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10 things all great online educators do

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Best practices for any educator organizing online courses



[1]It's no secret that virtual education has become more and more widespread, with new online schools popping up regularly and brick-and-mortar institutions adding a blended component. With that in mind, certain strategies, tips, and guidelines have been proven to help instructors begin what can seem like an overwhelming task—teaching a course without ever even needing to physically see her students. Throughout my years of

experience, I've compiled a list of ten best practices and tips that I believe can help save instructors a lot of time when teaching or developing online courses.

Develop a strong classroom presence. Whether it's multiple times a week or every day, using communication tools such as discussion boards or announcements will help keep students from feeling isolated. Taking part in class discussions by consistently asking leading questions, extending student thinking, and contributing relevant, instructive subject matter expertise will build a strong foundation for collaboration and engagement. Discussion boards encourage critical and creative thinking and supports students in their own reflections and inquiries. Boards also allow students to get to know each other personally and intellectually.

Encourage substantive feedback from students, to students. Don't let students get used to the notion of "one post" as an acceptable standard. If they don't receive feedback from the teacher saying otherwise, or if they receive one short "good job" post to a comment, they tend to start thinking of their contributions as individual notes to the teacher, instead of as contributions to a whole-classroom discussion. Equally important is to encourage students to respond to each other's comments or to ask questions about what they have posted.

Check for questions frequently and provide timely feedback on progress. Teachers should access their courses and monitor discussions daily and respond as quickly as possible to students' questions, requests for review, submitted work, and other posts, even if it's to just acknowledge receiving it, with an answer coming later.

Be mindful of tone, modeling respectful behavior for students. Teachers should phrase comments and responses carefully and be noticeably helpful and supportive; comments can be misinterpreted when students can't see facial expressions. Teachers should address students by name and sign all posts. This models what we'd like students to do.

Help students develop time management and organizational skills. Virtual students often choose to take an online course because they assume it will provide more flexibility for their busy schedules. They will need to know what is expected of them so that they can organize their time to meet course requirements. This increased time management responsibility for the learner also means that there is an increased organization responsibility on the teacher. Prepare syllabus and assignment due dates carefully and well in advance so that students know what to expect and when. In my district, all of our online courses follow a consistent format, with weekly checklists and rubrics that the teachers monitor.

Don't overload your students with material. Many online courses aren't broken down into manageable pieces. If you deliver too much content in one sitting you have to work very hard to get the learner to be willing to accept your attempts to reinforce the material. By breaking up your course into smaller, separate modules you make it easier for students to retain knowledge and pay better attention to your lesson.

Establish good course practices. A good course might have a "capstone project" that all the course activities build toward. Instead of just reading and writing weekly assignments from a book, students read and write in service of completing a larger project. A good course teacher provides annotations to all the websites she or he asks the student to visit. This provides an advanced organizer to students — a preview of what's to come — so they know why they've been sent to each site, and what some of the pitfalls might be when they get there. Make sure students can move easily between navigation and instruction. Clear, precise distinctions should be made in all instructions. Before students leave a document, they need know where to go next after completing the work you have just assigned.

Present material in different ways. Understand how to engage learners of different styles, presenting material in multiple ways. Considering using both synchronous and asynchronous activities, which helps provide a good balance of activities. Engage learners in more collaborative and reflective activities; those that include real-time interactive brainstorming and sharing are often just as effective as those that require students to think, plan, write, and summarize.

While the day-to-day instruction is just one facet of online learning programs, administrators should consider these points when offering virtual programs:

Online programs should be multifaceted for greater student voice and choice. Insist that your online program offer many unique elective offerings and a vast array of AP courses (and don't overlook credit recovery options, either!) This gives a student a way to "personalize" their education and allows them to discover and choose what most interests them.

Make sure teachers have the best training available. In our case, we collaborate with The Virtual High School [2], who we consider an online learning pioneer. VHS requires each teacher to graduate from a six-week, rigorous graduate level training program. During this program our teachers were immersed in the online world and learn as their future online students will learn. This philosophy and approach is the heart and soul of our program and the teachers often tell us what they've learned in their online teaching and training helps inform their own local, face-to-face instruction.

Barbara A. Popp, Ed.D., is director of curriculum, instruction, and professional development for the Manville School District [3] in New Jersey.

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