Teaching Online (Book excerpt from a work in progress)

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Introduction

The way we facilitate learning in higher education has undergone change. No longer are we constrained by time and space (Erisman & Steele, 2015). In their report, Erisman & Steele find institutions of higher education serving a much larger population of returning adult learners for whom advanced degrees and certifications can provide a difference in their working and personal lives.

In the current online learning environments, we no longer have as much flexibility over the instructional strategies we want to use. Content and activities are built through the use of readings, videos, reference websites, mandated discussions, self-reflection activities and structured assignments. Faculty are hired to teach through establishing a feedback working relationship with students. In building this relationship, the nature of how you communicate and work together changes. What may have been effective in a face-to-face learning environment may not work online. This adds a new dimension to how faculty do their jobs.

You may ask how educators bring the richness and expertise normally added to learning environments into an established course that we probably did not create. To facilitate learning effectively, adding new skills to our teaching toolbox helps us make the best use of online learning environments.

This article represents an opportunity to take what might feel like a sterile learning environment and build on your own teaching skills to become a more effective educator. You are the one who will support student learning and provide students with a quality learning experience based on the working relationship you build with your learners. Online teaching may sound like a lot more work. It is not. You are working differently and hopefully after reading this article, working more effectively.

Changing Demographics

In a 2016 report, researchers found that more than half (63.3%) of institutions surveyed felt online education was essential to long-term planning within their

institutions (Allen et al, 2016). Allen et al found the growth in almost ten years of institutions who find online education to be critical rose by approximately 45%. It is obvious many higher education institutions are embracing online education as an opportunity for organizational growth and providing educational opportunities to an underserved adult population.

McFarland et al reported in the Fall of 2015 there were 17 million students enrolled in undergraduate programs (2017). They found 12.3% of those students studied exclusively through distance education. For the same year, 2.94 million students were enrolled in graduate programs of which 26% participated exclusively in distance education (McFarland et al).

For the working adult who wants to return to higher education, online education is a gift. Returning adults find the flexibility of online learning convenient. They are working full time jobs and serving as caretakers for their own family and many times extended family. Their lives are packed with responsibilities and they find themselves juggling many life roles (Ross-Gordon, 2011). By 2015, 40% of undergraduates and 76% of graduates were found to be working a minimum of 30 hours per week (Carnevale et al, 2015). About a quarter of all students who work full time are also enrolled full time. Carnevale et al goes on to note that approximately 19% of students who work have children. Adding education to this busy mix can create a stressful living, working and learning environment. Because online educational opportunities continue to grow, educators need to ensure they have access to the strategies that can help these learners be successful in any learning environment.

Building Working Relationships with Learners
A considerable body of research on adult learners makes clear this population tends to learn somewhat differently than traditional age students in academic settings (Ghost Bear, 2012, Gregson & Sturko, 2007, Knowles et al, 2005 and Taylor & Kroth, 2009). For example, research shows that adult learners prefer active learning strategies, appreciate opportunities for self-direction in learning, and prefer learning that is clearly applicable beyond the classroom setting (Kazis et al 2007; Ross-Gordon 2011). As the Adult Learner Focused Institutions (ALFI) principles of effectiveness point out, these preferences require faculty to approach their jobs not as primarily lecturers, but as managers and facilitators of student learning (Klein-Collins, 2011). Those teaching online can make use of different types of strategies and tools when engaging adults in learning. One strategy relates to your introduction or first contact with learners.

When communicating online a time-place displacement was found to reduce social connections and intensify emotions such as loneliness and depression (Caplan, 2003, Caplan & High, 2006). Kuehn (1994) and Walther et al (2005) found communicating online eliminates the physical and vocal cues found in face-to-face communications. With the reduction of these cues, communication regarding social details related to students and faculty is also reduced. This dynamic produces a vague impression and can reduce social presence (Hancock & Dunham, 2001). In turn, this reduction of

social presence decreases learning (Lira et al, 2008). By switching to other nonverbal communication strategies, it is possible to build working relationships with students (Walther, 1992, Walther et al, 2005). According to Sherblom, with the use of nonverbal cues, effective classroom interactions are possible (2010). Sherblom feels the challenge for faculty teaching online is to develop their social presence and utilize the communication strategies that facilitate engaging learners.

One strategy is to utilize self-disclosure which is made up of two distinct processes of receiving self-disclosure and reciprocating self-disclosure (Collins & Miller, 1994). Kashian et al found (2017) people like those who self-disclose to them. Those who receive the self-disclosure see those disclosing as warm and trusting because they shared personal information (Kasian et al). Anderson and Emmers-Sommer (2006) believe relationships develop more quickly online and found that study participants were more satisfied than those communicating less time per week.

Use of this information can begin the first day the online course opens for students. Many online higher education programs now require faculty to prepare an introduction or welcome letter that students receive when they first log into the course. In lieu of a welcome letter, some require faculty to prepare an introduction post that is posted into a general class discussion board.

A good welcome letter or post contains your expectations for how you'll work together. The writing tone is positive and contains information about course and school policies, how you can be reached and should end on a positive note. Share information students may not have access to. For example, tell them about your past experiences and degrees. Provide a brief story you feel communicates something about who you are. Perhaps share a guiding philosophy or what you like to do in your free time. Post a picture of yourself in the course so students can see you as a person. Perhaps include your pet or take the picture outside to show what you see every day such as a beach, forest or urban landscape.

Research suggests a video can build social presence and assists students in relating to the instructor (Frisby et al, 2013). Including a welcome video also provides opportunities for self-disclosure. Don't repeat what you've already stated in your welcome letter or post but use that to further set a tone of caring. Keep the video short. You don't want to overwhelm students with your welcome. Perhaps mention something you haven't addressed. For example, you can talk about how your field of study has impacted your life or the importance it has in the world of work.

Avoid oversharing and keep it professional but provide some insight into who you are as a professional and human. This is your first communication with students, so your writing and speaking style should be in a relaxed professional tone. The more you can connect on a human level, the more comfortable students will become. Most importantly, ask them to tell you about their educational goals, careers and expectations for the course. When you ask for their expectations you are actively engaging them in thinking about what they'd like to get out of the course. Once you are aware of their expectations you can use related examples in your feedback to

them. This sets a tone of respect and shows you were listening. As the working relationship grows, students being to relax, exhibit more honesty and share more self-disclosure (Gibbs et al, 2008, Vess, 2005).

Umphrey et al (2008) feels faculty can increase their social presence with the use of present-tense verbs, inclusive pronouns and verbal expressions of interest. Inclusive pronouns such as we, us, our can provoke a sense of commonality and connection. Umphry et al goes on to say, this practice can help to create a connected experience and can influence student engagement.

Beginning with a strong welcome sets the tone. It's important to maintain that tone through the feedback you provide on a regular basis. Witt and Schrodt (2007) found that the most effective learning environment is one where students see the instructor as close, available, open and approachable. They go on to say, without the proficient and skilled use of communication techniques, the online course can have a reduced impact on student outcomes.

Continuing the working relationship with feedback

Feedback as an assessment of student learning should address mastery of course concepts, recommendations for improvement and advise to help improve future performance (Cole & Nicolini, 2017). They go on to say, feedback is typically the primary means of communication between faculty and students in online courses. Feedback guides a student's learning and should be timely, frequent, personalized, detailed, clear, specific and balanced (Liebold & Schwarz, 2015). Additionally, diverse methods of feedback such as audio, written and conferencing are beneficial. According to Thomas et al, providing explanations can improve the learning experiences of students. Wang & Chen propose the fundamental goal of providing assessment feedback is to help students learn (2017).

Guasch et al (2013) found four types of feedback. According to Guasch et al, corrective feedback reflects the assignment requirements and content. Epistemic feedback provides questions or prompts to think critically and explain or clarify (Guasch et al). Guasch et al, lists suggestive feedback as containing advice or ideas to improve discussion of a concept. Finally, the fourth type of feedback combines the other three (Guasch et al). For example, suggestive and epistemic can be combined to include prompts/questions for further development and suggestions for improvement (Guasch et al).

Best practice for feedback contains many components. Wang & Chen encourage faculty to pay attention to details (2017). Suggestions for improvement could include asking students to provide examples to illustrate their points, add in additional research evidence and expand on concepts presented (Wang & Chen).

Recommendations by Liebold & Schwarz (2015) for providing effective feedback include personalizing it by addressing the learner by their name. They recommend returning feedback within 72 hours of a discussion and less than one week for project or paper assignments. Additionally, they encourage balanced feedback which

includes both positive remarks and areas of improvement. Begin your feedback with positive comments at both the beginning and end sandwiching your comments for improvement in the middle (Liebold & Schwarz). With the use of multiple choice and short answer assessments, text should be added that explains the correct responses (Thomas et al, 2017).

Your feedback tone should be positive asking questions that promote critical thinking (Liebold & Schwarz, 2015). Ask students to clarify meaning or provide examples. Avoid vague comments such as 'good job' or 'there are errors in grammar' which do not give students the information they need to act and improve (Liebold & Schwarz). Promote critical thinking by taking a vague section of the student's work and asking them how they might discuss more detail to increase the reader's understanding (Liebold & Schwarz). Sending students to other resources such as web sites or internal resources is also an effective method in helping them learn (Liebold & Schwarz). For example, students with consistent writing issues can be referred to the Writing Center. Those who need to give deeper explanations can be referred to a Librarian who can help them identify other related research on their topic.

Providing feedback using best practices may sound like time-consuming tasks and that can be concerning for those teaching online (Bonnel & Boehm, 2008; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). For example, Lewis and Abdul-Hamid recommend faculty retain a document containing commonly used remarks that can be cut and pasted into student's work. Consider the document a repository of carefully worded, specific, helpful feedback phrases written in a positive tone (Leibold & Schwarz, 2015). The repository should also contain a list of resources you would commonly refer students to.

Bonnel & Boehm (2008) propose faculty synthesize common feedback themes and provide them to the entire group through all class announcements or discussions. Another recommended strategy is to utilize peer reviews which can help save time as well as encourage students to learn from each other (Bonnel & Boehm). They also recommend the use of rubrics and templates to organize your feedback.

Teaching practice is changing to include more diverse learning environments. In order to facilitate learning, educators need to incorporate additional instructional strategies that assist learners who are studying online. Although at first it may seem these additional strategies seem to increase the time it takes to teach online, by organizing the way work is done educators can reduce the work load. Using best practice strategies for building working relationships and providing effective feedback can assist educators in reaching the ultimate goal of increasing learning opportunities for online students.

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