

Best Practices for Online Teaching

Background

The Kent State University School of Library and Information Science (KSU-SLIS) developed a fully online master's degree program in 2011. From the beginning we've grappled with how best to provide a quality online learning experience for graduate students going into a "people profession". Our graduates are employed in libraries, museums, archives, history centers and corporate environments and their work requires them to interact daily with individuals of all ages, races, creeds, abilities and socio-economic backgrounds. Yet the instruction they receive for their masters of library and information science degree is provided in an online, and for the most part asynchronous, environment where they rarely have face to face contact with the instructor or other students. The literature is rife with examples of how isolated students and faculty can feel in the online environment. Another common problem for students, resulting from this lack of face to face contact, is a sense of confusion or misunderstandings about assignments and instructor expectations. At KSU-SLIS we've found that our biggest challenge really comes down to one thing: how to provide a sense of connection and encourage meaningful student and faculty engagement in our online classes.

To help determine best practices for online teaching I developed a study in 2014 as part of my involvement in the Kent State Teaching Scholars program. At the time I also chaired the KSU-SLIS Online Learning Committee, which was planning an online teaching "boot camp" for the School's full- and part-time faculty at the end of the spring semester. Our goal was to develop a list of recommendations for specific teaching practices that would be effective and achievable for both experienced and inexperienced instructors. The products resulting from this

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study were a list of recommended best practices for online teaching and a checklist for faculty to use to gauge their progress; these were starting points to help all of us become more successful online instructors.

After reviewing the literature I surveyed 59 full- and part-time faculty members in the School to learn about the variety and use of active online teaching strategies. The teaching practices included in the survey were developed using the Community of Inquiry model (COI), as defined by Garrison et al. (2000), Anderson et al. (2001), Brook and Oliver (2003), and Fish and Wickersham (2009) and Taft (2011). The COI model emphasizes the importance of establishing and maintaining a teaching presence, a social presence and a cognitive presence (instructor with student, student with student, student with content) in online courses.

Survey Content

The survey was broken into three parts:

Part 1: Establishing a Teaching Presence, including effective course development and design, developing a clear and specific instructions and learner expectations and providing intellectual leadership to facilitate learning. Questions in this section addressed the ways instructors create an online identity, make themselves “visible” to students, provide effective instruction design and support students’ knowledge development.

Part 2: Establishing a Social Presence means engaging socially and emotionally with students and the course content. Questions in this section solicited input about how instructors create—and encourage their students to create—an identity as a “real person” in their online courses.

Part 3: Establishing a Cognitive Presence focuses on the student's ability to demonstrate their construction and integration of knowledge in the online environment. This is influenced by the instructor's social presence and teaching, as well as other students' social and cognitive presence. Questions in this section asked about the tools and techniques instructors made available for students to use in establishing a cognitive presence through their interactions with the instructor, other students and the course content.

The Results

Twelve full-time and nine part-time KSU-SLIS faculty responded to the survey and for the most part these were experienced online instructors. Most (76%) had developed online content and roughly 24 percent had taught more than five online classes in the last calendar year (all had taught at least two courses during that period).

The information these instructors shared about their online teaching practices was heartening. All indicated they aligned their student learning outcomes with assignments and learning activities; included explicit instructions for learning activities and assignments; offered synchronous online office hours; regularly engaged in personal communication with students, individually and in groups; and designed and/or lead learning activities. Even more encouraging, all but one of the respondents indicated they had recorded audio and/or video lectures for their online courses. Allowing students to see or at least hear the instructor's voice as they teach seems to be one of the most effective ways of establishing a social and teaching presence in the online classroom. However, one survey respondent indicated s/he had tried incorporating voiceover PowerPoint lectures only to learn that students preferred the lectures to be written out (in essence, reflecting the structure of an old school correspondence course). Interestingly, only

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about half of the respondents had ever provided students with the option of recording audio and video for either introductions or assignments. This could indicate the instructors' unwillingness—or lack of opportunity—to rework their assignment formats or, more likely, the students' reluctance to record themselves. (One respondent indicated that students were offered the option of creating a video introduction but none took advantage of the opportunity.)

Other practices these instructors engaged in to establish their social and teaching presence, and student cognitive presence in the online environment included creating a positive learning environment to help students feel respected and accepted; assisting students with knowledge construction (applying, integrating and synthesizing information); diagnosing and correcting misconceptions by providing direct feedback; providing formative and summative feedback, either individually or collectively; and assessing students' learning efficacy (i.e. the students' ability to reach goals and complete tasks). Other common active instruction methods the respondents engaged in included providing practice options (such as worksheets and exercises), requiring students to participate in group projects or discussions and using case studies.

Overall the survey respondents seemed to be successful at transferring active teaching strategies commonly used in the face to face classroom to the online environment but there were several notable exceptions. Almost no one indicated they had developed real or virtual fieldtrips, allowed students to interview each other or guest speakers, provided recorded guest speaker lectures (with or without options for students to provide their feedback), developed interactive study guides or demonstrated activities or applications for their students. Some of this can be attributed to the course content; for example, demonstrations tend to work best in courses that

emphasize the use of technology tools while case studies are more useful for illustrating best practices.

Instructor Comments and Recommendations

Some of the instructors surveyed expressed positive and proactive attitudes towards online instruction in the written comments sections of the survey while others shared negative and discouraging experiences (not unlike students who make the effort to complete course instruction surveys). The most common negative comments centered on students' unwillingness to participate in group projects or synchronous chats and meetings with peers, and the instructor's inability to connect with some students in the online environment. For example, one respondent asserted that "some [students] are very responsive and comfortable with the online format" but "in some cases there should be an option for either an in-person class for each section, or a synchronous online option". Positive comments reflected the instructor's enthusiasm for teaching ("I enjoy the challenge and learn from the students every week") and willingness to try new instruction methods and assignment formats, even if some of these failed to elicit a positive response from students.

Other recommendations for encouraging and enhancing student and instructor engagement in the online environment were to:

- Give timely and meaningful feedback
- Introduce materials that demonstrate trends in the field
- Tailor assignments and projects to allow students to bring in real work needs
- Provide alternative assignment options

- Make assignments and weekly activities as practical as possible to reflect what [students] do on the job

Summary

There is no question the online learning environment can be challenging for both faculty and students. Feeling disconnected and unacquainted with others, being unwilling to utilize unfamiliar technologies or teaching methods and feeling reluctant to record one's image and/or voice can lead to feelings of disengagement and isolation. However, there are also numerous ways instructors can incorporate best teaching practices learned in the face to face classroom into their online classes that will also enhance this unique learning environment. Creating unambiguous instructions for assignments, clearly stating learner expectations, regularly communicating with students individually and collectively, providing opportunities for real-time interaction with the instructor and allowing students to see and/or hear the instructor and each other are effective ways to establish a social and teaching presence in the online environment. Aligning student learning outcomes with assignments and course content, offering alternative assignment options that let students draw on their life and work experiences, providing timely and substantive feedback, demonstrating practical applications and helping students to integrate and synthesize what they've learned are essential for establishing a cognitive presence online. Being willing to try new techniques and technologies—even if some of these fail—is vital if one is to break out of the face to face instruction mold and fully embrace teaching online. But maintaining one's enthusiasm for teaching and *remembering the positive reasons why we first took on the role of instructor* may also be essential to our own wellbeing and our students' success.