

Preparing Students for an Online Class or Online Class Component

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Making sure that our students can use the course enhancements and digital materials we develop for them is a challenge we cannot take lightly.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of using online resources in teaching and learning is making sure that our students know what to do with the materials we have provided. Along with making sure that our students can access these materials, we must also consider the personal and interpersonal aspects of using new kinds of materials. Thus, the task of socializing our students and ourselves to this new environment is a very large one, but it is one that we must consider in every use of online course materials—whether we are teaching completely online or simply using online materials to enhance our realtime classes. These guidelines will assist in your efforts to equip your students to deal with online materials, digitized materials, course enhancements, and online courses:

Hardware, Software, and Access Issues

One of the major reasons for providing online and media resources for students is that they are “universally” accessible around the clock—but only in our dreams. Your students’ hardware and software configurations and the degree to which materials are actually accessible to them will pose challenges you need to consider carefully as you plan online and media components.

PLANNING AHEAD

- If your students will need special hardware (a microphone, for example) or software (even free plugins such as Adobe Acrobat), be sure to let them know *ahead of time*.
 - If some resources are available on the web, provide full instructions on how to access them.
 - If a plugin is required for viewing any course materials, provide a link to the source of that plugin.
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- Show students ahead of time in class how to download and install a plugin or find online resources.
- *Never* ask your students to do things you can't.
- In preparing course materials, be aware that not all students have fast or sophisticated systems. Target a certain lowest common denominator as your typical student computer user, prepare materials to suit that student, and then don't deviate from your standard.
- Remember that many students will work from off campus (this is the beauty of online resources—we can stay home), so they may have very slow connections. Keep course materials speedy and small. Do not overuse video, large image or audio files, and unnecessary graphics. Or if you must use graphics, make your materials available in graphics-free formats.
- Offer materials in more than one format. Sometimes students have the hardware and software to deal with one sort of handout (Acrobat, for example) but not another (the student may not have Word for Windows). Online and media redundancy is not an embarrassment.
- Author course materials—both in and out of class materials—with the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Federal Rehabilitation Act in mind.

The ADA “prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, State and local government, public accommodation, commercial facilities, transportation, and telecommunications.”¹

The Federal Rehabilitation Act (amendments of 1998) “prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by Federal agencies, in programs receiving Federal financial assistance, in Federal employment, and in the employment practices of Federal contractors.” Section 508 specifies that “An accessible information technology system is one that can be operated in a variety of ways and does not rely on a single sense or ability of the user.”²

PROVIDING HELP

- Let your students know where to find hardware and software help—whom they may call, when they can call, how much help you personally can be expected to give.
- Put help telephone numbers on your syllabus and on your course pages. Don't make students search for help. And *never* provide help numbers solely in your online site. Sometimes a student simply cannot get logged in to the materials, so having the materials and phone numbers available in hard copy is essential.
- Do not try to provide student support yourself. This is a no-win situation.
- If you are offering a course entirely online, be sure that accessible help (telephone, email, chat) is available around the clock.
- When offering assistance in using hardware or software—which I just told you not to do, but oh well—be aware that your system will not display a page or a document the same way your student's system does. So when a student says he or she can't find a link, and you say, “click the mauve button,” you should know that what is a

1. *Americans with Disabilities Act*: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm>

2. *The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998*: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/RSA/RehabAct.html>

button on your screen may not be a button on your student's and what is mauve on your monitor may appear an entirely different color on his or hers. (Besides, what color *is* mauve, anyway?)

Computer Competence

Your students bring a wide range of online skills and software abilities to your classes. Some will know the Office Suite, some will be adept at searching the web, some will know how to use graphics software. But all will have odd, uneven collections of skills—as most of us do.

- In terms of teaching—especially if you are teaching a course entirely online—it is a good idea to build the acquisition of skills into your assignments. If you are covering public policy, for example, have students do a search of government documents online to answer a question or solve a problem. Be sure to offer guidance in online searching as part of the assignment, and encourage students to partner and help one another.
- Remember that you don't have to provide all the software and internet instruction for your students. Hundreds of sites online provide such instruction; just point your students in the right direction, and give them a reason to go.
- If you want your students to be able to deal with the information in your field effectively, you will probably find that they require skills that you did not need when you were an undergraduate. They may need to know how to use a database program, they may need to produce a webpage, they may need to be able to manipulate graphics. You might, to provide them with experience in these new ways of handling materials, consider asking them to do some of their work in less traditional ways—produce a PowerPoint presentation, for example. When you give such assignments, it is effective sometimes to have students complete these assignments as members of groups. The array of talents and skills in a group will allow students to do together what they may not be able to do alone.
- Another way to encourage computer competence and information literacy in your students is to offer assignments which may be completed in more than one way. If you want a report on current American investments in Southeast Asia, for example, you may allow students to do a traditional research paper, to offer a PowerPoint presentation, to build an interactive webpage with a database, or to compose a CD with a software like Director. In suggesting a range of possible production tools, you permit all students to complete the assignment, but you also encourage them to develop new strategies for disseminating information.
- Remember that students are your best resource for educating other students and for educating us. Reward your students for helping you and for helping their colleagues in class. Build these rewards into your grading system.

Online Behavior

Many folks have developed their online standards of behavior in chat rooms, on email discussion lists, and in electronic newsgroups. If you have ever participated in these forums, you know that behavior is not always of the highest and most kindly sort. Some of your students—but only a few—will have taken online courses, and they will be aware that online class behavior is very different from chatroom behavior. But others will need some help, so one of the first things you should plan for is a small introduction to “netiquette.”

NETIQUETTE RESOURCES

- About.com’s netiquette page offers links to nearly twenty sites on appropriate online behavior. Subcategories include email netiquette, chatroom netiquette, and newsgroup netiquette.
<http://kidspenpals.about.com/kids/kidspenpals/cs/netiquette/index.htm>
- Sites such as “The Core Rules of Netiquette” offer wonderful introductions for your students. Ask them to review a site like this before they enter into online dialogue with others. You may make an online discussion of the rules of netiquette a way to ensure that your students are all online, that they are paying attention, that they know how and where to find information, and that they are ready to go:
<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html>

CHEATING AND PLAGIARISM

Many of us worry about online cheating. It is probably best to create assignments which do not make cheating easy. Also, it is comforting to separate issues of identity and performance. You will be able to tell pretty quickly one student’s writing from another’s. They “sound” very unique in online communications. So when student A no longer sounds like student A, you may suspect that some else is handing in student A’s work. The real issue is identity. Is student A really Mary Smith? One thing to remember is that we rarely check id’s in class, so Mary Smith in a realtime class may not even be Mary Smith.

Faculty Attitudes

PATIENCE

The most valuable attitude you can cultivate in this new teaching and learning environment is patience—patience with yourself, with your students, with the resources, with your support staff. Things will go wrong. Materials will be lost. Students will complain. Patience will serve you well in these moments.

TOLERANCE

Another great asset is tolerance—especially for student lapses. One thing to keep in mind is this: we all have heard the dead grandmother excuses about lost or late work so many times that we can see them coming a mile away. But if your students make excuses about late or missed work and these excuses involve technology (the computer crashed, I couldn’t log on, my ISP disconnected me), take them seriously—at least for a few more years. You never know, and some of the most odd and baffling things happen online. Your tolerance of your students’ missteps will serve you well when your own

Further Reading

ISP disconnects you and you can't upload the quiz you promised would be online by 9am.

GOODWILL TOWARD YOUR STUDENTS

Work with your students. Confer with them. In this venture, they are truly your colleagues. They love to help with these efforts, and they will roll up their sleeves and do a lot of the work for you if they see how much you are willing to learn from them. One assignment that is especially effective in classes of all kinds is having students do web searches for sites relevant to your field. Not only do students have a chance to evaluate sites, but they also have the opportunity to make discoveries which you can archive in your course materials and save for other students.

COLLABORATION WITH YOUR SUPPORT STAFF

Most of us are used to teaching alone, studying alone, writing alone. Teaching online or teaching with media and digital enhancements is group work. You need the support of your staff. Sometimes this takes a bit of getting used to for those of us who came to the task of teaching from the halls of scholarship.

Don't be too hard on yourself. This is new, different, and challenging work.

Further Reading

Americans with Disabilities Act Documents: <http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/kinder/document.htm>

U.S. Department of Education Office of the Chief Information Officer, *Requirements for Accessible Electronic and information Technology Design*: <http://gcs.ed.gov/con-info/clibrary/software.htm>