

March/April 2001 Topic:

Facilitating Every Student in an Online Course

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Introduction

One obstacle to successfully facilitating an online course is the need to adequately promote online learning skills in those students who do not fit the profile of a "successful" online student. Not every student is the "ideal" student whether you are in a face-to-face or an online environment. In fact, this ideal student is probably in the minority in any class. Therefore, the online course facilitator is charged with the task of developing the skills of these non-ideal students while creating a learning environment suitable to various needs, preferences, and abilities.

This somewhat daunting task can be made simpler by first considering the traits common to successful online students. Numerous authors have addressed this issue ([ref. 1-8](#)). Six key elements appear in one form or another throughout these works. Students need time management skills, discipline and motivation, a sense of community ("people" skills), communication skills, computer/online familiarity and comfort, and access. However, if we were to limit the online learning environment to only those students possessing all of these skills or abilities, we would quickly run out of students to fill online classes. Furthermore, some campuses are now requiring that every student take at least one online course or a course with an online component. Clearly, all of the students in such a situation would not fit the ideal.

Therefore, an online instructor in conjunction with an institution's online support program

traits or skills. Techniques for overcoming these needs may not always be obvious. This article presents several methods instructors can utilize to better facilitate their courses for the "non-ideal" student. These techniques are organized by the trait they address. Some techniques address more than one trait and thus may appear more than once.

The trait categories discussed herein are:

1. Time Management Skills
2. Discipline and Motivation
3. Synergy and the Online Learning Community
4. Communication Skills
5. Technophobia
6. Access

Time Management Skills

Independent of whether a course is self-paced, cohort-paced, or instructor-paced, time-management skills are a key to the success of an online student due to the nature of the online classroom ([1-2,4,6-7](#)). There is usually no set time for class to meet (except when a specific online office hour is used), and often, the lack of large amounts of free time is a contributing factor to an individual opting to enroll in an online course. But every student does not innately possess the ability to schedule his/her time within a self-paced environment, especially if that student is new to the world of online education. To properly facilitate the learning experiences of these students, an online instructor and/or online support staff should structure a course to minimize the necessity of advanced time-management skills among students. The following suggestions attempt to help an instructor complete this task.

1. Lesson Length

Make the chunks or pieces of information small enough to appeal to and be processed by those who have only 15 to 30 minutes a day to log in. These small pieces of information can quickly be processed by the student who can then return later to finish other assignments. There can be more than one chunk of information per unit or module, but the unit itself should be broke into manageable chunks.

Related to lesson length is the length of pieces of information that are displayed on screen. In general, there is a 3 click rule in instructional design for the Web. The 3 click rule specifies that any piece of information should be viewable by no more than 3 clicks of the mouse on the browsers scroll bar on a screen at 640x480 resolution when appropriate. Placing more information on the page may cause the viewer to lose interest or the information to lose its cohesiveness. Of course, when information maintains a context and

The rule can also be ignored when producing printer friendly pages, since the information can be taken out of the scrolling context of the Web.

2. Taking the Lesson With Them

Make the Web pages printable (or make a printable form of the pages) so that the student can take the information along when he/she is offline. Then, the necessity of the computer is temporarily removed from the course and the student can continue to learn while offline and away from a computer. Printer friendly pages can also be friendly to the student's eyes when there are a lot of readings in a course. Always remember, although many of today's authors choose to ignore this fact, printed materials and books have always provided anywhere anytime learning.

3. The Effective Syllabus

An effective online syllabus (or any syllabus) includes more than simply descriptions, contacts, and the like. An online syllabus should also contain information relating to the length of time a given assignment is anticipated to take for the average student. With this information, a student can schedule the activity into his/her available time.

4. Make Suggestions

At the beginning of the course, if not before, make suggestions to the students concerning how they can manage and make the best possible use of the time they devote to the course. These suggestions can include: setting a specified time (or times) each week to logon to the course and collect information, creating a schedule for when to complete assignments based upon the student's availability rather than only on the specified assignment due dates, and composing course posts in a word processor and later cutting and pasting them into the course's messaging system.

5. Provide Clear Posting Requirements

With an engaging course in which many students are active participants, the number of messages posted within any course discussion forum can quickly grow. When such a case presents itself, it is a good idea to give specific minimum (and maximum if necessary) requirements concerning the number of posts each student is required to submit. For example, in an ice-breaking activity, you could require each student to post responses to 2 other student posts chosen by selecting the student above and below that student in a listing of students sorted by some criteria such as alphabetically by login. When minimum requirements and other guidelines are given, students know how much work is expected of them for the assignment, ensuring that they will allocate enough time to do an adequate job and enabling them able to prioritize their time. Even an active student can have a busy week in which he/she must schedule time to properly meet this minimum requirement.

Discipline and Motivation Skills

Unlike a face-to-face classroom, the distance student does not have an instructor on hand to recognize lack of motivation or to immediately prompt a student to participate. For the most part, distance education courses rely on an individual's intrinsic motivation based upon interest in the course materials or desire to receive credit in the course. Student discipline and motivation levels are bound to vary on a per student and even a per day basis. Even a normally disciplined and motivated student can fall behind or lose interest in a course over time. Thus, it is important for the student and instructor to recognize that with the freedom and flexibility of the online classroom comes responsibility.

Therefore, an online facilitator/instructor needs to enliven the course and provide motivation whenever possible while giving the students tips to aid them in maintaining a positive work ethic. The following suggestions offer several methods by which an instructor can begin to address this need.

1. Motivation Beyond the Grade

Not every student takes a course because the material interests him/her. Sometimes there are degree requirements, inability to attend a face-to-face class, or other circumstance leading to the student's enrollment. The instructor needs to help the student realize the potential importance of the material beyond the need for a passing grade. How can this be done?

To begin with, one can relate the course to items of importance to the students. Examples within the course and assignment questions can be centered on topics that interest the students or that relate to current events.

Also, many would argue that students (and people in general) have a naturally inquisitive nature. To bring out this potential in one's students, try building "discovery" activities into the course. Ask students to find a new site or pose a question of their own on a weekly basis. Any activity that involves the students will aid in their motivation.

Finally, reward and encourage students. Without the immediate feedback of a face-to-face environment, students are unable to see the smile or nod of an instructor recognizing that the student has submitted a valuable contribution to the course discussion. While an instructor should limit the number of "good job" posts within the course forum in order to reduce the total number of posts that can build up over time, the instructor can give personal feedback via email or student specific forums so that the student knows that his/her effort has been acknowledged and is appreciated by the instructor.

2. Make Your Presence Felt

As stated above, an online student is unable to "see" the instructor. Facial expressions and other non-verbal queues are not present to relay an instructor's involvement to the student. Therefore, the online instructor must employ various other methods to maintain student awareness of the instructor's presence. How can this be done?

Respond promptly and effectively to student posts. These responses do not always have to be within the forum. They can be individually directed to students on a scheduled basis to give the student feedback and to reduce clutter in the course discussion forums.

When asking questions or posting responses in the course discussion forum, engage the students in the discussion and prompt higher level thinking. Redirect comments and pose questions that explore a student's answer.

Use an instructor's page effectively. Give the students an image of yourself and a short biographical statement so that they can have a mental representation of the instructor and/or teaching assistants. Not only does this provide communal aspects to the course, but it gives the student an awareness of the facilitator.

3. Direct Questions

If a student is beginning to lag behind the rest of the course, or the student is not making the required posts, direct items specifically to that student. When prompting higher order thinking, provide a list of students that you would like to respond to the question. Always be sure that such lists include active students as well to take the pressure off the lagging student as having to be the first one to post a response.

In addition, don't be afraid to send a student email asking if anything might be interfering with his/her participation in the course. Be sure to explain both the importance of participation in the course and your desire to continue to receive any valuable input that the student may have. Always be positive in such correspondence understanding that often the reasons for lagging are mundane and beyond the absolute control of the student.

4. Other Considerations

Discipline can sometimes be affected by a student's ability to manage his/her time. Refer to the previous section on [time management](#) for more on this topic.

Avoid interruptions. One possible deterrent to student participation could be unrelated to motivation, but rather dependent on the student's ability to find or create a quiet workspace or learning environment conducive to thought and study. If this is the case, suggest that such students seek out a particular space and time at which others are aware that they need to be left undisturbed to work on the course.

Synergy and the Online Learning Community

Palloff and Pratt (8) and Stephen Covey (9) argue that while the power of the community is great, the power of the learning community is even greater. Shaffer and Anundsen (10) relate that there is an innate human yearning for a sense of belonging. A "Conscious Community" can be created within the online environment through student participation in discussion about course goals, ethics, and communication styles or norms. Such a community supports the intellectual as well as personal growth of all involved. Learning together can create a sense of "synergy" in which the students feed off of each other's excitement and motivation. As Covey states, "The total outcome of knowledge acquired and shared is far greater than what would be generated through independent, individual engagement with the material." (9) What one student knows is enhanced by the knowledge and contribution of other students in the course. The challenge for the instructor is to facilitate this environment so that every student can become a part of this community.

1. Provide a Course Philosophy

If creation of a community of learners is important for your personal course philosophy, then let the students know. Provide your philosophy as part of the course information. In this way, students know what to expect as the course begins to unfold, and they can relate better to the instructor's instructional style. Model this philosophy in your attitudes and activities within the course.

2. Structure Discussion Into the Course

Community is difficult if not impossible to develop without effective and consistent communication (see [communication](#) section) among the students. Therefore, to establish and maintain community within the course, structure or build discussion into the course design. Provide guidelines for student posts (these can be negotiated with the students to increase their sense of involvement) in content, length, number, etc.

3. Structure the Discussion

If having discussion as part of a course is the first step in creating an online community, then controlling that discussion is the second step. This control is exerted, in part, by the structuring of the discussion. For example, create easy to follow guidelines for where students should put their posts, organize distinct topics into separate forums to keep the information manageable and understandable, and in many cases provide the first post within a forum to give additional guidelines for that chat space beyond that suggested by the title of the forum.

4. Be Engaging (even funny when appropriate)

Be open minded about sharing life, work, and educational experiences with the students as

the students in opening up and presenting their own personal anecdotes and other information that could prove valuable to the course. An engaging instructor/facilitator can help students feel at ease and relaxed so that the class as a whole can move on more effectively to the process of learning.

5. Break the Ice

The best way to begin to develop community is to present the students with an activity at the beginning of the course so that they may get to know each other. Although in a traditional face-to-face course such activities can occur through informal discussion before and after class, they must be explicitly built into an online course.

6. Fix Problem Situations Quickly and Effectively

Whatever takes a lifetime to create can be destroyed in an instant. Therefore, an online course facilitator needs to constantly be on the lookout for situations that can disrupt the learning community. Palloff and Pratt (8) and Ko and Rossen (6) both present guidelines for handling disruptive situations. The most important item an instructor can keep in mind is that the disruptive student may not realize s/he is causing a problem. Not all situations are intended to be disruptive or confrontational.

The table below summarizes possible solutions to different types of student disruption. As always, be prepared to provide personal contact via email if the situation is escalating or to make the student aware of your concern.

Disruption	Instructor Response
The Know-It-All	1. Give him/her the opportunity to "save face"
The Mutineer	1. Note the complaint. 2. Ignore any hostility to maintain your
The Lagging Belligerent Student	1. Although the student may be angered by falling behind, ignore emotion and be

	<p>supportive.</p> <p>2. Offer advice.</p>
The Attacking Belligerent Student	See the Mutineer above.
The Controller	<p>1. Restate guidelines for all discussion forums as well as guidelines for student posts.</p> <p>2. Respond quickly to any posts that might present themselves as the only answer and ask for alternatives.</p> <p>3. Pose questions directly to other students.</p>
The Staller	<p>1. There can be many reasons why a student's postings are continually not on time. The first step is to determine the reason(s).</p> <p>2. Based on these reasons try to come up with a solution that will help the student to catch up and remain with the course.</p>
The Must-Have-An-A Student	<p>1. Be firm.</p> <p>2. Be objective.</p>
The Non-Participant	<p>1. Encourage the student.</p> <p>2. Pose questions directly to other students.</p> <p>3. Inquire individually about possible reasons (see staller above).</p> <p>4. Suggest techniques such as managing time and printing messages to help enable the student to participate.</p>
The Overloaded Student	<p>1. If a student is consistently posting, yet for some reason is receiving little student feedback, prompt for this feedback through directed questions regarding the student's posts.</p>
The Concerned or Anxious Student	<p>1. Determine nature of concern (is it a privacy issue or anxiety over student feedback).</p> <p>2. Reassert purpose of classroom discussion.</p> <p>3. Encourage participation and be supportive.</p> <p>4. Plug any security leaks if they pose a concern.</p> <p>5. Suggest helpful techniques to student such as managing time, printing messages, waiting to absorb materials before composing responses, etc.</p>

7. Foster Effective Communication Among Students

To create and maintain the online community, the students must communicate effectively with one another and the instructor. The next section of this article discusses how communication and communication skills can be developed within the online classroom.

Communication Skills

In the online community, virtually all communication is written, so it is essential that all students have the ability to properly express themselves in writing. However, the writing ability of online students often vary greatly. Tact and other communication skills will also vary among online students. Earlier it was mentioned that effective and consistent communication is a key to fostering a sense of community and creating synergy among the students, therefore, it is extremely important for the effective online facilitator to do whatever is possible to ensure the development and continuation of effective communication among online students. The following guidelines are intended to help bring about this end.

1. Be a Model

As the facilitator, one has the ability to take control of certain aspects of a course, and communication is one of them. By modeling effective communication and providing guidelines, a facilitator can show students what is expected of them. Here are some useful tips on how to respond to student posts and influence the overall tenor and direction of the group discussion:

- ?? Be positive and remove unintended or unnecessary emotion from your posts, however, do not be afraid to add emotion when it can lead to a more positive virtual environment.
- ?? Always think twice before posting even mundane responses to student posts.
- ?? Maintain the instructor "presence" in the online course and remember that the students can not hear or see you think or type, they can only read your posts (and hear your words if audio transmission is used).
- ?? When necessary, be prepared to provide individual attention to problem students or students with special needs.
- ?? As White and Weight (7) put it, do not react, but respond. Provide a unifying voice for the students and address issues fairly, quickly, and effectively.
- ?? Respond with clarification or extension when needed.

2. Give Instructions

include general guidelines for contributing to group discussions, such as requirements regarding content, frequency, and length when appropriate. Length and content requirements can also be instigated during a course to allow the course to develop somewhat on its own. For example, if students are posting messages that are too long, post a maximum length, and if the posts are incomplete, include minimum content requirements. In this way, if the students are already performing at or above expectations in the absence of instructor created restraints, they will feel a sense of control over the environment.

Be sure to explain the necessity that comments be constructive and that no "flaming" take place. If students maintain a positive attitude and present comments in a constructive manner, a better community can be developed.

3. Provide for Communication in the Course Requirements and Philosophy

Incorporate communication into the course structure as a requirement make the reasons for this requirement clear in the course orientation. Help students to understand the important role communication plays in the development of the online course community. Furthermore, create a common forum where students can discuss any topic much as they would before and after a face-to-face class.

4. Break the Ice

The best way to begin to develop community is to plan on online activity at the beginning of the course that will help the students to get to know each other and the course environment. These activities can be through discussion before and after class during a face-to-face class, but must be explicitly built into an online course.

5. Provide Motivation and Encouragement

Encourage student posts and discussion and be prepared to encourage those that are falling behind. When applicable, send individual posts of encouragement to students or send thank you's and good jobs to students as individual emails.

6. Remedial Efforts

If a student has clear communication difficulties, be understanding. In the case of disabilities, try to construct ADA compliance into the course. For students with limited writing ability, which should actually be addressed prior to beginning an online course, suggest possible remedial efforts that the student can participate in to improve his/her writing ability.

7. Understand the Forms of Online Talk

understand when other students are making use of them. If necessary, provide the students resources explaining special online languages such as acronyms and emoticons.

- ?? Control Talk - providing guidelines and instructions
- ?? Humor - entertaining and lightening student spirits
- ?? Acronyms - numerous short acronyms such as (IMHO - in my humble opinion, RFLMAO - rolling on the floor laughing my behind off (Web Design in a Nutshell by O'Reilly press and numerous other resources contain comprehensive listings of these and the next item, emoticons.))
- ?? Emoticons - text queues to emotional states (:> :) :o)
- ?? Androgical Approach - attempt to take gender out of online discussion language unless appropriate to the discussion.

8. Meanings within Meanings

Try to understand the meaning within meanings of student posts. Be able to recognize subversive hostility or emotional stress within a students post. This is asking a lot and is a difficult task. Most likely, only clear examples will be recognized, but recognizing these meanings gives the instructor the ability to respond to them.

9. Other Techniques Based on Mode of Communication

Asynchronous -

- ?? Start major topics yourself with explanatory post.
- ?? Narrow topics to smallest units to reduce clutter in the discussion forum posts.
- ?? Restrict most forum topics to course activities and topics.
- ?? Organize forums so that they correspond to the course flow.
- ?? Be aware of cultural patterns in the manner in which people post.
- ?? Respond frequently, but save "nice job" posts for individual student forums or emails.

Synchronous -

- ?? Limit group size (I've seen viewpoints ranging from 4-12 people as an optimum. My experience says 5-10 is manageable and effective.)
- ?? If necessary, employ some form of "crowd control" or ask students to take turns in a specific order or by a given system to minimize chaos.
- ?? If possible, use audio for the instructor feed. This allows the discussion to take place in text while the instructor can still access the auditory senses of the students.
- ?? Allow some socializing before and after. Possibly have the synchronous chat room constantly available, but post specific times for course discussion.
- ?? Many online students are online because of schedule restraints. Therefore, do not expect to be able to have all of your synchronous sessions at a specific time. Be

- with students organized into groups based on availability.
- ?? Post an agenda in advance to keep the chat time organized and to give students a chance to prepare.
 - ?? Preface individual responses with to whom it is addressed.
 - ?? Always have a backup plan. One can still not count on the reliability of synchronous systems.

Technophobia

Many people have an aversion to computer use (or at least the modern connotation of a computer as a desktop processor with keyboard, monitor, and productivity software since even a calculator is technically a computer.) In many cases, this aversion will prohibit that person's ability to participate in an online course. However, some students will take online courses by necessity and will attempt to place their "technophobia" aside for grander purposes such as job promotion. Therefore, the online instructor needs to be willing and able to create a course that will minimize a student's anxiety. The following techniques are designed to help this process.

1. Pre-Course Orientation

Provide an orientation prior to the online course. If a cohort model is being used, consider bringing the entire cohort to a face-to-face orientation prior to beginning the program. This meeting can serve to orient the group with the technology being used and to provide a greater sense of community for the group. When it isn't practical or appropriate to bring the group to campus, provide some form of tutorial on all the technology used.

2. Support Services

Before your course begins, let your students know exactly where to go or whom to contact in order to get technical assistance, even if it's an 800 number. If multiple support resources are available for your course (for example, a telephone help desk, online chat-based help, etc.), tell them which resource is best for specific types of problems. Be sure to foster a supportive environment by letting students know that you will do whatever you can to resolve their technical issues.

3. Patience

The best gift you can give to the technologically challenged student is patience. When possible, try to make concessions to help these students to keep up or catch up.

Expect the range of access that students have to the Internet to vary widely among your students. Access includes speed of network connection, available network connections at home versus work, and disability issues. Course design must take these access issues into account. The following discussion outlines steps that an instructor can take to minimize access limitations.

1. Disability Accessibility

All online instructors should be make sure that their course materials are accessible to students with disabilities. To learn more about this topic, see my November /December 2000 Pointer and Clicker, Accessible Online Course Design.<<http://illinois.online.uillinois.edu/ionpointers/ionpointers1200.html>> . I would highly recommend that any instructor be prepared to deal with disability issues.

2. Network Access and Bandwidth

Design the course to take into account the slowest network connection available to your students. In most cases, this may be as slow as a 28.8 modem.

What does this mean? If you must use video content or some other form of high bandwidth content, provide alternative versions of the information for students to use and possibly even provide the content on a CDROM that can be distributed among the students. Also, limit the use of graphics or provide a low bandwidth version of your course webpages.

Finally, suggest other possible locations where students can try to gain access, such as local libraries.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to enlighten the reader and describe techniques that an online educator/facilitator can employ to increase the usability of his/her online course to all students. In any environment, there will always be individuals of varying ability, and it is important as an educator to take these varying abilities into account when designing an online course. When proper care is taken, an instructor can help to insure the success of all online students.

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