

Crafting an Approach to Online Teaching

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Online teaching is in its adolescence and needs to mature in order to overcome some of its growing pains to reach its potential in the field of education. Reflecting upon the author's first three years teaching online, he notes practices and commitments that could help instructors better participate in and facilitate lifelong learning for students. To overcome challenges of online education, such as physical isolation and a sense of disconnectedness, instructors must develop creative and personalized strategies to meet students' needs. The author offers personalized reflections to guide online pedagogy/andragogy, foster dialogue and encourage enhanced student learning in the online classroom. Essentially, teaching in the online classroom involves establishing and developing principles of support and communication that could result in the understanding and application of information.

The online classroom requires creative and personalized input from instructors in order to craft and maintain an effective educational environment. Such creativity and personalization takes time, effort and some love for the students and the job. Two general problems are especially notable. First, faculty must find unique ways to overcome any lack of foundational skills among students. The foundational skills under consideration in this article include reading, writing and comprehension skills. This is a problem in both regular and online classrooms, but the online classroom demands special attention because of the addition barriers of distance and the asynchronous style. Second, faculty in the online classroom must motivate student attention to instructions and diligence in reading, writing and comprehension. As a part of this issue, faculty must overcome the two-edged sword of the personal and community disconnect of the internet classroom.

The personal disconnect refers to the geographical, time and visual barriers of the online environment. These disconnects are currently a part of the online classroom that cannot be corrected. Community disconnect refers to the common view that an online education is inferior to on-the-ground classrooms (Washburn, 2005). Unfortunately, there

is significant evidence that online education is inferior because of the prevalence of current online universities that are more like diploma factories (Hebert, 2007). Washburn (2005) observed, "it was clear that the dream of using information technology to enhance teaching and learning risked being subordinated to other, less noble goals, namely, the desire to make money, cut costs, and further reduce the need for full-time professors" (p. 242). Several steps can be taken to overcome the community disconnects. First, online colleges and universities can commit to academics rather than profit and can work toward hiring faculty members with solid experience in using the online environment. Faculty members should also be encouraged to maintain high standards for students in reading, writing and comprehension. Second, learning institutions can work on improving and maintaining high academic standards. When academics instead of financial profit are prioritized student education will be the focus. A greater focus on academics will also provide great benefit as online graduates are placed in jobs in which their major field of study can be used (Hebert, 2007).

In order to affect resolutions for these major problems in the online classroom, faculty may

need to request additional support from the college or university where they teach. It is common knowledge that discussion forums make up a key aspect of online learning. Grand Canyon University (GCU) online Classroom policies include the statement, "Participating in classroom discussion is paramount to the learning experience" (participation policy, 2010). Research has shown that online discussions can help communicate teacher and student knowledge and student critical thinking skills (Raleigh, 2000). The difficulty in such forums can blossom to ridicule toward students who lack basic writing skills. The discussion forums are the main areas of online classrooms where students process the content of a course. The discussion forums are also the realm in which the teacher can correct student misunderstandings of course subject matter. The university or college of the 21st century must continue to provide tutorial and remedial courses in writing; as well as in reading comprehension.

Other resolutions to major academic problems in the online classroom are special forums (beyond the academic classroom) and additional websites provided by the college or university. The Student Success Center at GCU appropriately includes the Writing Center. Also provided by GCU are Smarthinking Tutoring Services, http://vault.gcu.edu/sharepoint_forms/library/reference.htm, Ask A Librarian and <http://my.gcu.edu/centerforlearning> for help finding personalized assistance (Welcome to Academic Writing presentation, 2012). Other online universities undoubtedly have similar policies and programs to facilitate the student learning. Faculty must present the opportunities for such mentoring, tutorial and remedial courses strongly yet with sensitivity. Online faculty can empathetically promote professional academic reading comprehension and writing.

There are at least two sources for convenient help with academic writing. The first basic source is the wealth of online spelling and grammar checking software. Unfortunately, these online sources cost initially and have regular renewal fees. There are, however online grammar websites like The Purdue Owl (Paiz, Angeli, Wagner, Lawrick, Moore, Anderson, Soderlund, Brizee, & RKeck, 2012) which are very helpful if the student is encouraged and willing to use this resource. The Purdue Owl is a full service writing lab that includes articles on how to write professionally, how to avoid plagiarism and even how to follow APA and MLA formatting. At

the GCU Student Success Center one finds GCU classroom policies and student as well as faculty expectations. The GCU Writing Center includes information on APA style guides, a list of helpful writing websites and examples of writing assignments. The second basic source is the student plus his or her family and friends. If the student struggles with academic writing many issues in a poorly written essay can be overcome by simply reading the essay aloud (Writing Tutorial Services, 2004). This resource can help with corrections by reading the essay aloud to a family member or friend that has a better grasp on academic writing. As the reader stumbles over a particular sentence it is a red flag that perhaps the writing is cumbersome or grammatically errant.

The university success courses that are introductory to university expectations and that provide students with basic skills are helpful in overcoming writing, reading, reading comprehension and study habit problems by providing teaching and examples for basics like budgeting time. Time and effort by faculty is required to motivate student attention and diligence in all student reading and writing assignments. Both students and faculty generally have huge demands on their time. This results in both students and faculty being distracted and therefore unaware of pertinent classroom situations such as student difficulty with material or even physical sickness. The university success courses can provide students with basic skills. Beyond these introductory classes the faculty must take on the responsibility and find the balance between appropriately mentoring the student while not enabling incompetence of gaining and maintaining student attention and diligence.

Faculty can become, not just effective facilitators, but also online cheerleaders to motivate student learning. As such, faculty members need to be cheerleaders that enter the stands to get student attention and motivate diligence that is, the commitment to persevere in study, writing and reading in order to improve skills. Several steps are essential. First, the faculty member must prepare clear and specific course policies, faculty contact information, course announcements and grading rubrics; the rubric can provide specific expectations for every assignment in the areas content, spelling, grammar, and mechanics. In the author's experience, a single generic grading rubric will be

ignored by many students. An accurate, concise rubric which effectively restates assignment instructions can open the eyes of students to the task they are assigned. Even with a specific rubric the faculty should plan on regularly reminding the students to download and review the rubric while preparing an assignment. For complex assignments it may become necessary to provide additional specific instructions for individual assignments. In providing such additional instructions the faculty member must exercise caution to avoid enabling lack of confidence, laziness or incompetence. As a class progresses the faculty can use email, classroom messages, forums for students to pose questions to the instructor; even Twitter, Facebook, personal websites, course announcements and phone calls, when necessary, in order to motivate student attention and diligence. Both classroom forums and these additional means of communication can be effective in sharing knowledge, reflecting on concepts learned and in developing critical thinking. It is important to use more than one method of communication in order to ensure effective and productive contact with the student. The teacher can also be sensitive to which method gets significant response from an individual student, and then obviously to prioritize that method with that student.

A general practice to further motivate attention and motivation includes empathizing with students. Empathizing consists of understanding a student's circumstances based on a general consideration of one's own experiences and communicating that understanding to encourage the student. Empathy can include freely admitting that you as a faculty member are also involved with lifelong learning. Make sure the students know that within the university guidelines they can contact an instructor in the way most convenient to them. Also, an instructor should be approachable. Respond quickly and empathetically to student questions after carefully looking at the question and the question that might be behind the question. Many times students have questions that they have difficulty or fear asking because of personal feelings of insecurity. The result is that a student may ask a question outwardly that is based on a more essential unspoken question. Some questions may be simply based on a student having a lack of confidence. When a student raises a general interest or otherwise important question in a personal message request permission to post the

question and answer in a separate forum designed to promote student questions. When important and appropriate questions are posed to the instructor in a private message the other students may benefit from seeing the teacher's response. In such forums the instructor can encourage appropriate student to student motivation and information transfer. Various levels of experience, gifting and education student to student communication can be an effective means of facilitating learning.

An appropriately structured online classroom can create better communication and a better learning environment. Communication must be a priority in every area of the online classroom from student friendly forum environments to empathetic teachers. In that discussion forums are paramount to learning, the student must be expected to participate regularly and substantively in each module's forum. Substantive posts can be encouraged and defined by teachers with a brief introduction of expectations. Having the first discussion question not due until midnight on the third day of the module week may not keep the attention or encourage diligence among students. In the view of the author the consistent human tendency is to delay to the final hour. Those students who tend to be diligent will provide a well crafted response on day one as well as on day three. When the first discussion question's initial responses are not due until midnight on the third day the instructor is forced to have a conversation with the mirror during the first three days of the week. In other words, the teacher, being required to post responses on five or more days will have to post responses to the discussion question and not to students. Rarely will a student go back to the initial discussion question after the second day of posting an initial response because the student wants to move to the final discussion question for the week. The ways to overcome this last issue is by being aware Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs and using that awareness to motivate adult students towards self-actualization (Boeree, 2006).

Along with the aforementioned problems there are at least two other deleterious results. First, when students finally enter the forum they find a list of posts by the instructor to be somewhat overwhelming. Second, this can easily lead to the module week focus becoming blurry unless those multiple posts by the faculty member are perfectly aligned with the topic. In such a structural environment the in-

structor must provide relatively brief, solidly informative, creatively titled posts that are directly in line with the actual required discussion questions. The faculty member can even summarize a non-discussion question post with encouragement to students to now move on to the actual discussion question.

Faculty can learn to adjust to any weaknesses in classroom structure in order to gain a better place to learn. As students post in the Welcome forum early evaluations can be made and further evaluations of student needs can be made after the first academic posts. Using Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, generically referred to as 'scaffolding', the teacher can determine when a student needs help, correction or redirection and respond accordingly (McCleod, 2010). The teacher can also keep in mind basic behavioral modification concepts as a means to motivate students.

There are several ways in which an instructor can heighten interest in the discussion forum. First, as the module begins, the instructor can provide provocative and intriguing titles for each post, including the required ones. Second, the instructor can provide a current events post that links to a related current event on the topic of the module. Third, the faculty must commit to slowly developing the module week topic with each general post to the forum. The point is to concisely summarize the topic(s) for the week and then, in a logical order present the details of the topic(s) over the first few days of the module week. It is too easy for a faculty member to post large chunks of material in a single message. When the student opens the post, he or she is immediately overwhelmed and either fails to read the post, fails to read the entire post or fails to absorb anything significant from the post. By focusing precisely on the topic of the post and editing its content the instructor can move toward this goal. Instructors can learn and apply the old adage that brevity is the soul of wit.

A current understanding of learning large amounts of data is called "chunking". Chunking is the thought process of grouping informational bits together in categories that a student may naturally remember. This is beneficial when posting in discussion forums. In the Western culture data tends to be better recalled when it is presented in groups of three (Gallo, 2010). This is common reality, but generally unobserved. Consider that the Declaration of Independence records that Americans have the

right to, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". There are only three bears with which Goldilocks had to contend and only three stooges (per show) to create mindless comedy.

It seems better to provide each post with a brief encouragement to the student in the first line that also points the student ahead to the actual content of the post, followed by a concise but informative paragraph or two that communicate significant aspects of the module week focus. Within the main content paragraph the instructor can occasionally find another website or a YouTube video that elaborates on or illustrates some aspect of the module topic.

For the brief concluding paragraph, it is beneficial to do one of several things. In the author's opinion the instructor can phrase a thought provoking question that encourages the student to move ahead to the assigned question. The instructor can also phrase a thought provoking question so that it has a life application stated in it. Finally, benefit for moving the discussion forward can be gained by using that closing question to invite the student to look at another student's post in the forum. The key to the last concise paragraph is to creatively nudge the student further into the forum content and the thought process.

The challenges of the online classroom will continue into the future. The above suggestions are just the beginning of meeting the educational needs of online students. Instructors that love teaching will use some of these suggestions and continue to develop new ideas in order to benefit students. Instructors can use support systems available to them as well as direct students to resources and support that will make learning more likely to occur.

Author Biography

Paul Meyer has been a pastor for about 29 years (both full and part time), having graduated with a BA from The King's College and a ThM from Dallas Seminary. He ministered at a church near Nashville, TN for about 17 years. In the last 12 years he has been at three churches. Two were in Flagstaff, AZ. Currently, he is a part time minister at Lifehouse Community in Surprise, AZ. The church is involved with considerable community ministry and outreach including the program, Celebrate Recovery which is on Fridays. Although he has taught offline at a bachelor's level and online at a master's level, he enjoys the challenges of teaching in the GCU environment.

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