What are Tips for Teaching Online?
Andrea Hendricks

Hello, my name is Andrea Hendricks. I am an Associate Professor of Mathematics and the Senior Director of Online Initiatives at Georgia State University Perimeter College. I have been teaching online for the past 20 years of my 29-year career in higher education. Throughout those 20 years, a lot has changed, but I have learned a lot that really remains the same regardless of the technology or the new innovations that are developed through online education. And I would like to take a few moments to share my experience and tips for teaching online that I hope you can implement in your own classes.

It is difficult to sum up my 20-year experience teaching online in a few slides, but I will attempt to do so. I really think it boils down to these five lessons that I have learned. That is, that teaching online is more than moving content online. Student success does not arise by chance. The instructor is the most important part of the course. And I will explain what I mean by that. Designing effective online courses is work. And, it is necessary to address students' misconceptions about online learning.

So, I initially thought that if I put my content out there, right, in an online environment that students would know how to use the tools and navigate through the content and that they would actually use the resources on their own. That they would read the book and watch the videos. Boy was I wrong. Students went straight to what was for a grade and by-passed the very resources that could help them succeed. They could get a 100 on the homework but often fail proctored exams. They were working to get the grade not studying to learn and retain the information.

When teaching at a distance, students need guidance through the learning process and your content. You must curate the resources they need and make mandatory what is good for them. At-risk students do not do optional. If the activity is valuable to their learning, then make it part of the grade. I also had to build in strategies from learning science that would change the way students interact with the material. I had to integrate interactive lessons that could help them practice their common mistakes and misconceptions and give them immediate feedback.

What is obvious to you is not obvious to novice learners. They need help making connections and understanding what is important. Students learn by what they think and do. So you must create opportunities for them to make meaningful connections and to reflect on what they are learning. Your activities should be purposeful and have a clear connection to the course. And, according to transparency in learning, you need to explain the purpose to your students.

An online course is student-centered. The teacher is not just the knowledge giver but relationship builder. Without your physical presence in a classroom, students need your virtual presence checking in on them, discussing their progress and help knowing they are not alone. They need to know that a bot is not running the course.

Tip 2 is that student success does not arise by chance. If that was not the case, our pass rates in online courses would by sky high. For online courses, the first two weeks (in my mind) are the most critical. In that time, we need to be ultra present, passionate, and compassionate with our students. We must create swift trust with our students by showing them that we are accessible and reachable and that we will respond to their questions in kindness and with immediacy. If a student falls behind during the first two weeks, there is little hope of catching up. One thing that you could do to help in this area is to provide opportunities for students to meet with you virtually during the first two weeks and offer that as a homework grade or offer some incentive – bonus points or something for students to actually go through and make that meeting happen.

We must provide feedback in a meaningful and timely manner. You would do this naturally in a face-to-face class after returning a graded exam. It takes effort to do this online, but it is no less important. In fact, all the literature I read about online class's states that feedback is probably the most important item. Our feedback should also be faster than the US mail service, or we have reduced our class to a correspondence course.

An institution must also have a culture of supporting students – don't let them start an online class in the 3rd week of the semester (really after the first day of classes), provide online tutoring options, online advising options, etc. You must be able to meet the needs of online students just as you do f2f environment. Have an early alert system, faculty training. Ideally, you would have a centralized online program that can cultivate online faculty, and develop and create consistent practices and policies.

You also need to integrate study strategies. I've mentioned this a little bit on the previous slide. Strategies from learning science - metacognition activities, mindset. We need to provide clear and consistent information about what it takes to succeed in your course. Show them ideas from learning science that are grounded in learning science about how to effectively study for your course. Show them that learning actually requires a productive struggle and that mistakes grow their brain. You should also implement time for regular reflection. Things like exam wrappers, time for them to elaborate on topics you've presented, summaries for your modules.

And, lastly, we need to humanize the content and humanize the course. This can be done through personalized emails and nudges. In our LMS, we have a replacement string that we can use to put in a student's first name for each of the emails that we send out, intelligent agents to connect with students that haven't logged in, failed first test, or actually passed first test, right, we do not want to forget the students who are performing well. Add a welcome video or a picture. You should also summarize key concepts and common errors. Provide tips for learning concepts just like you would do in a face-to-face class. But be mindful of cognitive load so that we don't overwhelm students.

Tip 3 is that the instructor is the most important part of the course. I used to think very differently about this especially when I was teaching face-to-face. I am not saying the student does not have any responsibility. Ultimately, the student is the one that must do the work in

the course. But here are the three big reasons why I believe that the instructor is the most important part.

First, you are the face of the institution or your department to a student and sometimes the only connection to the college. You let them know about other resources that they can access on campus as a student, right, the counseling services or tutoring services. You answer financial aid questions, registrar's questions. You are often the face of the publisher as well. It is important for you to understand the technology you are using and how to support students appropriately.

You are the one who can make the student feel like they belong in your class and in college. According to the CCSEE survey, the most important factor to keep a student in college is that someone knows their name. How much more important this is in an online environment when we don't see our students physically. There are some simple things in addition to what I shared on the last lesson. You can rebrand your office hours to student hours, consultations. I've read that some people call them happy hour or afternoon tea. Rebrand group work to teamwork. Offer group exams, especially two-stage exams where students complete part of it on their own and them maybe the last 15% of the grade for that test is from a group effort. Provide an Oops token or a get out of jail free card for missing an assignment or such. Show struggling students that you are paying attention them and that you are actively engaged and helping students move forward.

Compassionate pedagogy is a recent term to me, but it is about ensuring that our teaching and interactions with students and colleagues are based on kindness, and followed through by actions and practices that alleviate suffering and promote wellbeing. Man, our students really need that in these recent times coming from this pandemic. This also includes that we offer opportunities for failure and learning from failure, such as formative assessments, without it negatively impacting the grade.

This image is one that I created that shows kind of a timeline of technology tools and apps that have been created since 1983. And, there's a lot of them. It is really just to show you that technology is not the answer. If there were one tool that helps student succeed, we would all be using it. The technology does not replace you the human connection that is needed for your students to succeed. So, just keep that in mind as you are teaching your online classes.

The next tip is that designing effective online courses takes work. I am sure everyone can relate to that coming from this last year and a half. But there are things that you can do to make your work more efficient. You can create learning objects that can be used and reused in your courses. These Learning Objects should be book agnostic as must as possible. You can also make your documents, videos, materials accessible from the get go, so that you do not have to go back and make them this way. I am doing this right now for one of my courses, and it is challenging. You have to be mindful of tagging images, using the appropriate heading structure, using color appropriately, captioning videos, and such. But I would say that you have to tackle your course in small bits – focus on doing one thing each semester. And know that you are not

alone; there are professionals – instructional designers - who can assist you in your course creation.

Online courses can be rich, robust, and can lead to learning.

I would say one other thing about efficient practices. I used to create my online course in a weekly flow, but I would have to adjust it between fall, spring and summer, because of spring break or Thanksgiving break. The timeline did not match up perfectly. So instead, I now create my course based on units or modules so I only have to adjust my calendar rather than the actual layout of my course. So, just keep that in mind as a suggestion.

And, then, I would also add one other thing here and that is backward design. Design with the student and objectives in mind, so that everything you create can tie back to what the ultimate goal of learning in that course is.

And, this last tip, which I am sure is of no surprise, is that it is necessary to address students' misconceptions about online learning. Students come to us thinking online learning is easier. It is self-paced. They actually think that using Google is not cheating. They think a week's worth of assignments can be done the hour before the deadline. They do not think they have to be actively engaged in an online course. And, lastly, they don't think they need to write anything down because it is all on the computer. So, we need to address the misconceptions upfront and early so that students can plan and just be aware of these things as they are studying and managing their time. We need to teach them that online learning actually does require self-discipline and self-management. There are weekly deadlines, at least in my course, but there should be some rhythm and flow to the course so that students know when to expect things to be turned in. Succeeding in an online course requires active engagement and participation by both the student and instructor. And, yes, they do need to write things down. That helps with our memory and retention of material. Cramming is not an effective way to approach a class; work must be spread out over several days rather than in just one sitting. And really the one that I have spent a lot of time teaching my students is that outsourcing their learning to Google takes their brain out of the process; it takes it out of the learning loop. So, if they are outsourcing their information, they're never going to be able to pull from that when they need it for a test.

And then I want to just end with the Department of Education's revised definition of distance education. So, there are some new regulations that are coming out that were crafted by a diverse group of experts with community involvement. This was primarily done to make a distinction between distance education and correspondence education. Colleges are going to have to have this "regular and substantive" interaction that is in this new definition to maintain their federal funding. I just want you to be aware of it if you are not. You can certainly Google regular and substantive interaction for online classes and you will find a lot of information out there.

Regular interaction is defined between a student and an instructor where they are providing the opportunity for substantive interactions with the student on a predictable and scheduled basis. The defining point here is that the instructor is the one that is offering and reaching out and creating these opportunities; they are not waiting on the student to contact them if they have questions.

It also involves monitoring the student's academic engagement and success and ensuring that an instructor is responsible for promptly and proactively engaging in substantive interaction with the student when needed on the basis of such monitoring, or upon request by the student.

In a correspondence course, the interaction between the instructor and student is limited, and is not regular and substantive, and it's primarily initiated by the student. Correspondence courses are typically self-paced and they are not to be confused with a distance education course.

Substantive interaction is engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion and includes at least two of these activities where the instructor is providing direct instruction, assessing or providing feedback on a student's coursework, providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course, facilitating a group discussion regarding the content, or other instructional activities approved by your institution.

Academic engagement by the student includes things attending a synchronous class, a lecture physically or online with the opportunity for interaction between the student and instructor, submitting an academic assignment or taking an exam, participating in an interactive tutorial or webinar, participating in a study group, or group project, or online discussion, or interacting with an instructor about academic matters. Academic engagement does not include logging into an online class or tutorial without any further participation. And these are important guidelines, because if you are like my institution, we have to report students as attending or not attending. And so, attending would be defined by some of these academic engagement criteria but not attending would be a student who for instance just logs in and does nothing else. So, it is important to clarify the definition of engagement in a class.

I hope some of my lessons and tips have been helpful to you. If you have any questions or want to further the discussion, please feel free to reach out to me at ahendricks@gsu.edu. Thanks for tuning in and enjoy your day.