Transitioning Rapidly to Online Teaching:
Ten Tips to Prepare Instructors for Success
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Linda D. Bloomberg
Northcentral University

In the Spring of 2020, most educational institutions are rapidly having to convert to online education. Suddenly, instructors are no longer in the same physical space as their students. Separated from their students and colleagues, they are having to adjust their teaching approach rapidly, and are most likely learning as they go. This ubiquitous incorporation of technology is an enormous shift from normal operations, one that includes significant challenges such as an overtaxed technological infrastructure, students' disorientation, and fear, and instructors' learning curve. Coping with these adaptive challenges will undoubtedly test the capacity of stakeholders at all levels, including students, instructors, and educational systems. Although technical support teams and personnel are usually available to help instructors learn and implement online learning, these teams typically support a small pool of instructors who are interested in online instruction. In the present situation, these individuals and teams will most likely not be able to offer the same level of support to everybody in such a narrow preparation window. Instructors will, therefore, be required to improvise quick solutions in less-than-ideal circumstances, and many will understandably find this process stressful.

While face-to-face teaching competencies such as knowledge of curricula and pedagogy do transfer to online contexts, it is also essential to recognize some of the unique competencies required for online teaching success. These competencies include technical and communication and administrative skills, as well as ongoing responsiveness, monitoring of learning, and student support. Online learning systems employ a variety of online tools and software, which places new and often unfamiliar demands on the technical competence of teachers. Modes of communication also differ in online courses, with a greater reliance on asynchronous communication methods that do not occur in "real-time." The ability to effectively communicate, manage technology, and deliver and assess content becomes especially important in online environments, where there is less available time to acclimate to new tools and operating environments. The monitoring of student progress, and identification and follow-up of issues or barriers encountered by students are also critical duties for instructors; they help minimize the likelihood of disengagement or withdrawal.

One concern is what instructors will do to ensure that they can meet a much higher set of expectations for quality instruction and learning, especially if schools remain closed--wholly or partially--in the fall. This forced and abrupt move to remote learning may provide institutions with an opportunity to innovate and pilot new approaches, thereby helping to create positive and enduring changes. Indeed, universities may find that they have a new remote-learning capability that can be integrated with on-campus instruction, once this crisis has passed. The current situation is challenging; however, when it is over, institutions of higher education will have the opportunity to reflect on their implementation of effective teaching practices that facilitated continuity and quality of instruction. Additionally, they will emerge with valuable lessons learned. Although the current situation is challenging, when it is over, institutions of higher education can emerge with an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate how they were able to implement effective teaching practices to maintain continuity and quality of instruction, and what were the key lessons learned. Remember, there cannot be one online program or practice that will serve all students' needs equally well. It is imperative, therefore, to ensure that instructors are engaging and inclusive in their teaching approach and that the needs of all students are being met. The following ten tips

have been created to assist instructors in preparing themselves in offering an optimal and successful online learning experience for all.

Ten Recommendations for Optimal and Successful Online Learning Experiences

One: Be Open to Learning

You are used to being an expert in your field. Right now, however, you may be facing a situation where you feel somewhat uncertain and unfamiliar. For most of your students, taking *all* of their classes online will likely be a new experience. If online teaching is new to you as well, do not be afraid to let your students know that you are learning with them. Keep a beginner's mindset. You are not expected to have all the answers right now. However, you should know how to point your students in the right direction if they need support; there are many free resources online to assist, including Sage's Assistance and Resources (Sage Publications, 2020). This resource includes multiple tools and services to support students and instructors alike. Additionally, you can do a Google search, check-in with your institution's IT, call a colleague, or *ask your students*.

They will be happy to help if you make it clear that having a great online course is a *shared project*. As you would tell your students, it is okay - especially in this new environment - to ask questions. Let them know that you are learning *with and from them.* Even though, as the teacher, you are in a position of authority, make it clear that you value their opinion. Strive to instill in your students a sense of autonomy, whereby they feel as though they are active participants in their education. You do this by avoiding the "sage on the stage" or "sit and get" approach to teaching, and in so doing, empower your learners through this student-centered approach. Presenting yourself as a *co-learner* and adopting a learner-centered teaching approach goes a long way in building trust, respect, collaboration, and motivation. Indeed. Learning with and from each other is part of the onboarding process for both you and your students.

Two: Use Technology as a Means to an End

Working in the online environment means that you will have access to a variety of tools and resources that may not be available or applicable in traditional classrooms. Online education can take a wide variety of shapes and forms, due to the numerous ways to combine the essential ingredients such as technology platforms (e.g. learning management systems, broadcasting platforms, social media platforms), media modality (e.g. text, animations, imagery, videos, audio), temporal arrangements (asynchronous and synchronous tools), instructional approaches (e.g. direct instruction, inquiry-based, product-oriented, flipped classroom), student arrangement (individual, small groups, and larger groups), teacher roles, and frequency of interactions among students and instructors.

Different combinations and usage will result in different forms of the overall online learning experience. As you make this quick transition, it is critically important not to get too bogged down with the technology itself, *but to think about pedagogy and engagement.* These are the central tenets, regardless of whether learning is face-to-face or online. Do not confuse technology with teaching. The goal is to *use* technology to facilitate engaging and effective

teaching and learning. Know that technology's tools of engagement (like discussion boards, wikis, journals, and blogs) are just that—tools, not the actual engagement itself. Be aware that YOU are the "secret sauce." A learning management system (LMS) and the available technology and tools are no substitute for a trusted advisor, mentor, learning facilitator, or experienced subject-matter expert like you.

Three: Employ Both Asynchronous and Synchronous Tools

Just as you should not overemphasize the role of technology in this educational moment, you do not want to underplay it either; it is vital to understand and become familiar with the capability of the technology that is available. Most learning management systems have a way to create and integrate teaching tools, both asynchronous and synchronous. As an instructor, you may choose to engage your learners, either asynchronously or synchronously, or make use of a combination of modes, depending on the course content or material that needs to be taught. Thoughtful facilitation methods and combinations of methods and options will serve to build student engagement and persistence.

Asynchronous tools

These include communication that does not occur in real-time, such as group discussion boards, Prezi or PowerPoint presentations, pre-recorded lectures, podcasts, email, text messaging, and posts to announcements. Social media options, including Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and others, can also be used to creatively and meaningfully deliver learning content. Additionally, instructors may choose to pre-record lectures by way of audio and video recordings for playback, by way of podcasts or YouTube. Asynchronous collaboration tools account for time zones by allowing learners to access, listen to, or view lessons at the time, pace, and place of their choosing. Asynchronous options can lead to increased cognitive engagement since students will have more time to engage with and explore the course material. Additionally, this method also creates an accessible archive of past materials. One disadvantage is that course material may be misunderstood, or potentially be misconstrued without the real-time interaction and without the opportunity to ask questions and receive necessary explanation or clarification "at the moment."

Synchronous tools

These include real-time communication methods such as instant messaging, group chats, video or web-conferencing, and phone communication. Applications such as Google Hangouts, VSee, or Zoom allow instructors to participate in and monitor communications and interactions with a single student, a select group of students, or the entire online class. Some video and web-conferencing tools offer combinations of communication mechanisms, giving learners opportunities to text, chat, share material, and video conference at the same time. This type of immediate personal engagement between learners and instructors has the potential to lessen feelings of isolation and create a sense of community. Responsive exchanges between learners and instructors may prevent miscommunication or misunderstanding. One challenge to using synchronous tools is the requirement to coordinate availability with all learners so that everybody

has equal access. Additionally, some learners may face technical difficulties if they do not have adequate Wi-Fi networks.

Four: Reconceptualize Face-to-Face Teaching Materials

Schwieger and Ladwig (2018) discuss the current generation of students, Generation Z, who were born between 1996 and 2012. Like millennials, they were raised with technology. However, for Generation Z, technology is an inherent part of their everyday life activities. Understanding Generation Z's unique characteristics will help higher education instructors rethink what they are doing in their classrooms, and becoming more conscious of their students' learning needs. Although it may not be possible to work individually with every student, you can try to understand their learning needs and implement new ideas. As such, you will need to become more skilled in different types of devices, programs, and applications that can be integrated into your classes. You can do this by developing activities that are related to the course and meaningful to your students.

The multimedia principle (Clark & Mayer, 2011) contends that students grasp and understand new material better, and can remember it longer when the presentation is multimodal. As such, your role can and should extend beyond verbal and written communication to include audio and video modes of communication and teaching. Most learning management systems have a way to create and integrate teaching tools and resources. Effectively incorporating audio and visual materials begins with understanding how to rethink or reimagine face-to-face teaching materials, and transforming these into content that makes the best use of the online medium as its unique communication forum. However, creating audio and video materials is not merely a matter of transcribing your face-to-face lectures into a document that you then post in your LMS. While this is an improvement over text, some instructors may also choose to create online videos by just adding narration to a PowerPoint presentation. Once again, they are thinking in terms of the face-to-face paradigm by reading pages of notes.

In the online environment, Audio and visual content should not be used for projecting your detailed notes; instead, the purpose is to skillfully convey the concepts to be learned, and amplify the learning experience with images that provide an emotional emphasis and visual analog to the concepts being taught. The imagery itself is what makes the abstract concepts easier to grasp, understand, and remember. All information should be conveyed in terms of its significance. Thus, the first task is to identify the important information, and develop a single theme for each audio or video presentation. Grab your students' attention by letting them know clearly why the material is essential and how it will benefit them. Once you have developed a theme and state the significance of each part of the lesson in terms of that theme. You will then proceed to record the narration and add relevant images to your presentation. Be wary of cluttering your presentation with too many images, or trying to create something that looks like a slick, professional product. Indeed, if you do not have time to create new audio or video material, post your lecture notes or PowerPoints. If you have not yet been able to create PowerPoints, post your notes. If you do not have notes, dictate your expertise into an audio recording application (such as VoiceThread) or use your smartphone to create an audio (MP3) or video (MP4) file. As you move forward, you can begin creating relevant online materials. Remember, the point is to create material that is clearly and logically

presented for your audience. You want your students to find the materials interesting, relevant, and meaningful, so they will engage the content and learn from it.

Five: Ensure Accessibility

Equal access to education is mandated by law, and is grounded in the hope that all people will have equal access to course content. Therefore, it is imperative to comply with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act of 2008 (ADAAA), and Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, as amended in 1998.

Online learning is fundamentally mediated by learners and the devices they use to access this learning. Access to education does not necessarily mean inclusion, nor will access necessarily ensure or engender inclusion. As you move to the online environment, keep in mind that what works for some students can harm others. For example, some programs may work for students who have more experiences with online activities but can hurt those who are just learning how to use online educational tools or who may have connectivity issues. In addition to economic inequality concerns, the "digital divide" (the uneven distribution regarding access to or use of technology) also includes a need to address proper accommodations for those with learning disabilities, as these students will require additional attention and support.

Each individual has a preferred mode of receiving and processing information or demonstrating their knowledge and abilities. Be aware of your preferred methods; you may tend to over-use those techniques, and this relates to our own implicit bias regarding how people learn. Because one size does not fit all, you will need to be very thoughtful in your approach so that you remain engaged and inclusive at all times. Provide for flexibility in the ways that information is presented, in the ways that learners can become engaged, and how they can respond or demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Be cognizant of facilitating accessibility right from the start. Make sure that all content is accessible; that it supports all learners and ensures inclusion; and that it provides multiple opportunities for engagement, interaction, and challenge. As an instructor, you have a responsibility to recognize which tools and formats (document and media) support accessibility and which do not. Be aware of using media thoughtfully, including both synchronous and asynchronous activities. Work with your institution's instructional designer and disability-resources specialists to ensure accessibility by designing specific approaches and making accommodations regarding technical competencies as needed. For example, institutions can record courses and add closed captioning, so that students who are hearing impaired or have auditory processing delays can keep up. The goal is to create an environment of support and challenge that can reach and inspire students with different needs, abilities, and learning preferences. It is critical, therefore, to minimize the barriers in instruction by providing appropriate accommodations and support as needed. Your pedagogy and teaching approach - not the convenience of technology - should drive all of your content choices.

Six: Be Present

A central aspect to promoting learner engagement, and in turn, ongoing success is the sense of presence. Presence is essentially a state of being or "nearness" in space or time, a state or condition of "now." Moreover, how online educators present themselves to their learners, or how they frame themselves, impacts positive behaviors in the course and opens the lines of communication even further. The concept of "teaching presence" is a key component of the Community of Inquiry Model, developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001, 2003). This concept relates to instructors developing collaborative working relationships and interacting with learners in order to bridge the distance inherent in the online environment, and generate greater engagement and success. Research shows that presence in the online education context includes *learners' perceptions* of instructor involvement as a central factor, with higher levels of engagement and more positive perceptions leading to more profound satisfaction with the learning experience. It also leads to higher levels of achievement and a greater likelihood of course completion (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). Because you are no longer in the same physical space as your students, your communication skills become paramount. Effective instructor-student communication in online learning environments relies on timely and transparent interactions through a variety of formats, including email, chat, live class questions, and assessment and feedback provision.

In the absence of more direct feedback methods available to on-campus instructors (e.g., face-to-face consultation), the assessment and feedback provided in online learning environments need to be as clear as possible to promote student understanding. Online instructor support involves effective monitoring of student progress, anticipation and resolution of crucial learning queries, and establishment and maintenance of rapport. Collectively, these kinds of competencies will shape your effectiveness as an online instructor and, in turn, the student's learning experience. Therefore, do not be the "person behind the curtain." At this moment, online learning is new and unfamiliar to most students, so high "teaching presence" is more critical now than it has ever been. Log into your course every day. Make use of group communications, such as the announcement function in your LMS, to touch base with your students every few days. If you are able, consider posting a video check-in for students at the same time every day. Usually, 48-hour response time is typical. Set expectations of when you will and will not be available. Instructor presence is established when your students feel that you are there for them. Therefore, regularly and consistently remain visible and available by staying in touch.

Seven: Promote Ongoing Engagement

In the rush to transition to online instruction, there may be an impulse to use the learning management system (LMS) as a content repository, whereby you upload all the relevant documents and materials, schedule a lecture in Zoom, and voila you have an online course. In the rush to transition to online instruction, there may be an impulse to simply upload content to the LMS and schedule a Zoom lecture. Nevertheless, such a course will not promote lasting change—as you would expect your classroom course to do. As you construct your class, ask yourself if your expected learning outcomes will be achieved. Avoid the trap of choosing "coverage" over engagement. Research consistently recognizes engagement as one of the most significant factors

impacting academic performance and overall achievement. Student engagement and instructor engagement are two sides of the same coin and are inherently reciprocal (Bloomberg & Grantham, 2018; Bloomberg, 2020). Student engagement ensures ongoing motivation and persistence. Instructor engagement implies the idea of being "present" for your learners, thereby establishing a sense of "teaching presence." This requires reimagining your role as "teacher," and moving toward becoming a proactive and responsive partner in the educational experience by thoughtfully developing meaningful working relationships with all of your students.

More important than using technology to engage is that you are aware of your online persona, and how you are "showing up." Ensure you humanize the online learning environment in order to increase students' investment in the educational experience. They will be more apt to overcome whatever obstacles they are facing and have a greater sense of buy-in if they see their instructor as a human being. Your presence and visibility are, therefore, essential, since you provide support to your students throughout the course.

Remain flexible and keep an open mind so that you do not overlook individual differences regarding learning preferences and abilities. Flexibility with deadlines for assignments within courses, course policies, and institutional policies is also strongly considered. Additionally, remain flexible with assignment deadlines, course policies, and institutional policies. In your classes, allow students to take turns leading online discussions, either via Zoom or on the discussion board. Add peer-to-peer support, incorporate collaborative group work, and provide frequent opportunities for feedback. Additionally, remember that for many students, the value of higher education comes not only through academic coursework but also from the vibrancy of campus life. Therefore, think about how to use existing tools to move in-person gatherings online and open up spaces for discussions and events of interest. The idea is to offer virtual spaces in place of physical ones that enable the university community to connect. These techniques will help you promote ongoing engagement and begin to build and establish a vibrant and meaningful learning community.

Eight: Offer Technical Support

One of the most immediate and unique hurdles in rushing online is the necessity to provide adequate technical support to prepare students for learning in this online-only environment. Tertiary institutions offering fully online courses need to ensure that all technical requirements are communicated to students before commencing the course. That ongoing technical support is provided to reduce delay in meeting course expectations. This is particularly important for intensive modes of online study where assessment deadlines leave little to no room for technical-based hurdles.

The strong relationship between a student's acceptance of technology and their perceived satisfaction with online courses is also important to consider, as this may pose additional hurdles to incoming cohorts unaccustomed to learning in an online environment. When students or instructors lack the required technical competence, this can pose a significant and often insurmountable barrier, contributing to student disengagement or withdrawal from the course—as such, adopting a user-friendly learning environment and flexible online technical support is critical

for intensive online courses in order to increase student retention and engagement. Without adequate technological skills, instructors run the risk of being unable to resolve technology-related problems during the live class, which may impact student access to learning materials.

You are certainly not expected to have all the answers. However, know that your students *will* be turning to you for support. A good idea, therefore, is to partner with your institution's IT department to determine the technical issues that students are most likely to encounter when accessing an online course. This may include forgotten passwords, disabling of pop-up blockers, browser issues, or creating a Word document or PowerPoint presentation. Educate yourself on what the main issues could be. To avoid spending more time troubleshooting technical problems than teaching your content, consider developing FAQs or links to websites or videos that provide solutions to the most common problems. You are not expected to become a programmer or to intervene adequately on technical matters. However, you will need to be prepared to tell your students where they can find relevant and helpful information and direct them to the appropriate resources. Reach out to your institution's IT department or to your colleagues, who are no doubt also navigating these very same challenges. There are many free resources out there to get you started. Make use of OERs (Open Educational Resources), as these provide a wealth of information (such as videos, articles, examples, case studies, rubrics) and other useful tools for both you and your students. Creative Commons is an excellent place to start, and YouTube also has some beneficial videos. Additionally, ensure you collaborate with you colleagues to share new-found resources and best practices.

Nine: Seek Feedback Early and Often

Demonstrate that you consider your students' active partners in the learning experience by asking them for feedback and making changes accordingly. This will reinforce your presence and enable you to continue to offer a beneficial learning experience. It will also help students feel more engaged and give them a sense of ownership of the course. Soon after your class begins, reach out and ask your students about how things are going for them. Administering a brief survey is a way to assess the "temperature of the room," and gives you an early (and most likely, necessary) warning system. The point is not to give yourself a grade, but to find out which students are struggling and what they are struggling with. You might consider using a simple 3-question questionnaire.

Use a tool like Survey Monkey if you do not know how to set up a survey in your LMS. Ask simple open-ended questions such as:

- What is the best thing about this experience so far?
- What have you found most difficult in the move to online learning?
- How can I help you to prepare better going forward?

These basic questions allow students to share their viewpoints. You may find that you were completely unaware of some of the stumbling points or obstacles that they are facing. Some of the issues may be as simple as limited access to an assignment because of a pop-up blocker or some other easy-to-fix issue. Other times there may be more significant hurdles such as feelings of

isolation or exclusion. In all instances, be sure to assist your students who indicate that they require some form of support, reaching out for personal consultations as needed, and seeking technical support from your institution's IT department if necessary.

Additionally, be sure to address those issues that you were made aware of, as this will serve to improve and enhance the learning experience. Engaging your students by interacting and communicating with them, and making changes as needed, allows you to be more connected to your students as individuals. This is also a significant opportunity for your students to see you as a source of support. By reinforcing positivity, you can guide them effectively through these unprecedented times as a trusted mentor.

Ten: Engage in Reflective Practice

Take a moment each day to stop, think, and reflect. Rodgers (2020) writes about reflection as it relates to "teaching presence," explaining how reflective teaching is grounded in a living and evolving philosophy of practice. With the passing of each day, you will develop a greater awareness and understanding of the complex challenges and barriers to learning that exist in the online environment. Each day you will also be developing a greater awareness of how to facilitate meaningful and engaging online learning experiences for your students, and ways to increase their opportunities for success and achievement.

Reflection is a vital skill that is central to the capacity to learn from experience and to apply that learning to professional practice. Therefore, embrace the opportunity to reflect on and consolidate what you have learned and think about how to apply your new-found knowledge and skills best. As you move forward through the rest of the semester, and possibly into the next semester, take the time to reflect on and make notes for yourself of what works and what does not work, and the improvements you were able to introduce. Plan to use these nuggets of information in future online courses.

Teaching online courses comes with some unique challenges. You are tasked with delivering course content, helping students navigate the technology, engaging students in discussion, monitoring student progress, encouraging perseverance, providing timely and detailed feedback, and fostering interaction between students. You are expected to be flexible, responsive, and committed to engaging and retaining all of your students. All of this being said, do not be too hard on yourself. There are so many great things happening in the world of teaching and learning, so this is a beautiful learning opportunity. Undoubtedly, this is new, and so it will not be perfect.

Give yourself some credit for what you are accomplishing in a short space of time. In truth, many of the online learning experiences that instructors will be able to offer their students at such short notice will likely not be fully featured or necessarily well planned, and there is a high potential for ongoing improvements. Think of your first online course as Version 1.0, and remember that the first time will not be perfect – so for now, start by using that which you know "works." Long past the current national health crisis, there will most certainly be a Version 2.0 and 3.0., so you are not expected to be adventurous or even perfect right at the start of this journey. Welcome the opportunity to learn and improve. Treat this period of upheaval as a chance to pursue

innovation. You have a valuable opportunity to focus on learning, shift to student-centered instruction, and look for new opportunities the online setup affords. Take some time to re-examine learning outcomes and the development of universal skills, instill in students a sense of resilience and the ability to adapt to unfamiliar territory. Our higher education system depends not just on your technical expertise, but mostly upon your pedagogical insights and competencies. Keep your commitment to excellence in teaching a top priority while you remain open to acquiring these crucial 21st century skills. You will come to realize that online teaching practices are skills to be developed, and that skill development comes with time, insight, and experience.

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