

BEST PRACTICES IN ONLINE EDUCATION: Online Instructors, Courses, and administrators

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ABSTRACT

Learning and teaching online imposes certain challenges on both students and teachers. Teachers should be prepared to meet special requirements of teaching online. Teachers play an important role in teaching. Roles of teachers increase with introducing the online learning, contrary to an early assumption perceived with the invention of the Internet. Designing and developing online courses need collaboration of several people with a variety of interests and expertise, including administrators, teachers, designers, and technical specialists. Each course within the curriculum should be well-designed and fit well within the curriculum. The curriculum in turn should reflect the current state of the discipline, enabling the learners to develop appropriate proficiency and mastery within the specific discipline.

This paper describes the roles of teachers and administrators in online learning, and discusses the rules of best practices for both.

Keywords: Online learning, best practices, online teachers, online courses, online administrators

INTRODUCTION

There is no universally accepted definition of what a best practice is. However, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) describes best practices as having four common characteristics: they are innovative; they make a difference; they have a sustainable effect; and they have the potential to be replicated and to serve as a model for generating initiatives elsewhere (UNESCO, n.d). When applied to a particular condition, a best practice must ensure the delivery of the most effective outcome, based on repeatable procedures or activities that have been proven they over time for large numbers of people.

The best practice in education is the most efficient (least amount of effort) and effective (best results) way by which society transmits its accumulated knowledge and skills from one generation to another. The use of computers and the Internet in transmitting knowledge and skills is blossoming, and new technology is increasingly being used to complement established education practices and develop new ways of learning such as online education. For technology to offer powerful learning tools for engaging students, online curricula must be developed based on best practices principles and taught by highly qualified teachers using principles of effective online teaching. An academic curriculum is composed of several coherent courses related by themes, enabling the learners to move from the basic foundation of knowledge to more advanced, sophisticated levels of critical thinking and mastery of skills. The attention devoted to each and every course composing the curriculum will lead to a powerful teaching tool, ending with a recognizable scientific degree.

Similarly, the traditional role of teachers is being challenged as a reflection of changing teaching philosophies. Online learning, with its steady increase in popularity and acceptance, exerts more strain on teachers to change their tools and concepts of teaching and evaluating. As an online teacher, close adherence to instructor best practices and expectations ensures a successful outcome of the learning process, which is rewarding to both the teacher and learner alike.

BEST PRACTICES: Instructor

The online instructor must actively participate in all dimensions of the online classroom. The two contradictory assumptions that, once created, the online classroom can manage itself versus that the online instructor should be available to the students 24/7 are both faulty. Ragan (2008) emphasizes that students in an online course rely on the instructor to follow the established course schedule and to deliver the course within the scheduled time frame. However, the online instructor is expected to make schedule adjustments as needed to manage special circumstances. The online instructor must serve as a guide to facilitate learning and must do that in a more pronounced way because of the lack of face-to-face interactions.

One benefit of online teaching is that the facilitator need not worry about preparing teaching materials before each 'class' begins because the core teaching material, resources, and instructional strategies need to be in place prior to the start of the class. This fact gives the online teacher the liberty and time to interact more with students, responding to their inquiries, addressing difficult subject matter, and engaging more in discussion boards (Faculty Focus, n.d.).

In order for the students not to depend excessively on their instructor as the sole link to the course, which may demand more time and energy from the instructor, a well developed syllabus addressing proactively many of the course dynamics and the use of 'frequently asked questions' are recommended to overcome the mentioned drawback in this area. Mastering learning management system (LMS) of the course will also assist the faculty in attending to the details of course management (Porter, 2004). The effective use of the LMS's tools enables the online teacher to oversee the students' progress via reporting functions such as summaries of student online activity, participation in discussion groups, and completion of course assignments.

Another important factor that reflects on time and energy the instructor spends managing an online course is the student-teacher ratio (Bower, 2001). The number of students enrolled in an online course should be large enough to ensure interaction and dialogue amongst course participants, but at the same time enable the instructor to easily monitor and manage the students' activities and performances. The key is to free the instructors to concentrate their time and energy on crafting a truly engaging learning experience while empowering the learners to take responsibility for managing their own learning experience. Communication amongst the learners and between the learners and their instructor is of paramount importance in addressing the different roles and responsibilities that are expected from each participant. A richer and more equitable learning experience is one of the advantages of online learning over face-to-face learning because of the ability to provide communications to all participants (Gao & Lehman, 2003).

Another best practices rule is establishing patterns of course activities that can aid both instructor and student alleviating confusion of course operation (Faculty Focus, n.d.). Obviously, one of the most striking benefits of online learning is working without the confines of time and location.

However, “anytime, anyplace” education imposes challenges on both student and instructor regarding time management and operation. This lack of operating parameters can be controlled by establishing a pattern of course activity and communicating that to the learner, who should then develop a plan of study to meet the course’s requirements. This course schedule and pattern aids both the instructor and learner to manage course-related activities while at the same time balancing the demands of work and other life commitments. Without a question, online learning needs discipline and time management skills to keep pace with the requirements of the online classroom. Therefore, most online students are older than traditional-aged learners (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008), and, expectedly, they have developed these core skills. Instructors and learners should develop work timeframes to prevent the class from interfering with other responsibilities and other life activities which, if taken place, will result in exhausted and overwhelmed situations.

Established course-related patterns should not prevent *flexibility*—one of the touted advantages of the online learning space; good instructors allow a modicum of flexibility to compensate for different styles of teaching and learning, unexpected technological problems, students’ feedback, and emergency cases. However, when established patterns need to be changed, it is a good habit to create a line of communication regarding these changes: reasons (travel, technology-related excuses, and “life happens”), duration, and a definite “resume function” date. It should be realized that these changes may also be required by the instructor and this will have a greater impact on the course because any interruption in the service may create confusion and anxiety on the part of the learner as the instructor is almost the sole link to the virtual classroom. Again, “having thought through communications strategies for both short term and long term scenarios enables all class participants to manage those times when schedules change, course adjustments need to be made, and life happens” (Faculty Focus, n.d., p. 12).

The time frame for instructors responding to learners’ inquiries should be reasonable. The online instructor should communicate this timeframe from the early beginning of the course and this will reduce student frustration waiting for the instructor’s feedback. Instructors should be aware of the fact that further progress in learners’ academic work may hinge on the instructor’s reply or feedback to an inquiry or a question. The norms for how long it should take before receiving a reply range from one business day during the week to 48 hours over a weekend (Ragan, 2009).

This means that instructors should attend the course activities at least once per weekday, and at least once over the weekend. More importantly, establishing and communicating a response rate expectation by the instructor leads to student satisfaction with the learning system and helps eliminate the guessing and frustration of not receiving an immediate response (Ragan, 2009).

Similarly, unsolicited feedback to assignments, quizzes, and other learning activities should also be current, relevant, and within the established timeframe. Excessive delay (for example, longer than 72 hours) should be avoided unless this time will be invested in articulating well-crafted responses that will improve the teaching and learning experience for all class participants. In such situations, the instructors may communicate a short notice informing the students of the need for extra time beyond the established timeframe. The lines and tools of communication between the instructor and learners should be determined and for ensuring safety and security it is preferable to be within institutionally supported and maintained communication systems.

Therefore, the online instructor must adequately understand the online learning platform available to online learners and, preferably, experience each functional dimension of the online course in order to help learners take advantage of the system's functionality and performance (Faculty Focus, n.d.; Porter, 2004).

The above-mentioned best practices define the anticipated teaching and classroom management behaviors of the online instructor. Careful adherence to these principles helps the instructor identify and overcome potential barriers and limitations to online learning and achieve the performance expectations. High-quality course content is also essential for a successful learning experience, and will be addressed in the following section.

BEST PRACTICES: Course

Designing and developing online courses needs collaboration of several people with a variety of interests and expertise, including administrators, teachers, designers, and technical specialists.

Each course within the curriculum should be well-designed and fit well within the curriculum. The curriculum in turn should reflect the current state of the discipline, enabling the learners to develop appropriate proficiency and mastery within the specific discipline. McGreal (2005) in an article titled "Development Principles for Online Courses:

A Baker's Dozen," listed a dozen principles useful for initiating and supporting online projects. They can be summarized as the following.

- *Beg or borrow (steal!) courseware, or learning objects.* Learning materials are available in several sites, such as Merlot, Careo, MIT's Open Courseware Initiative, Java SIG, and Co-operative Learning Object Exchange, and you can use the learning materials accessible through the Web as is or with some modifications to make them customized to the course objectives. Even if you should pay for these materials, studies show that reusable learning objects cost less money and consume less time than developing and creating your own (Elliott, & Sweeney, 2007).
- *Take what exists and build the course around it.* Instead of building a course out of scratch, you can build courses around available materials. Literature reported on several courses that have used off-the-shelf proprietary materials for developing specific relevant tasks in English, nursing, and business (Christiansen & Anderson, 2004).
- *Avoid the "not invented here" syndrome.* You may choose a tried-and-true course invented by others to be included in your institutional curriculum (Nash, 2004). The notion that things developed by others are always inferior and those internally developed are superior proves to be invalid. Moreover, adaptation of external courses to blend with invented ones will offer the learners with different learning styles the opportunity to meet and serve their individual needs.
- *Know the content—garbage in, garbage out.* Sound content is essential for effective teaching and learning (Porter, 2004). Therefore, content experts should always be fully involved with the course planning and development. In order that sound subject content translates into good learning content, instructional designers should also be part of the course development team.

- ***Provide different routes to learning.*** Research shows that individuals may try different styles of learning according to factors such as complexity of the concept being learned, the time of the day, the quality of the presentation format, and the level of interactivity (McGreal, 2005). Therefore, learning materials should be presented in a variety of formats to look appealing to the learner and the outcome tested in several independent ways. Fortunately, the online environment enables course development specialists to make the passion for diversity easily attainable.

BEST PRACTICES: Administration

Fear about the quality of an online curriculum may deter faculty from effectively participating in planning, developing, and teaching courses online. In order to alleviate such a fear, administrators of an institution that offers both online and on-site classes should deal with faculty issues and course issues in a way to move the institution forward and, preferably, based on best practices principles. Porter (2004) mentioned five principles for developing an effective online curriculum that help an academic institution implement successful online programs and lessens the fears among faculty and administrators about the quality of online curricula and education. These principles include: 1) Recognize that the ways courses or programs may be created can differ, but the resulting product should be equally high quality, 2) Value on-site and online faculty equally, 3) Avoid playing off on-site classes against online classes, 4) Create equally credible online and on-site courses and degree programs, and 5) Set up a dialogue between on-site and online faculty—if they are different groups of faculty. Looking at these principles, two key factors are integrated: curricula and teachers. Best practices must ensure sound curricula and highly qualified teachers.

Recognize That the Ways Courses or Programs May Be Created Can Differ, But The Resulting Product Should Be Equally High Quality

Many educators, particularly those who were traditionally taught, see teaching online as an enormous time sink that will not improve learning. It should be realized, however, that online teaching is different (but not better or less so) from face to face teaching. Online students are expected to read and understand materials on their own, and online facilitators must be able to support students by defining clear expectations for student participation and pacing. Teaching practices must be adjusted to reflect the changes needed by introducing online teaching format and teachers need to change the way they teach to reflect their new understandings of how to teach with technology. Online education requires discipline and time management skills from both the learners and facilitators. The course content must also be able to be delivered well online.

Porter (2004) argued that not every discipline may be well defined through an online curriculum, and that discipline's experts must determine whether the body of knowledge and skills of a particular discipline are a good match for the current state of online education. Actually students pursuing the doctorate in Computing Technology in Education at Nova Southeastern University agreed that not all courses translate well to an online format (Deubel, 2003), which faculty at University of Illinois (1999) and Valentine's study (2002) also reported on.

To ensure quality, online courses should be completed, reviewed, and pre-tested for accuracy before their implementation. Quality is affected also by the choice of instruction delivery system; the technology being used to deliver course content should be based on desired learning outcomes and not on the availability of technology.

Value On-Site and Online Faculty Equally

Although online learning requires students to take a more active role in facilitating their own learning, faculty play a significant motivating factor to enriching learning environment. Without a doubt, the number of faculty teaching online courses is steadily increasing. Online education is a new specialty, requiring teachers to rethink their teaching practices. Similarly, there is a need for effective faculty support and development in online education. At the early beginning of distance education, virtual adjunct faculties have carried higher education into the cyber classroom (Puzziferro, 2005).

For example, about 80% of all online course offerings at Florida Community College at Jacksonville were taught by virtual adjuncts in 2005 (Puzziferro, 2005). Managing adjuncts that are geographically separated can be challenging and work against involvement and engagement. However, the adoption of the seven principles of good practice helps virtual adjuncts become a highly valued and precious resource for distance and online learning, and as a result, the stigma of being “cyber-faculty” once endured, is diminishing (Puzziferro, 2005).

The first principle in managing virtual faculty is good practice encourages contact: frequent faculty-institution contact is the most important factor in faculty motivation and involvement. Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation is the second principle, and it is based on the premise that good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Creating shared communities enable connecting faculty to the institution, the administrators, and the students, and this will help increase accountability and promote retention among students and faculty alike. Faculty must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. This would encourage active learning. Professional development is one of the most important motivators for online faculty, and this provides incentive for faculty to improve their teaching skills, earn a certificate, receive a stipend, and network with onsite faculty and other online faculty.

In the online environment, faculty need to know whether they are meeting the institution’s expectations (good practice gives prompt feedback), and whether that be met in a timely manner (good practice emphasizes time on task). Faculty who know that they are working for a professional organization that demonstrate a commitment to quality and expect more—and they are in return will get more—are more likely to feel accountable to that institution. According to Puzziferro and Shelton (2009), close adherence to the seven principles of good practice will undoubtedly enhance online faculty satisfaction and effectiveness.

Avoid Playing Off On-Site Classes Against Online Classes

Different learning offerings by universities should be perceived as sincere endeavors to accommodate the needs of learners. Online learning programs are designed to serve an off-campus population, providing access to higher education for students who cannot attend traditional courses due to several reasons, such as employment, family responsibilities, and distance. There are conflicting attitudes about online learning. In general, people rated the online courses as lower in quality than traditional courses taught on campus (Inman, Kerwin, & Mayes, 1999).

Later studies found that students perceive that they achieve higher quality educational outcomes in the online learning environment, and that they do not believe that they sacrifice a quality of education for the convenience of utilizing this type of learning which allows them to balance their other commitments more easily (Hannay & Newvine, 2006).

Porter (2004) stated several points that, when implemented, would help put both types of learning environments in their correct perspectives as a niche for quality learning:

- Both on-site and online programs need administrative support to allocate the appropriate, necessary sources for success,
- Online courses and on-site courses should not have to compete for the same group of learners,
- Online and on-site classes should follow the same rules within an institution, such as required credentials or prerequisites, and
- One type of program should not be considered better, easier, or of a different quality.

Individuals who are typically enrolled in an online education system are different than those enrolled in an on-site education system; they are married, non-traditional being in the educational environment by choice, and older (25 to 40 years of age) (Hannay & Newvine, 2006).

Create Equally Credible Online and On-Site Courses and Degree Programs

What matters is the high quality of learning, whether that learning is offered on campus or via the Internet. Recently, institutions find advantages in integrating some of the best aspects of online learning into traditional courses to build a hybrid learning environment, or at least using newer technologies to enhance on-site courses. There are many roads to learning, and good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning (Puzziferro, 2005).

Set Up a Dialogue Between on-Site And Online Faculty-If They Are Different Groups of Faculty

Online faculty are the vital bridge between nontraditional students and institutions that are traditional, enabling these institutions to integrate online education into the core organizational mission while at the same time protecting the faculty roles in research and scholar activities.

Online faculty, who started their work in these institutions as adjuncts and part-timers, are increasingly becoming highly professionalized and full-timers. Porter (2004) urged administrators not to isolate faculty; rather, she encouraged them to find ways for them to work together and communicate.

Poor acceptance of traditional faculty to online education can be explained based on the lack of knowledge about the benefits of online education venues and the separation between on-site and online faculty.

Creative ways to engage online faculty within the context of their disciplines and to share other faculty in developing and maintaining quality and academic integrity are needed.

CONCLUSION

What matters is the high quality of learning, whether that learning is offered on campus or via the Internet. Online education requires discipline and time management skills from both the learners and facilitators. The course content must also be able to be delivered well online. Quality is affected by the choice of instruction delivery system; the technology being used to deliver course content should be based on desired learning outcomes and not on the availability of technology.

This paper presented the best practices rules of effective online teaching and learning pertinent to instructors, course designs, and administrators.

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