Planning for Online Learning

In the previous chapter, we explored the online learning technology needs for students and educators. Without the proper technology, educators and students can experience unnecessary frustrations that could have been prevented. Although technology is at the heart of the online learning experience, other critical components are involved. Planning helps educators utilize the various online learning technology components to create the optimal learning experience for learners.

Planning involves looking at the bigger picture and determining what individual pieces of the online learning environment will work together to benefit learners. Without a well-thought-out plan of how all the pieces work together, online learning can be difficult and not produce the desired outcomes for educators and students. As the old adage goes, “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.” A detailed plan can be the difference between success and failure. Before you can devise a plan, you must determine your purpose.

Purpose

Having a clear purpose keeps you focused on your goal. In traditional learning, many educators utilize a lesson plan to structure their days and keep them focused. Although the learning environment is different due to Covid-19, the
method is still the same. You must have a plan and a purpose. Purpose fuels your drive and drives your day. Throughout a typical learning day, you will be pulled in different directions, so having a clearly defined purpose reduces your chances of becoming distracted. Online learning is not easy for educators or students particularly during a pandemic. It is unchartered territory that everyone is learning to navigate daily. Having a clear purpose provides a road map that you can follow to keep you on track or adjust as needed. Some possible questions to ask yourself to determine your purpose include:

- What outcomes do you want to accomplish?
- Why are you teaching online?
- Why is online teaching important to you?
- What do you hope to accomplish through online learning?

Once you answer these questions, you should jot them down either in a journal or on your favorite note-taking mobile app such as Evernote or Microsoft OneNote to periodically review. They will serve as your daily motivation. Now that you are clear on your purpose, there are some other factors you should consider.

Online Learning Organization

Organizing your learning materials is an important step that is often overlooked in online learning. Without an intuitive organization system, you can waste valuable time trying to locate learning resources. As you are creating your learning resources, you want to make sure that you give them descriptive names and save them in descriptive folders on your computer. It is also a good practice to back up your learning resources to a cloud-based system such as Microsoft OneDrive or Google Drive.

Although your learning management system will already have an organization structure in place, you want to make sure that the learning resources you add are intuitive for your learners to find the necessary materials. Nothing frustrates learners more than not being able to easily locate something in the online learning environment. Always think about your audience first before creating any learning resources to guarantee the best possible outcomes.

Mindset

One of the hardest things to change is our mindset on certain things. No one likes to change but it is inevitable. Benjamin Franklin’s quote sums up how most people feel about life’s certainties: *In this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.* When we encounter something new or a change from the
norm, it can scare us. As we have seen with Covid-19, the things once considered normal in all areas of our lives no longer exist. Everything has changed and we must adapt. Oftentimes, it is the fear of the unknown more than the change itself that scares us.

Online learning might be out of your comfort zone. When you compare a new concept to a familiar concept, apprehension can easily set in. Many educators have been thrust into the online learning paradigm without any training and are figuring it out as they go along. For many, the traditional learning paradigm has been embedded in their minds and lives for years. It is the only learning model most know and have taught. Other educators were already familiar with online learning and looking for ways to improve their skills.

When online learning originated as another alternative to traditional learning, many in the education space were skeptical because it was a change from the norm. It was not familiar to them. They could not understand how learning could occur outside a physical classroom. For some, it can be difficult to overcome these feelings which can cause them to miss out on the opportunities for online learning. Regardless of the medium used, learning still can occur. Some resources to help influence your mindset while increasing your online teaching skills and knowledge include:

- Corwin – [https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/online-teaching-toolkit](https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/online-teaching-toolkit)
- Future Learn – [www.futurelearn.com/info/blog/resources-for-online-teaching-during-coronavirus](www.futurelearn.com/info/blog/resources-for-online-teaching-during-coronavirus)
- eLearning Industry – [https://elearningindustry.com/](https://elearningindustry.com/)
- Edutopia – [www.edutopia.org/](www.edutopia.org/)
- Faculty Focus – [www.facultyfocus.com](www.facultyfocus.com)

Being able to overcome these feelings as an educator is crucial. These feelings can indirectly and directly influence your attitude toward online learning and appear within your online learning delivery silently sabotaging your efforts. Online learning should not be viewed as a replacement for traditional learning. Instead, it should be viewed as an addition. Everyone learns differently and excels in a delivery method that caters to their learning style. Keeping an open and positive mindset motivates you to put forth your best teaching efforts to help students effectively learn.
Time Management

Everyone has 24 hours in a day. Within those 24 hours, we juggle daily responsibilities that might or might not get accomplished. Once those hours are gone, we cannot reclaim them. We must start again the next day. Compared to traditional learning, online learning does not have standard school hours which requires better time management skills. Contrary to what many believe, online learning requires a lot of preparation and effort. Oftentimes, it can seem as if your workday never ends while trying to balance your learners’ needs along with your professional and personal needs. At times, it can seem overwhelming. Without the preplanned daily schedule offered by traditional learning, it can become easy to forget things while organizing your teaching schedule.

Online learning offers flexibility that can complement work/life balance. However, many educators are still overwhelmed with life's tasks. During Covid-19, many educators have children they must assist with online learning in conjunction with teaching online. Some also might be caregivers or dealing with personal health issues. Attendance and participation requirements exist for educators in both traditional and online learning modalities that they must adhere to while learning how to stay safe and teach in this new normal. It is not easy to juggle. Although you might already have a scheduling tool, it never hurts to have options.

Google Calendar is a free online calendaring system used for scheduling appointments and other important events. You can think of it as an online planner with time management capabilities. Not only can these events be seen online, but they can also be saved to your mobile device's calendar (Figure 3-1). By utilizing a calendaring system such as Google Calendar, you can schedule lesson prep time, assignment due dates, office hours, and more without missing something. Since it is cloud-based and available with a Gmail account, it can be viewed on any device. Likewise, the Google Calendar app can be downloaded to iOS and Android mobile devices.
Another alternative is to use your mobile device’s calendar. Since many of us always have our mobile devices with us all the time, we can easily schedule events and receive notifications. You can even set a reminder several days in advance to notify you of meetings, office hours, and grading deadlines.

Microsoft To Do is another tool to add to your teaching toolbox. It can be used as a personal planner to create to-do lists and reminders to help you stay focused and organized throughout your day. It is free and available to use via the Web and as an app on Windows, Android, and iOS platforms (Figure 3-2).

Figure 3-1. Google Calendar that can be used for appointments and reminders

Figure 3-2. Microsoft To Do allows you to create to-do lists to stay organized and focused
Work Area

Although online learning allows you to work or teach from anywhere, a designated teaching area can increase your productivity. Once you enter into this space, your mind and body know that teaching will occur similar to entering a physical classroom. A teaching area also reduces distractions and keeps you focused.

Everyone has heard the saying that a cluttered workspace represents a cluttered mind. In some ways, it is true. Clutter can affect us not only consciously but also subconsciously. According to Psychology Today, clutter can cause our thinking to not be as sharp as it should.¹ Clutter can also heighten our stress and anxiety levels. Having a clutter-free teaching work area prepares and motivates you for success. A clutter-free area projects a professional image during web conferencing sessions. Although these might seem like small items, they can add up to make a big impact on your teaching success.

Social Media Support

Sometimes, online learning can feel isolating. However, it does not have to be. There are numerous online groups that you can join for assistance with teaching in an online learning environment. For instance, Facebook has numerous groups and pages that you can join or follow to gain new insights and resources about online learning. Likewise, you can also network with other online educators. Some Facebook Pages you might want to follow include:

- Global Online Academy
- TED-Ed
- Global Educator Collective
- edX
- Khan Academy

Facebook groups that you might want to join include:

- Digital Resources for Distance Learning
- Distance Learning Educators
- Online Teaching Strategies for Educators

¹[www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201705/5-reasons-clear-the-clutter-out-your-life](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fulfillment-any-age/201705/5-reasons-clear-the-clutter-out-your-life)
LinkedIn is another good social media resource that offers groups that you can join to not only network but also learn new online learning strategies.

Self-Care

Educators tend to put the needs of their students before their own. With online learning, you can easily put in more hours on a computer or mobile device than in-person traditional learning. Sometimes, you must be a little selfish. You must always remember the saying “You cannot pour from an empty cup.” Take care of yourself and schedule some time for some self-care to recharge and regroup. Otherwise, you will quickly suffer from burnout. Some simple self-care tips include:

- Schedule some daily exercise such as a walk or yoga
- Establish consistent work hours
- Eat healthy
- Drink plenty of water
- Get enough rest
- Take breaks throughout the day

Summary

Online learning involves more than technology. You must have a well-thought-out plan to serve as your road map. However, you will need to adjust your plan as needed. A quote from Robert Burns’ “To A Mouse” sums up how you should view plans: The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

No matter how carefully a project is planned, something may still go wrong with it. Be flexible.