

## Teaching Tips:

### The New Frontier: The Development of an Online Gerontology Course

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In developing this *Teaching Tips* article, I wanted to provide some insight into a relatively new opportunity in teaching: the development and delivery of an online course in adult development and aging. I was fortunate enough to teach an online course this past spring, and the following article explores some of the challenges as well as benefits of teaching an online course from my own perspective.

As many of us have learned in our various professional positions, successful teaching is a process. There are certainly administrative skills to be honed and refined (i.e., developing a strong syllabus, establishing competent grading systems), but there are also dimensions of teaching that are more difficult to establish: the *teaching persona*, or the ability of the professor to effectively engage students to learn and critically analyze the given material. As the term implies, the teaching persona is often dependent on the personality of a given professor, and it is difficult to define what constitutes an effective teaching persona for any given individual as we all have interpersonal strengths and weaknesses that are magnified in the classroom environment.

It has taken me many courses to feel comfortable with my teaching persona, which often seems to be a balance between the quirks of my own personality along with the strong desire to critically analyze course material. While prior *Teaching Tips* articles as well as others explore strategies to develop a strong teaching persona (for a number of additional resources, see Gaugler, 2004), what happens when we are faced with the challenge of establishing a teaching persona in an online format? As higher education continues to utilize technology to facilitate the development of curricula, there is an increasing likelihood that many of us will have to adapt our teaching identity to contexts other than the traditional, 'face-to-face' (f2f) setting. Instead, some of us may have to deliver courses in what many administrators may view as cheaper, more easily managed online courses (where content and even student-professor and student-student interactions can be monitored). These were some of the issues I grappled with when I accepted an offer to teach an Introduction to Gerontology online course.

#### The Virtual Classroom

The 'classroom' I was charged to teach actually offered a number of interesting pedagogical features. The main course page, where students and the professor could log in, was set up in two 'frames.' A frame on the left provides more of the administrative course information to students; included was a hyperlink to the instructor's name/email as well as a short bio of the instructor; the names and email addresses of all students, as well as student bios (if the student wanted to provide one), a course syllabus that

provides the schedule and content of the course, and also a webliography and course content link, where the instructor could provide helpful web links or actually download course readings in .pdf format. All of this material is available to students at any time.

In addition to basic class information, the left frame of the classroom page offers a 'Conferences' link, which details each of the different topics to be discussed during the course of the class. When the Conference link is clicked, a list of topics is provided (e.g., Introduction, Conference 1: Gerontology as a Discipline; Conference 2: Physiological Aspects of Age, etc.). Finally, when these topics are clicked, the right frame then lists a series of conference notes, where students can post thoughts, questions, or comments on different chapters, readings or assignments for each particular conference.

Other features provided in the virtual classroom included a chat room, where students and the instructor can interact in real time as needed, as well as a study group link. In certain course assignments, some students may be grouped into smaller clusters to work together on various group assignments. Gradebooks and student portfolios (where the instructor can monitor the number and frequency of posts of each student) are also provided; the gradebook calculates grades when needed for the instructor.

The main right frame is where the majority of class interaction takes place. As indicated above, students are able to post, in bulletin board format, responses, questions, or comments on each of the readings assigned for the conference. The instructor has administrator oversight over the conference postings; she/he can delete comments if needed, can respond if necessary to any questions, and can also 'close' a conference to any further postings (although students can still access and read prior posts). Moreover, the right frame of the classroom also provides a series of 'class announcements,' where the instructor can raise any important administrative or substantive issues to the class prior to or during a conference.

#### Strengths and Weaknesses

While at first I was skeptical of the online teaching experience vs. traditional f2f instruction, I found that many of the interactive features of the online class were advantageous. Generally, students were given a week or so to complete a given conference topic, which usually entailed the reading of 1-2 chapters out of the text, reading a journal article, and then completing a series of online assignments I had devised. The latter took advantage of the online course format and also provided students with some guidance on how to navigate and identify important aging-related information on the Internet. As long as students completed the assignments by posting to the conference topics as well as responding to other posts by the deadline, students could post at any time

of the day. In many respects, this allowed for a great deal of flexibility in managing the class and the course content. These online discussions tended to be vibrant; students generally posted 2-3 submissions per each topic within a conference, which generally led to 10-15 posts a week for the more attentive students.

Another rather unanticipated strength of the online format was the opportunity to provide constant feedback on students' writing and composition skills. In many courses, particularly those with only 1 or 2 final 'papers,' the ongoing feedback instructors can provide is limited. This is especially true in large courses. In contrast, as students are expected to contribute constant posts to each online conference, the instructor has the opportunity to establish expectations for written contributions relatively early in the course. This allows students to understand some of the basics of exposition and written arguments, and aids considerably when term papers are assigned.

While the flexibility and dynamic nature of the online course are strengths, there were several weaknesses as well. Although the instructor has flexibility in terms of when she/he reads and responds to posts, in order to do an adequate job, instructors have to spend some considerable time doing so. This is especially apparent in the initial stages of the course, as students are still trying to understand the expectations of the instructor. In addition, instructors have to be careful in rewarding quantity over quality; in many instances, I had students who waited to submit conference posts until the day or day before the end of a conference (and in some cases, well after the conference closed). While the student may have submitted an adequate number of posts, the content of the posts were often facile and demonstrated little knowledge of the course material (i.e., "I agree with Joe's last post"). These are issues that the instructor has to address immediately, or the nature of the online interaction is likely to suffer as the course continues.

Another potential challenge to the instructor is the extremely wide variation in student background. In my course, students ranged from those who actively desired a career in gerontology and health care, to those who were simply taking the course for credits, to those in the military, to those who were from foreign countries. While the composition of the course is probably not unlike those of large-scale, undergraduate survey courses at public universities, the reliance on writing and discussion in the online course format puts greater responsibility on the student to participate and shape the nature of the course. While this is a challenge, it is alternatively a strength as well; the online course afforded me the opportunity to instruct and spend virtual 'quality time' with students who may have otherwise not received such mentorship in the traditional, 300-700 student survey course at the local state university.

One aspect of the online curriculum I also have instinctive concerns about is its standardized nature. There were several areas of the course syllabus that I could not modify. In addition, the textbook was assigned; while I may be able

to recommend another text, I'm not sure if that is possible. Moreover, I received the distinct impression from some of the administrators that there is a continual move to standardize course curricula, teacher evaluations, and any other aspects of the class that were possible. This is a rather disturbing trend for those of us educated in the classic liberal arts vein, and seems to be the manner in which many purely online 'universities' construct their curricula (e.g., see Farrell, 2003). I do not think it is a flight of fancy to believe that larger public universities will adopt similar strategies as tenure-track faculty positions are eliminated in favor of more adjunct teaching positions. In some cases, assigning an adjunct faculty member to teach multiple sections of an introductory survey course online may save the university more resources than offering the same course in traditional f2f (face-to-face) format. In this sense, I fear that the rapid incorporation of online courses into established disciplines (particularly in the liberal arts) may be yet another tool to reduce the power of faculty to shape the content of their courses.

### Final Thoughts

I thoroughly enjoyed teaching Introductory Gerontology to a group of students whom I would likely never reach in my current academic position, and the flexibility of online teaching provided me with this opportunity. I was more than satisfied with the caliber of conference posts and discussions that took place, and I believe the students appreciated the ability of the course to go beyond textbook learning with the use of journal articles and online assignments. The flexibility of the course also made my instruction more efficient, as I was not limited to certain times of the week to offer my thoughts to students.

Although I do not believe an online course can ever adequately replace the dynamic type of learning that occurs in a small-group, high-level graduate or undergraduate seminar, in my opinion the flexibility of the online course makes it preferable to large-scale lecture courses and may be the approach of choice in the coming years for lower-level undergraduate instruction. Nonetheless, the flexibility of online courses needs to entail not only when the instructor participates and interacts with students, but also the content of each online course. Unfortunately, as the existing models of online courses tend to adhere to a more standardized model, the ability of online courses to act as a strong supplement to f2f instruction may be compromised in favor of a larger administrative trend to construct and deliver prefabricated courses to the student 'consumer.' While this may strike some as the position of Luddite, it nonetheless is a trend that warrants attention in the coming years.

### References

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