Chapter 29
Online Teaching as an Act of Design

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Abstract Online education has grown rapidly in recent decades. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the ubiquity of online learning to new levels, alongside renewed recognition of the need for high-quality online pedagogy. In an uncertain world, educators must be prepared to teach online and potentially shift modalities as needed. While this can be daunting, it helps to remember that online teaching emerges from the same teaching principles that exist in any setting—that good teaching is an act of design. This sense of pedagogical design is foregrounded in the need for careful front-end design of online learning spaces. In this chapter, I discuss keyframing points for online instructors to use in designing online learning. This includes practical information on designing for learning goals, including design-based projects, assessment strategies, and community building tips and ideas.

29.1 Introduction

In recent decades, online education has shifted from being viewed as a lesser learning modality, to becoming widely-accepted and common educational practice. Extensive research, academic debates, and ongoing discussion have focused on good teaching practices and designs for online spaces. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has pushed the ubiquity of online learning to new levels. This has brought a renewed recognition of the need to focus on elements of high-quality online pedagogy. Online learning will continue to expand, and educators must be prepared to teach online and potentially shift modalities as needed. This can be daunting. Shifts in teaching create a sense of shakeup, as educators are tasked with leading and preparing students for an uncertain world, and perhaps doing so in online mediums where they themselves are less comfortable.

As an educator who has taught online since 2005, I have sometimes switched between pedagogical contexts—including different modalities (face-to-face, blended or hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous, online), or different contexts, countries,
subjects, or educational levels. I can empathize with the sense of uncertainty in shifting into new settings or contexts. Although online settings have different affordances and may require us to rethink practices to a degree—ultimately any mode of teaching is still always about crafting a pedagogy for students, through good design work. In this chapter, I will cover some general points or practices for online teaching. These are framing ideas (with a few specific details) that teachers can conceive or re-conceive of, as suits their own pedagogy.

29.2 Design for Learning Goals

What matters in online teaching is similar to what matters in face-to-face pedagogy—engaging learning activities, effective assessment practices, and students’ experience—but these points are enacted differently online. Teaching is always an act of design toward a learning purpose (Henriksen & Richardson, 2017). So it helps to start by asking—what is important to me and for my students in the class, topic, lesson, or activity? That means considering: What do I want students to learn or take away? What kind of experience do I want them to have? What should they be able to do after this learning experience? This may involve gaining specific content, or skills, capacities, or meta-takeaways. After identifying the goals, a teacher can consider ways to enact these goals in an online space.

For instance, if I am teaching doctoral students core education theories (content), and how to apply these theories to real-world situations (skill or capacity), I start with the goals and then find interesting ways to feasibly support them in the online medium. I may identify possibilities for conveying the theory-based content (readings, videos, resources, or having students explore or investigate theories themselves); and then consider how students could enact this knowledge online and apply theory to practice.

For instance, in a prior face-to-face course, one activity involved students taking a class trip to a local design studio and observing how learning occurred there, then writing individual reflection journals about educational theory used in that studio. Students enjoyed the observation trip—but it was also logistically cumbersome to bring a class group off-campus. When I moved the class online, re-thinking this same activity became a necessity that actually released some logistics challenges and opened options up. Students were able to choose educational sites in their own community to observe each week (classrooms, libraries, museums, or informal learning like dance or fitness classes, etc.), and then write reflective blog posts about their observations, framed by theory from readings. They added images and reflections and reported enjoying the opportunity to choose their own local spaces, observe, and reflect, then share and learn from peers who about sites across other cities, towns or countries.
29.3 Engaging or Design-Based Projects

Since online learning can be individualistic, there is a risk of disengagement if students do not feel interested in the work or see its relevance in their lives. Projects should push learners to work with content at deeper levels, by having students first engage with course materials (from readings, discussion or video lecture), and then take the ideas to the next level to create or design something with them. Learning through the lens of design gives students opportunities and autonomy to create something (an artifact, tool, lesson, video, podcast, or anything that could be relevant in their thinking around the content).

Online learning allows and even requires autonomy—so taking advantage of this through design-based projects can build upon the affordance of learning being located outside of the traditional classroom. Further, online spaces can make sharing one’s work (via blogs, videos, audio, or a range of creative technology tools) easier, allowing students to share and make learning public. It helps to think about how one can take advantage of the medium, rather than starting from a deficit model of overcoming barriers. Barriers may happen and instructors can always problem solve for solutions, but online design begins on a better design foot when starting by considering the affordances. So, rather than seeing online learning as more limited than the classroom, one might consider how it can offer more unlimited possibilities to take learning into the real world, let students connect what they are learning to their own work, context or environment, or connect them with learners from varied places, contexts, and settings.

29.4 Feedback and Assessment

Feedback and assessment are central in any teaching setting. While teachers often have their own assessment structures and philosophies which may cause a transition between settings, there are a few unique aspects online.

Students do not receive all of the same cues online that they have in a physical classroom. The immediacy of contact with each other or the teacher is not always there, so some informal conversational feedback drops away and uncertainty can increase. This can be mitigated to some degree by offering online office hours or synchronous video sessions. But there is still a need to maintain helpful and timely grades and feedback.

Setting a schedule or expectation for timing on grading/feedback (e.g. that grades/feedback will be done within a given timeframe after the assignment deadline), and sticking to the schedule, can mitigate some student anxiety in calibrating their work. Feedback that provides supportive or positive comments, as well as suggestions or areas of improvement, is helpful so that students know an instructor recognizes and has engaged with their efforts.
Much feedback in online learning happens via written text, such as comments on a paper, or grades notated in the Learning Management System (LMS). Text-based comments can be useful to allow an instructor a chance to craft a response and the student to read and think through the comments. However, online learning can also be a chance to explore more personalized and different modes of feedback, such as in video or audio format (Ryan, Henderson, & Phillips, 2019). Many LMS’s provide accessible options and tools to help do this, and students often report video or audio feedback as providing a more personal, helpful experience. Henderson and Phillips (2015) offer a method of creating short (5 min or less) video or audio clips of instructor feedback for more in-depth assignments. They describe approaches which mitigate the time-intensiveness and demonstrate how students appreciate video/audio feedback. There are varied opportunities to explore modalities of online feedback. Experimenting with these modalities and learning the functionality of the LMS can help instructors develop an assessment style and schedule that works.

29.5 Building Community and Personal Connection

Building community is essential in the front-end design of online courses. Students invariably point to their favorite courses as those where they felt some connection to the instructor and peers. In face-to-face courses, this connection potentially happens emergently. But in online learning, it requires intentional and front-end course design that supports connections between students and with the instructor. Good design combats the potential for isolation, even when the instructor cannot check in regularly or spontaneously with each student (Overstreet, 2020).

Offering online office hours allows students to drop in more organically for virtual face-to-face time or direct conversation. Depending on course size, it may also help to require that students schedule at least one or two virtual conference calls with the instructor during the semester. When I have done this, I generally block off periods of time in my semester and create a spreadsheet so that students can sign up for 15 min segments. Much communication still occurs by text, however. Teachers are often busy, and may be in the habit of quick, efficient, and potentially even abrupt email responses. But in online learning, these text-based communications may drive students’ perceptions of their instructor interactions. Ensuring that the tone of communications and messages are warm, supportive, and inviting goes a long way to determining how students perceive their experience.

Sending regular messages and announcements to the group (without bombarding them) is essential. In addition to informational emails, clarifications or coursework-related subjects, class messages can also include supportive or relevant quotes, poems, ideas, news stories, and topical articles, or even personal well-being resources. Students benefit from seeing an instructor’s face and knowing there is a person there, so including (even occasional) video announcements is helpful. These can be brief check-ins recorded with QuickTime, Zoom or other easily-accessible software.
Students connections with each other are also vital. Although every student may not get to know every other student, it is important to have meaningful interactions and connect with at least a few other students. When it is manageable to do so, some small group work is valuable. I typically try to include at least a couple of group projects or small group discussion boards, where students can work together around a goal or have a more focused discussion together.

Asynchronous discussion thread are also a common and useful way to connect students. Having students start right off with a welcome discussion to get to know everyone—sharing a picture and whatever they feel comfortable posting about themselves—can set the tone and tell them a bit about each other. The instructor should post there too as a part of the community. Weekly discussion around the readings or topics at hand (where students are required to respond to each other) is useful. Here, it is critical to craft prompts that support open-ended critical thinking, or that allow students to connect coursework to their own experiences (Henry Hulett, 2019). Having students share their work (journals, papers, projects) with each other and give feedback is also beneficial for connecting them as a learning community.

### 29.6 Reflections and Recommendations

An instructor’s mindset should be framed around strong front-end holistic course design, as well as building experiences, supports, and a learning rhythm and flow that allow students to both learn independently and collaboratively. Online learning involves more design up front, in mapping out an entire course of learning rather than designing or lesson-planning from week-to-week or session-to-session. But good intentional design (allowing for occasional shifts based on emergent needs) reduces angst on both the instructor’s and students’ parts and allows students to flourish. It creates a more positive experience and sets up a progression of learning with its own rhythm and flow—allowing for a sense of community and deep engagement with ideas.

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