterman, I don't have professional writers. So:

## 10. Allow more time for teaching and preparation

To do it right takes time; doing it wrong leads to failure. Information must be available for the students when you say it will be. "Winging it" is difficult if not impossible. Scanners die. Files become too large. Links disappear. Allow ample time to create, implement and check course materials, preferably in the same environment (teaching lab, over the phone line, etc) students will use to access the course.

## 9. You MUST engage students.

Simply throwing material up on the web will not lead to students learning much, if anything. You must work to get the students into the subject matter and to maintain their enthusiasm. Even with considerable effort, you can expect about 1/3 of the students to disappear. Encouraging students to participate in online discussion and to share their experiences helps to involve each person and keep them interested.

## 8. Facilitate building a learning community.

Building on the previous tip, getting the students involved in the course material together helps them take ownership in the course and in their learning. Subtle peer pressure keeps them involved and active. Students realize that the instructor doesn't know everything, and they have something of value to contribute to the course. What could be better than a course where everyone learns from each other?

## 7. Murphy Lives! Be prepared, flexible, and available.

If it can go wrong it will, especially when your options are limited. Accept that. Budget extra time into the course to allow for situations such as down servers, html pages or other material that "hides" from students, or student submissions that fail to appear on time. Let the students negotiate appropriate deadlines. When we accept an assignment is rarely critical. Understand that not only technology but life can get in the way of deadlines. We don't see the wrinkled online student with bags under their eyes because of a new child, or the student with a swollen head after being kicked by a deer while working on a research project, yet these events can affect their participation in the course. I allow students to "take one week off" during the semester; they do not need to participate in discussions or turn in the assignments for that week. If they complete all the units, I drop their lowest score. This allows them some flexibility while minimizing abuse.

The final point here is to be available to the students. Make clear up front your response time for e-mails and discussion participation. If you are going to be away, let them know. For me checking the course web site daily (during the week) has worked. I ask students to send urgent messages to my regular e-mail account, and provide them with my cell phone number as well as office numbers. This has been helpful early in the semester when students have problems accessing the course web site. Students have never abused this.

## 6. Demand excellence.

Just because a course is online doesn't mean we should accept sub-par performance. If we raise performance levels and excite the students, students will respond, and some will overachieve. High expectations require the students to produce (which, if we have done our jobs, should equate to learning!) the trick is to make them want to learn.

## 5. Get students out of their seats and doing something.

We fell in love with some discipline so much we studied it for years so we could do it as a career. Unfortunately, our students probably don't have that same love for our topic. Yet! We need to teach as if we are going to "convert" them. Some of us were influenced by a good lecturer. That option is a challenge for the online teacher. The best way is to get them to DO what it is we are teaching. Active involvement vs. passive. Learning by doing. All good reasons, but we want more. Be creative. Sample urban soils in January for nutrient analysis? Great idea, except most soils are frozen. But accessible at construction sites. Accept failure; reward the exercise, the initiative, not the result.

## 4. Keep the course current.

Broken links and dated material send students the message that you don't care. Keep the materials fresh. Place teaching materials in the context of *current* events. Which means the work is never done.

## 3. Budget for software, hardware and assistance.

Even when the course is "done," it will need to be maintained. Materials need to be revised, checked and updated, new video clips added, etc. Are YOU going to do this? If not, how will you get someone else to do it? New versions of programs are constantly rearing their ugly heads. You will need to update. Computers, scanners and other hardware need to be replaced. All of these things require a budget, yet few of us get an adequate budget for teaching in the traditional face to face classroom. Where will we find these resources to teach online?

## 2. Let the students know you are a real human being.

In a face to face class, we interact with students person to person before, during and after class. They see our human side. We must establish this rapport with our online students as well. We can do this by sharing the small events of daily life with them, like fessing up to our typos or mentioning that our previous attempt at posting a response vaporized when we pressed the escape key. A sense of humor also helps. Try to connect with each student by responding personally to their posts.

And (Drum Rolls!)

## 1. Allow more time for teaching and preparation!

To teach well takes time. Teaching online takes more time. But unscheduled time – the class doesn't meet at a scheduled time. It is easy to procrastinate, to allow other more visible demands to take over. And the online class gets put on the back burner. Online students and their learning is just as important as that of on campus students. Try to schedule a regular time to deal with course issues. I check in with the online courses first thing before starting anything else each day. I tried later in the day and found that more often than not I didn't get to the online course. I learned that when the instructor isn't there the students stop coming to class. Unacceptable behavior for a teacher – of a face to face course or an online course!

A reference I am finding very useful right now is by Linda B. Nilson, 2003. Teaching at its best. Second Edition, Anker Publishing Company, Inc. Boston, MA. 245p.



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