Chapter 26
A Combined Students’ and Teachers’ Online Education Perspective—You May Ask Yourself: Some Key Questions to Consider Before Beginning an Online Course or Program

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Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic has sped up a process that had already begun: an increase in online teaching at all levels. While face-to-face courses will resume at some point, online learning is not only here to stay, but is perhaps the future face of many facets of education. This chapter offers both a student’s and teacher’s point of view—as the authors are both students in an online doctoral program and professors in higher education. The chapter offers a series of questions designed to assist students and teachers as they develop strategies and prepare to move online.

26.1 Introduction

Prior to March 2020, online education was already a juggernaut picking up constant steam. However, the global pandemic that began in the first half of 2020 thrust online learning spaces into the forefront of educational discussion and practice. At all levels of education, both teachers and students scrambled to adjust to the online and remote environments suddenly required by their districts and schools. Even once students and teachers re-enter physical classroom spaces, elements of online learning that had not previously hit the mainstream will likely be here to stay. It is within this context that this chapter addresses online students’ perspectives—written for both students and teachers and including both academic and non-academic support advice.

But first, some background on the co-authors. For the past two and a half years we have been full-time students in an online education doctoral program in the United States. This program is fully online and admits students as members of a cohort, who then take all of their coursework together. We are also practitioners (Jennifer Keller as a journalism professor and chair of her department and Amy Collins Montalbano as a mathematics professor), who have experience on the flip side as well, as online
instructors. So we offer a unique perspective as people who both learn and teach in an online space.

26.2 As a Student

Aspiring online students no doubt have questions prior to starting courses. These questions likely centre around what is obvious such as the experience (*What will it be like? How much time will it take?*) or outcomes (*Will I be successful?*), but there are other helpful queries that may not be as obvious to a novice online student. Below we recommend a few questions students should ask themselves if considering an online format, and we offer our own reflections based off of nearly three years spent as students in a fully online program.

26.2.1 What Is Your Purpose?

There are good reasons, and not-so-good reasons, to take a class or program online. One good reason is if your work schedule is unpredictable or you work during the time most classes meet face-to-face. Another is if your ideal program is out of state but moving isn’t an option or if you are a parent who needs a flexible schedule. But if your decision is based on an assumption it will be easier, watered down, or take less time than a face-to-face class, these are poor reasons.

I (Amy) joined an online program because I work full time as a college professor and needed flexibility, and none of the face-to-face programs in my geographical area appealed to me. Jennifer also works full time in a college town where the closest face-to-face program is a two-hour drive away. Academically, the program has been every bit as challenging as the face-to-face version of the same program but with the added hurdles of fewer social supports and a greater time commitment. Listening to a lecture and participating in face-to-face group discussions while attending a traditional class will not take as much time as consuming the information for yourself and participating with classmates through discussion boards. Written information takes longer to read and write than verbal ideas take to hear and articulate. Taking a class online may save commuting time, but the course content itself is likely to be more, not less, time consuming.

26.2.2 How Many Highlighters Do You Own?

One of our online cohort members previously worked as a student advisor, and any time an incoming freshman asked him whether or not they should take an online class, he responded by asking them, “How many highlighters do you own?” It was a funny
and clever way of asking them about their organisation skills. When I (Amy) start a new semester, I have separately coloured folders, spirals, and yes even highlighters, for each of my classes. Especially for students taking multiple classes simultaneously, organisation is crucial. Otherwise, it is easy to lose oneself in a mess of work and due dates.

But organisation of materials is not enough. Online students must also be capable of creating their own work structure when taking an online class. At the very least, face-to-face students have dedicated days every week they attend class—often this rolls into dedicated study times on campus as well. While flexibility is often a primary reason students seek an online environment, flexibility should not mean lack of structure. Instead, flexibility should mean that the consistent days and time dedicated to the course are determined by a student and their schedule. Without required attendance in a physical classroom space, it is too easy for online coursework to suffer from the “out of sight, out of mind” effect. Set up a regular time of day (or at least a set amount of time each day) to dedicate to your online class. This dedicated time should be scheduled well enough in advance of deadlines to avoid last-minute efforts. Procrastination is perhaps the online student’s worst enemy, because possibilities abound for things to go wrong—the system might be down, you lose power at your house, your computer has decided just at the wrong moment to update and reboot itself….the list goes on.

Related to structure is getting into a rhythm. Regardless of how your online class is organised—by week, module, major assignment, etc.—you should be able to find some sort of pattern and flow to the course. For example, for modules that open on Sunday and close on Saturday night, you might find that you get your reading(s) done on Sunday and Monday, initial discussion post by Wednesday, replies by Thursday, and analysis paper on Friday and Saturday. At the start of a new week, begin the cycle over again. At the beginning of a new term it often takes a couple of weeks to find the flow of the course, but once the rhythm and daily tasks sink in, it frees up a lot of mental space that is otherwise spent fretting over deadlines and when to do what.

26.2.3 Are You Willing to Seek Helpful Resources?

It may not be initially apparent, but online courses can offer an abundance of helpful resources: an orientation module, the syllabus, FAQ page, technical support, librarians, discussion boards, other classmates, faculty office hours, email and plenty others. But students must be willing to search for and use them. Borrowing from John Donne, ‘no man is an island’. And while students may be physically isolated from others when taking an online course, that doesn’t mean there aren’t plenty of ways to connect and seek assistance. Reaching out to classmates, attending your faculty member’s office hours (or asking for an appointment), or sending an email to a librarian are just a few ways to avoid suffering or struggling in silence.
Although, as noted in Lovegrove’s chapter, there can be inappropriate student engagement or collusion when using online chat rooms, they can also be an important resource. Our cohort uses a group chat, which is an excellent venue to ask questions related to deadlines, occasionally vent, and offer support to one another when preparing for something important and stressful (such as dissertation proposal defenses). In addition, we occasionally have separate chats for asynchronous classes—not to share specific information but to help stay organised and on track to avoid last-minute procrastination. It can be a helpful way to encourage each other and stay accountable in the absence of physical classmates.

26.2.4 Have You Assessed and Planned for How to Deal with Distractions?

Distractions are a constant challenge in our stressful society, but online students tend to complete most (if not all) of their coursework on the kinds of devices that are most full of distractions. It is helpful for students to ask themselves—when you are on your computer (or tablet or smartphone), how do you tend to waste time? This will likely be the greatest source of temptation (e.g. to click out of that book chapter or discussion board to send off an email or “just check Reddit real quick”). I (Amy) often rely on the Pomodoro technique, during which I spend twenty-five focused and distraction-free minutes on task followed by a five-minute break. And I typically use that break by taking a quick walk, not checking email or Facebook or Instagram, because that is how five minutes becomes two hours.

Also consider your environment. Face-to-face students spend dedicated time on campus, away from family, roommates, and the kitchen that needs cleaning. But if you are working on your class from home, it will not be long before others in your space start asking for time. If you live with someone, whether it’s family or friend(s), have a conversation with them beforehand about the time you will need to commit to successfully complete your class(es) and make sure everyone is on board.

A final consideration for those planning to take multiple online courses simultaneously—make sure they do not distract from each other. Or, put another way, try to plan your schedule so that your online classes complement one another. For example, balance a reading- and writing-intensive course with another class that is more project based. Also, the importance of organisation and structure we mentioned earlier increases when taking multiple online classes. If you have a couple of hours a day to dedicate to your coursework, rather than spending one hour each day on two different classes, dedicate that entire two-hour chunk of time on one class today, the other class tomorrow. You’ll likely find this a more effective way to manage your brain power rather than wasting time swapping between classes.
26.2.5 Finally, Are You Taking Care of Yourself?

If you are electing for online options, it is likely because other obligations are clamouring for your attention and time. This makes sense and is understandable. But we cannot overstate the importance of taking the time and space to take care of yourself. Eating healthfully, moving your body, and getting plenty of sleep are crucial to your being able to effectually manage your many commitments. A student might be able to coast a few weeks while ignoring diet, exercise, and bedtime, but the effects will catch up. And when this happens, brain fog and loss of motivation are not far behind. So set aside fifteen minutes to write up next week’s meal plan, take a walk around your block, keep that therapy appointment, and turn off the TV or computer when it’s getting late. Your physical, mental and emotional health will thank you.

26.3 As a Teacher

As a teacher, we can learn a lot from our own experiences and from listening to our students. We are constantly reexamining and revising courses based on what we learn each term. With that in mind, based on experiences as students in an online program and feedback from our own students, here are a few questions to ask yourself when preparing to teach an online course.

26.3.1 What Is the Purpose of the Course?

Just as with any class, we suggest as a teacher you consider why you are asking students to perform a certain task or turn in a specific assignment. As Penelope Lovegrove mentioned in her chapter, optional discussion boards are likely to be seen as busy work and subsequently ignored. However, in our own experience, discussion boards that have a real purpose (and a mark or grade attached) can be extremely beneficial. If you want students to participate, give them a reason to do so. In one of our doctoral program courses, the first discussion prompt each week was designed for us to ask questions about the reading. The professor then followed up with responses to our questions. In other classes, the goal was to provide a dialogue between students about themes or experiences. In both cases, the discussion boards allowed students to receive direct feedback from others (student or teacher) and also to develop a dialogue with each other, which helps establish the sense of community that can occur in a physical classroom. We felt as though we knew many of our fellow students simply by their tone when asking questions and providing feedback.

Another important outcome of identifying your purpose is that it can help guide decisions regarding course content and circumvent attempts to cram too many things into any one class. Teaching online is different, especially when it is asynchronous.
When teaching face-to-face an instructor might often include group work and other discussions into the class, perhaps with homework points attached, because you have students together for an hour or two (or three). However, in online spaces, it is best to only include assignments that will advance the course and help them see connections. As a student, there is nothing worse than being assigned what is seen as “busy work”—which is only there to give us something to do. This means it is extremely important when you are not meeting with students on a regular basis to give them assignments that build on each other and help them make those connections they would make in a classroom.

26.3.2 Who Created This Course?

This is another important question to consider. If you created the course as an instructor, that will help in knowing this sense of purpose. In this case, it is intuitive to know answers to questions like the one above. However, if someone else developed the course and you are now teaching it, you might not know those answers. This means you need to be careful when revising the course that you do not eliminate things that were developed for a reason—such as helping students make those connections or connecting different pieces in the logical flow of the course. It’s not unusual to have courses created by one professor but then taught by others. The key, however, is for each professor to understand the primary outcomes of the course and the reasons behind decisions. Once those are understood, then a professor can revise to their own teaching style without sacrificing student learning. However, as students, we have had at least one course where a professor made changes and then subsequent course assignments made no sense. The professor was trying to be helpful in not overloading us, but we ended up not understanding certain assignments because we hadn’t received all the pertinent information.

26.3.3 How Long Can You Pay Attention?

This may seem obvious, but it helps to think about your own attention span when you are considering what your own students can do. How likely are you to watch a video that is an hour long? Or even half an hour? In today’s world of Twitter and Instagram, students are used to paying attention in much shorter spurts. This doesn’t mean that we should shortchange them in content, but keep in mind the ways that people think, and how information can be ‘chunked’. So if you are creating a video and you need to cover several things, break it into pieces. Shorter videos make it more likely both that students will watch it the first time and also that they’ll revisit if they feel they missed important information. This also helps you as a teacher, because you don’t need to sit in front of that computer for 60 min recording—and rerecording if you make a mistake. In addition, it means you are less likely to have questions about
something that you actually covered in the video. Another way to help with this is to provide PowerPoint slides or PDF bullet points of what you cover in the video. This way students can download it and refer back to it—thereby reinforcing what they hear and see.

### 26.3.4 Is the Answer in the Syllabus?

We’ve all been there as teachers. We get asked a question about something that could easily be answered if only the student had actually read the entire syllabus (or at least searched through it before asking). Online it can be even more challenging because students aren’t in a classroom where you can point out that location of information and they can learn from other students’ questions. Along with the syllabus, it can be helpful to post an FAQ page for students. Think about the questions you get most often—whether about grading, the schedule, specific assignment items, and include a general FAQ for those. You’ll still end up responding ‘It’s in the FAQ’, occasionally but it does help students to have a resource to turn to before reaching out to the professor. So it might help declutter your email inbox. Additionally, it is a much-appreciated boon of information for those students who seek it out on their own.

### 26.3.5 What Are the Deadlines—For My Students and Myself?

We expect students to turn in assignments on deadline. However, professors don’t always seem to have their own schedule for getting those assignments graded in a timely manner. It is incredibly important in any class—but even more so online where they can’t ask questions as easily—that students receive feedback quickly. This doesn’t necessarily mean within 24 h, but it does mean before they might need it for another piece of the coursework. We had one class where the feedback took so long that we were unable to use the first assignment for a later one (which was the entire reason for the first piece). This meant we had to do later parts using hypothetical data provided by the professor that was unrelated to our own research, rather than being able to use something that would have been practical and advanced our research.

Also, with assignments such as discussion boards, if you want students to participate, think about deadlines during any typical week or module. Our best courses, ones we’ve tried to emulate in our own online teaching, included a discussion post early in the module and then required replies later in the module. This ensured that everyone had time to read other comments before posting their response, and also that there were posts to respond to. Again, as in the first point, this helps establish that connection between the students.
26.3.6 Finally, Am I Putting People First?

As teachers, we need to think about the well-being of our students (and ourselves) as well as their educational goals and aspirations. This means thinking back to goals for assignments and whether we are overloading students (and ourselves). It also means listening to our students and understanding the outside issues and pressures they are facing. This has always been important but may be even more so in our current environment. Naturally, this does not mean we should just let students do whatever they want whenever they want and give them all A grades. But it does mean considering outside circumstances and whether extensions might help a student complete the class successfully. As a student, I (Jennifer) never expect to have extensions granted and don’t often ask for them (probably because I’m also a teacher who has seen her fair share of eye-rolling requests). But I have been pleasantly surprised when a professor has understood that outside circumstances led me to miss an assignment and allowed me to turn it in without me asking for the favour. It also helps if students understand that they can always ask—even if their wish isn’t always granted.

26.4 Recommendations and Reflections

This recommendation is also a reflection. We suggest that students and teachers can use the questions we have posed and discussed to reflect on their own situations. One thing that is true for both of us as students and teachers is the importance of reflection and evaluation. It is built into our dissertation process and it is an important component of being an effective teacher. These questions are just a beginning. There may be others that you find are important to your own reflection. They can serve as a tool for improvement and success. This means not only considering these questions prior to beginning an online course or program but also reflecting on them throughout the course, particularly at the end. Once the course is complete use these to evaluate the experience. What was the purpose? Did I achieve it? If not, why not? And what can I do to improve next time? If so, could it be better? What worked best? Was I overwhelmed? Was I successful? The important piece is not to answer each question perfectly. There is no perfect answer. It is to use them to consider what worked and what can be improved upon for the future.

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