

Chapter Five

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING

5.1 Learning Styles

Attention to the way students learn is just as important in on-line courses as it is in the traditional classroom. Yet, while you may regularly design face-to-face activities that involve visual and audio components, group work, and physical movement, you may still be relying heavily on the written word when delivering courses online.

In the past, we often considered learning style theory to help us to understand how individuals process information. Learning style theory argued that individuals have a dominant learning style that directs how they will best learn new information. For example, the theory suggested that a student could be a “visual learner,” “auditory learner,” or “kinesthetic learner.” The theory relied heavily on the work of Howard Gardner and his work on Multiple Intelligences (1993), wherein he identified eight intelligences that drive how we learn.

Figure 3: Multiple Intelligences

Howard Gardner proposed in his 1993 book *Multiple Intelligences* that people learn differently and that each of us is smart in at least one of seven ways:

- ◀ Linguistic intelligence (language)
- ◀ Logical-mathematical intelligence (numbers)
- ◀ Spatial intelligence (pictures)
- ◀ Bodily-kinesthetic intelligences (body)
- ◀ Musical intelligence (music)
- ◀ Interpersonal intelligence (people)
- ◀ Intrapersonal intelligence (self)
- ◀ Naturalist intelligence (nature)

Pedagogical research has shifted us away from the learning styles theory. The primary criticism of Gardner’s research is that we are simply not as easily defined as learners as the theory would have

us believe (Willingham et. al. 2015; Dekke et. al. 2012). Despite the intuitive nature of the theory, research does not support the idea that we can be neatly slotted into learning style categories. However, the theory has taught us one important lesson—students learn better when information is presented in multiple ways.

In the online learning environment, it is easy to rely on text-based materials. These certainly have their benefits, including availability, ease of integration into your courses and relevance to the course content. You are likely to have a textbook (either in print or ebook format), so continuing that type of content delivery is both easy and relevant. Yet, it is important to consider whether this is the best way to present material, or whether your text-based materials may need something additional.

The most common mistake made by faculty who are new to online learning is to underestimate the need for interaction and engagement with and among learners. This is manifested by a failure to include interaction, discussion, or feedback into every online assignment.

In addition to encouraging student interaction, you need to pay attention to the multiple ways that students take in information. For example, for each unit you could provide a trio of alternatives: a PowerPoint outline, transcripts of your lectures, and the lectures themselves streamed live or recorded and uploaded to a website like YouTube before being embedded into your course. Recorded lectures can be stopped and started as needed by the individual student and can provide a platform to embed review and critical thinking questions to actively engage the student in the learning process. Research suggests that students learn more deeply from words and visuals than from words alone, and multimedia presentations encourage active cognitive engagement and lead to more meaningful learning (Mayer 2003).

In contrast, inundating students with print materials can bore and overwhelm them. Richard Felder teaches chemical engineering at North Carolina State University, and writes regularly about distance education in his field. He presents a scenario that shows how an online course could engage a learner in multiple ways. In the example, the student reviews a multimedia tutorial that includes photos and diagrams and poses critical thinking questions, watches a video of the course instructor giving a lecture, retrieves information from a database to build an equation, exchanges e-mail with the instructor, and participates in a chat room with the other members of a team to discuss a joint project.

In short, when considering how to deliver course content and engage the students in learning activities, it is important to match the delivery method to the content being learned and provide multiple options for students to engage. Consider the information being presented and think about how you would present this information in a face-to-face class. With today's technology, the options for engaging, interactive, and meaningful learning experiences are broader than ever, and it is likely that you will be able to find a way to mimic face-to-face learning in the online classroom.

5.2 Accessibility

Since 1998, when Congress amended the Rehabilitation Act, federal agencies have been required under Section 508 of the law to make electronic and information technology accessible to those with disabilities. Coupled with the older and more inclusive Americans with Disabilities Act, there is a greater emphasis on creating online courses that can be accessed by everyone.

We discussed accessibility previously, but it bears repeated attention and is essential to consider when delivering your online course. To make your courses more accessible, post materials in different formats. For example, an assignment may be posted as a webpage and also in PDF format. A lecture may be posted as a text document and in PowerPoint outline form. Once you've been teaching online for awhile and have chosen to add more diverse resources to your course, go further. For instance, create HTML tags for illustrations to help the blind and avoid certain colors for those with color blindness. *Look at your entire course site and its ease of use from the perspective of those with disabilities.* Here are some free tools that can help:

- A list of the requirements for Section 508: <https://www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/communications-and-it/about-the-section-508-standards/guide-to-the-section-508-standards>
- Web Accessibility Initiative, a good overview: <https://www.w3.org/WAI/Resources/>
- Adobe offers information and tools to make PDF files accessible: <https://www.adobe.com/accessibility/resources.html>
- Microsoft offers tutorials for using accessibility features in Windows, Word, Outlook, and Internet Explorer: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/accessibility/>

- STEP508 is a tool for prioritizing Web site accessibility problems: <https://www.section508.gov/index.php>
- Toptal color blindness filter will show you how your page will look to someone who is colorblind: <https://www.toptal.com/designers/colorfilter>
- Understood is a great resource for Universal Design for Learning: <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/universal-design-for-learning-what-it-is-and-how-it-works>
- Natural Reader screen reader software: <https://www.naturalreaders.com/>

If your institution has a distance learning department and/or an office of accessibility or disability services, it will be important for you to work with them to get help with accessibility in your course. All of the tools you use in your courses should also have accessibility statements, so look for those when you decide to add a tool and make sure the things you use are as accessible as possible. Be sure to check the closed captioning accuracy of any public videos that you include, and add captioning to videos that you produce yourself or provide a transcript if needed. Your distance learning professionals are likely to have good resources for making your course accessible, and they will be some of your best allies when designing your course.

Another excellent resource will be your librarians. Librarians are skilled researchers and will be excellent sources of accessible content for you to include. Reach out and make use of the people and resources offered by your institution to make sure each student enrolled in your course receives a quality learning experience.

5.3 Community Building

In teaching a distance education course you are, in a sense, building your own little community. You are not just the facilitator; you are the mayor. Your #1 goal is to keep the citizens from moving out.

Attrition rates for distance education programs have historically been higher than for traditional college courses, with dropout rates as high as 80 percent at some colleges, though this trend is changing as programs mature. Many of the reasons—such as students' inexperience with technology, or insufficient student support services—are beyond a faculty member's control. However, you can have a tremendous impact on student retention simply in the way you communicate. The form,

frequency, promptness, and tone of written and oral interaction with students are very important.

The trick is to create a sense of classroom community. If students feel connected, if they believe that you have a personal interest in them, they will be less likely to drop out. This is often called “instructor immediacy.” Immediacy refers to the idea that communication in the classroom is a key feature of the learning process. Verbal and nonverbal immediacy, through behaviors such as calling a student by name, using e-mail effectively, and using prosocial behaviors and language, have been shown to be strongly correlated with both cognitive and affective learning within the classroom (Baker, 2005).

Research by Angie Parker (2006), who teaches at Yavapai College, shows that those students with a higher “internal locus of control,” or level of self-motivation, were more likely to complete a course. For students taking distance education courses, such an internal control was even more important, because these students must function more independently. This self-motivation is a learned trait, but it develops more readily through positive reinforcement; if students in online courses feel that they’re alone as they struggle with the technology as well as the course material, they are in greater danger of dropping out. In distance education, Parker concludes, “Instructional intervention can be a powerful tool for accelerating motivational change.”

The dramatic increase in the number of online courses at colleges and universities—and the problem of hanging on to students unprepared for this new way of learning—are leading to some research efforts aimed at systematically examining both issues. “Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education” (2000), a study by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, recommends that contact between faculty and students be “facilitated through a variety of ways, including voice-mail and/or e-mail” and that “Feedback to student assignments and questions is constructive and provided in a timely manner.” Communication is key, the study concludes.

In discussing community online, Dr. Gary Wheeler (Wheeler, 2003) quotes a study by Palloff and Pratt that defines the basic steps for establishing a virtual community. The steps are:

- ◀ Clearly define the purpose of the group
- ◀ Create a distinctive gathering place for the group
- ◀ Promote effective leadership within the group

- ◀ Define norms and a clear code of conduct
- ◀ Allow for a range of member roles
- ◀ Allow for and facilitate subgroups
- ◀ Allow members to resolve their own disputes.

Allowing students to resolve their own conflicts results in improved communication within the group. Since face-to-face interchange is not possible, online discussions in which students present conflicting viewpoints introduce a degree of emotion into the learning process. However, you must be careful to monitor the discussions so that they don't deteriorate into personal conflicts and discourage dialogue.

One way to do this to set a positive tone from the start: be personal, polite, open and responsive in communications you have with individual students, and with the class as a whole. When responding to students' questions and comments on the discussion board and in e-mail, always use their names. Make frequent use of terms like "please" and "thanks." Be sure to watch your wording so it is as positive as possible. For example, instead of saying that a student has done something incorrectly and leaving it at that, include targeted feedback with wording that lets them know how to improve for the next assignment and ensures them that you believe they are capable of the improvement. All of this takes extra time, but it's worth it.

It's a good idea to keep most communication within a course, such as on a discussion board, so you don't end up repeatedly answering the same question. E-mail can also be a great tool for personal encouragement and for friendly reminders about assignments that are upcoming or overdue. *Keep students on task by sending weekly e-mails to those who did not post on the discussion board to let them know their contributions were missed. Many learning management systems automate these types of messages, and include tools to help with reminders.* For example, Remind (www.remind.com) is a free tool that sends text messages to your students without revealing your personal phone number. You can schedule reminders before your course starts that can be sent later to give students a reminder of upcoming due dates. You can then use it as a quick message tool to contact students individually or in groups while maintaining your own phone privacy.

Another way to encourage communication is to make yourself available at times and in a manner that is most helpful for students. This doesn't mean that you need to chain yourself

to your computer 24/7, but it might mean that you hold a targeted online office hour one day or evening a week for the students in your online course, perhaps the night before an assignment is due. Make it easy for students to contact you instantly, either in a chat room through the courseware or via an instant messaging tool such as Google Hangouts, Remind, or Facebook Messenger.

Here are some practical tips for fostering good communication in online courses:

- ◀ **Introduce Yourself.** Make sure your students know who is teaching the class. Add a photo and bio, link to a website bio that you have created, or create an introduction video. When students see that there is an actual person behind the course, they will know that you are more engaged. If your learning management system allows for it, post a picture as your avatar, and encourage your students to do so as well. It is much more inviting when communication occurs with someone you can see, even if it's through a picture.
- ◀ **Build a learning community.** Have students post written introductions (and photographs if possible) on the discussion board—and post one yourself. Encourage students to interact with discussions about course material, either through a space on your site or in temporary chat rooms. Create an area online for socializing.
- ◀ **Give frequent and encouraging feedback.** You might adapt the practices of a biology instructor at Piedmont Technical College in Greenwood, South Carolina, who holds online office hours, responds to e-mail within 24 hours, gives a range of dates for an exam to be completed, and responds to students individually with their grades and where they stand in the course.
- ◀ **Maximize the use of the discussion board to encourage group interaction.** Minimize the use of e-mail for communication, and keep communication on the discussion board as much as possible. Encourage students to answer each other's questions.
- ◀ **Check in daily to answer questions and redirect discussions if they get off track.** Students need to sense your presence, though you don't want to intrude. Some instructors post on discussion boards a few times during the week while others write a weekly posting which comments directly on what students have had to say during the week. Even if a problem seems to be

developing, hold back for a little while, for often the group will resolve its own conflicts and be stronger for it. But if discussions veer wildly off track, post a follow-up question to help recapture the focus. If you don't have discussion boards, this can be done through an announcements forum or group e-mail.

◀ Be encouraging, understanding, and flexible. Congratulate students on a good effort. Ask what happened when a grade was low or they missed an assignment. Allow them some time flexibility in completing assignments, if possible, by creating a reasonable time frame for submission. Share a little of yourself. Reach out to students who are struggling. A simple note to a student asking, "Is everything OK? I haven't heard from you in a while," can give a student under great pressure the reassurance that someone cares.

◀ Make class fun. Bramucci (2001) offers many ideas for injecting an impish spirit and for giving students reasons to check into the class more often. For example, he suggests a weekly "Guess who?" feature based on unusual facts gathered by the teacher about each student. "Hide" actual test questions on the site in a sort of "Where's Waldo?" activity. Post teasers about interesting information to be covered in an upcoming lesson. Post holiday greetings. Invite students to submit nominations for a joke of the week. Send a Friday greeting with wishes for a good weekend.

◀ Use an Icebreaker. Maybe more so than with a class taught face-to-face, an icebreaker can be an asset for distance education courses. It commences communication immediately, gives the students a chance to participate and use the technology, and gives the instructor an opportunity to observe student writing styles.