The Future (Revisited) of Online Education

How to design a state-of-the-art asynchronous online course.

By Steven Mintz

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Given the demands on students' time and the pressure to increase credit accumulation, online education will certainly play a growing role in undergraduate as well as graduate and professional education. Many of those classes will offer a pale imitation of a genuine education, consisting of little more than video clips, digitized PowerPoint slides and discussion boards. These are correspondence courses for the digital age.

But it is possible to offer a robust, engaging, highly interactive online instruction, as long as cost savings don't represent our highest priority.

1. Course Design: Conceive of the class as a journey

Our standard approach to online course design -- backward design -- isn't enough. Sure, it's important to identify one's learning objectives and align one's activities and assessments with those goals. But a cutting-edge course needs something more: a narrative arc, a starting point, a sense of direction and a destination.

Conceiving of a course as a journey requires an instructor to think of the course as a series of stops, tasks, challenges, experiences, engagements, encounters and contests. The journey metaphor encourages the instructor to adopt a student-centered design focus, asking, for example, why students take the class, what the students want out of the course, the students' needs and interests, the pinch points they are likely to experience, how they are likely to move through the course, how to keep the students motivated and engaged, and what constitutes success.

2. Instructional Design: Give the course a problem and inquiry focus

Rather than thinking of the course as a body of content that needs to be transmitted or as a series of skills that need to be taught, instead organize the course around questions, challenges and debates. Such an approach makes clear that college is not about memorization and ingesting and regurgitating facts, but about formulating and testing hypotheses, making and refining arguments, building on prior knowledge, and correcting misconceptions.

This approach is relatively easy to adopt in a humanities class. For example, in a history course, a problem or inquiry approach encourages students to recognize that history isn't simply a body of facts, but rather a series of arguments. The questions an instructor might ask involve perspective (How did actors perceive events or their options?) and interpretation (How should a piece of evidence be understood?). The questions can also be causal (What caused something to happen), corrective (How accurate is a particular historical myth or generalization?), explanatory (Why did something happen?) or evaluative (What were the consequences?).

Such an approach can also work in STEM and quantitative social science courses. The key is to integrate opportunities for students to investigate

particular problems, make observations, test various hypotheses and methods, and identify and evaluate possible solutions.

3. Combining the Synchronous and the Asynchronous: An effective asynchronous online class contains synchronous elements

A wholly online asynchronous class eliminates many of the elements that are essential to a robust learning experience: opportunities for collaboration, interchange, improvisation and serendipity. Hangouts, virtual office hours and live interactions offer possibilities for bringing live, first-person interaction into the course.

4. Instructor Presence: Instructor presence in online courses is essential

Instructor presence in online courses can make a big difference in student motivation, engagement and satisfaction. In a face-to-face class, eye contact, humor and simply conveying expectations have a big impact. In online classes, it is also vital that the instructor be visible.

A welcome letter, brief video clips, periodic commentaries, prompts and asides, regular announcements and feedback, connections to current events or items in the news, and outreach to struggling students – these are but a few of the ways to ensure that you are visible to your students.

5. Opportunities for Collaboration, Argument and Conversation: Move beyond discussion boards and chat rooms

Discussion boards rarely promote the kind of engaged interaction that is what we expect in an animated classroom discussion. To replicate that kind of intensity, incorporate debates, brainstorming sessions and role-playing into your online class.

6. Active Learning: Active learning Is as important online as in face-to-face classrooms

Processing information is a key to learning. Simulations, interactives and problem-solving tasks are important to ensure that students meaningfully engage with the course material.

7. Embedded Assessments: Distribute assessments throughout the course

Embedded assessments ensure that students regularly engage with the material. In some cases, these assessments are diagnostic: to help an instructor understand pain points and confusions. In other cases, these are formative learning experiences, helping to hone students' skills and help them accurately monitor their command of course content and concepts

8. Gamification: Consider gamifying your course

What works in video games also can work in the classroom. Points and levels and competitions offer effective ways to help motivate students and prevent them from thinking that a single bad score on a test or essay dooms them to low grade.

9. Multimedia: Appeal to students' senses

Take advantage of the ability of digital environments to support the visual, the audio and the interactive. Rich multimedia can reinforce learning and augment written or spoken explanations. Multimedia sources – ads, film and music clips, fashion, gravestones, hairstyles, and propaganda posters -- can themselves be subject to analysis.

10. Communication: Invite communication

Integrate multiple communication channels into the class. Make it easy for students to communicate with classmates and the instructor.

11. Student Leadership Opportunities: Give students opportunities to lead the class

Transform students into co-instructors. Create opportunities for students to introduce class sessions, lead discussions, make presentations or devise essay questions.

12. Peer Commentary: Share the burden of providing student feedback

Classmates need to learn how to offer constructive feedback. Work with them to create rubrics which they might use to comment constructively on their classmates' written work.

13. Polls and Surveys: Students can provide valuable data for collaborative analysis

Consider surveying your students at the start of a class. What are their anticipated majors? Their career goals? Their motivation for taking the class? Or consider collecting information on their background and attitudes, if this is relevant to the course. Analysis of surveys and polls of students can bring abstract debates to life through the use of authentic, real-world data.

14. Collective Feedback: Share your comments with all students

Providing feedback is time-consuming under all circumstances, but especially in online classes, where many comments are shared one on one. Consider ways to make comments widely available. Discuss problems that occurred in multiple essays or problem-solving exercises. Offer general advice that all students might find helpful.

As long as pioneers in flight tried to mimic birds, their efforts proved futile. Only when the pioneers broke free from slavishly imitating birds did powered,

heavier-than-air flight become possible. So, too, designers of next-generation online learning need to rethink every facet of the educational experience.

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