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How to design online learning to enhance active
learning and student engagement?

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When designed and implemented effectively, online learning holds huge potential for learning. Nevertheless, many online courses that we see nowadays are not designed based on sound instructional design and adult learning principles. Simply providing students with online content and expect them to learn on their own is not an effective approach to online learning. Such online courses don't provide students with the high quality learning experience they deserve. Informed by research and drawn from my years' of experience teaching and designing online courses, in this short article I will share some online learning design strategies and tips that you can implement to enhance students' online engagement and learning.

- **Don't do online learning blindly.** Before you decide to implement online learning, it is important to think critically about why you are doing it. You don't want to do online learning simply because all others are doing it. If you are considering redesigning a face-to-face course for online delivery, the first thing to do is to evaluate whether online learning is a good fit for your course.

Below are a few questions to ask yourself before implementing online or blended learning.

- What is not working well in my current face-to-face course?
- What is the nature of the content (technical or fundamental)?

- Will it work better if I move those modules online?
- Will I redesign only a few modules or the entire course for online delivery?
- **Don't literally translate face-to-face content online.** One pitfall in online learning design is that some instructors simply move the content and activities from the face-to-face course to the online platform without making any changes. The issue is that not everything that works in the face-to-face environment might work as well in the online environment. Whole class discussion with 60 students might work pretty well in the classroom. However, the large class size might pose challenges when the instructor implements whole class online discussion. In this case, it is better to break students down into small groups for online discussion forum activities.
- **Get students well orientated.** If you redesign part of your face-to-face course for online delivery, it is also important to give students the rationale for why you do so to get their buy in. Explain to them how the online or blended format will benefit their learning. You can even show them evidence from research.

Sometimes we might assume that our students have grown up with technology and they can easily navigate the online learning environment. Nevertheless, being tech dependent is different from being tech savvy. Additionally, being tech savvy in daily life is different from being tech savvy in the learning context. Therefore, it helps to give clear instructions on how to get started. You can do so by creating a 2-minute course overview video trailer, providing a virtual walkthrough of the course, or have students take a "syllabus quiz" to make sure they read the syllabus carefully. For those who haven't had any prior online learning experience, share with them some online learning strategies, including how to manage their time.

- **Communicate high mutual expectations early on.** At the beginning of the course, let students know what you expect of them as well as what they can expect from you. Expectations are mutual. Your expectations for them helps guide their efforts. Letting them know what they can expect from you shows your commitment to their online success. For example, you can tell them how soon you will respond to their email inquiries and how soon the grades for assignments will be in. Put this information in the syllabus and remind them of the expectations more than once throughout the course.
- **Provide a well-organized online course structure.** Clear organization is key to success in any learning environment. If students have to click on several tabs to locate the information

they need, they might feel frustrated. It is a good idea to keep things organized by linking them to a central location for ease of access. For instance, you can put readings and viewings, assignments, and supplementary resources all within a module on the Modules/Lessons page in your learning management system. Students can easily access what they need for that particular module with only one click.

- **Use multimedia-rich online content.** Don't restrict yourself to slides and book chapters. Students find online content that is too text heavy boring. Most learning management systems allow you to easily incorporate videos, websites, games, and so on to continuously engage students and to help them understand the content. You can easily create interactive content with tools such as SoftChalk, Captivate, or Storyline.
- **Support online interaction and community building.** One of the most important factors contributing to student success in both the face-to-face and online classroom is social interaction (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003; Picciano, 2002; Sing & Khine, 2006; Zheng & Spires, 2012). Wenger (1998) claimed that the social and cognitive processes involved in online interactions are critical for online learners to build a cohesive learning community in order to construct knowledge collaboratively. Your online learning activities should support the following three types of interaction:
 - *Learning-content interaction.* Students need to actively interact with the content in order to make meaning. To help them develop a deeper understanding of the content, you can ask them to reflect on what they have read or viewed and discuss how they can apply their new learning in future practice.
 - *Learner-learner interaction.* The potential of peer learning is huge. You can leverage peer learning by asking students to conduct peer review, work on collaborative projects using tools such as Wiki and Google Apps, and participate in online discussion forums.
 - *Learner-instructor interaction.* Your visibility in the online course might greatly impact students' satisfaction, motivation, and online learning outcomes. You can easily enhance your online presence by replying to students' discussion forum posts, summarizing each online module before or shortly after it is over, asking them questions, providing feedback to them, and so on.
- **Use the right online learning technology in the right way.** There are a ton of online learning tools out there. In order not to overwhelm yourself or your students, it is a good idea to start

with a few easy-to-use tools. More importantly, think creatively about how to use the tool in innovative ways to support active online participation and interaction, rather than merely using it to deliver content. Finally, no matter what technology you use, always teach students how to use it with a short tutorial or spend five minutes in your face-to-face class to walk them through the tool.

- **Use different methods to assess student learning at a higher level.** Don't restrict yourself to quizzes or exams. While quizzes and exam are very helpful in some contexts, they can't always capture student learning accurately. Using a combination of multiple assessment approaches, you can assess their learning at a higher level on Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001). You can combine quizzes, discussion forums, reflective journals, self-assessment, peer assessment, and hands-on application projects. Finally, remember that no matter what assessment approaches you use, it is extremely important to provide timely, personalized, and actionable feedback to students.

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