TEACHING ENGLISH ONLINE: Tips and Tricks to Teach Like Gardening

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Abstract: Teaching English online recognized as alternative to traditional classroom learning in teaching English. This paper discusses and offers some of the best ideas and practices gathered from successful online instructors and recent literature. Suggestions include good online class design, syllabus development, and online class facilitation offering hints for success for both new and experienced online instructors.

1. Introduction

Teaching English and gardening in certain things quiet similar. Both need preparation, nurture and harvesting. Moreover, like plants, students need a healthy and fertile environment if they are going to mature and thrive in their online courses. It takes planning, preparation, hard work, and enough knowledge to know what to do and what not to do for the labor to yield an abundant harvest.

New phenomena rises in teaching English nowadays is 'online teaching' due to the growth of internet massively. Recently, teaching English online has grown from an academic experiment to a recognized alternative to traditional classroom learning. In general teaching online shares similarities to teaching in the classroom; however, even the best traditional instructors may still find that teaching in an online environment can lead to feelings of inadequacy and being ill-prepared.

VanSickle (2003) recognized that a new online instructor should understand how the Internet has changed student expectations. These student expectations, include increased levels of feedback, increased attention, and additional resources to help them learn. In response to meeting these expectations, alternative methods of instruction and class facilitation have evolved to support student cohesiveness and encourage learning. To successfully challenge the online student, increased communication is required between instructor and student[15]

Multiple methods for online instruction are utilized throughout academe. One method, described as the online learning community, has become preeminent in online instruction. An online learning community as a community that "consists of learners who support and assist each other, make decisions synergistically, and communicate with peers on a variety of topics beyond those assigned"[3]. For this paper, the following is assumed of the online course:

- The course meets online during a regularly defined semester or quarter.

- The course is broken up into learning modules or content chunks.

- Student participation is required within a set time period, each content module is presented with a given start and end time.

- Learning takes place as students synthesize the prepared material and interact in class discussions with peers and the instructor(s).

Four stages are necessary for successful gardening and four stages are necessary for successful online teaching. A good gardener will prepare the soil for planting early; sow the seed; nurture the seedling to maturity, then harvest the crop reflecting on a productive season. A good online instructor will follow the same basic path: develop and structure the learning environment, introduce the material, encourage academic and intellectual growth, and finally, evaluate the effectiveness as he/she watches the students depart with an understanding and appreciation of the subject that will hopefully remain with them for a lifetime.

2. Preparing the Soil—Develop and Structure the Learning Environment

The first step in online instruction occurs long before the seeds are planted it takes significant planning and preparation. The design of an online course "can either facilitate or impede the learning process[2]. Much of this groundwork centers on designing the course syllabus. Preparation of the syllabus enriches the soil, providing a fertile and prepared environment for learning to occur.

Within the syllabus, student expectations should be clearly defined along well-written directions relating to course activities. The syllabus to a course contract and observe that new online instructors do not include enough information in their syllabi. These expectations should be stated in the opening orientation material as well as in the course syllabus. Preparation includes clear definitions of the following within the syllabus: contact methods, course objectives, attendance requirements, late work policies, the course schedule, orientation aids, grading scales and rubrics, communication practices, and technology policies[7].

2.1 Contact Information

The syllabus should include administrative items such as office times, contact information, and preferred modes of contacts. However, unlike a traditional course, instructors should be very clear about "online office hours" or hours of unavailability. For instance, if church attendance on Sunday mornings occurs regularly, it would be appropriate to inform the students in the syllabus of the offline time on Sunday mornings.

An online instructor not be available twenty-four hours a day to the student but establish a framework for turnaround response. This framework should offer recommendations for how long a student should expect to wait before repeating an email request that has gone unanswered[3]. Similarly Jarmon (1999) also states that instructors should set expectations for the students regarding response time and let the students know how quickly to expect a response.

If there is a specific times when the instructor will be online, he/she should include a "fastback" time or online office hours. A fastback time is a time period when students can expect a quicker than normal email response, usually within the hour or soon after the message is received. Many instructors offer online office hours where they enter the class chat room and wait for questions. It is often reported by instructors that students underutilize this time, choosing to send email as their questions arise, rather than waiting until a prescribed time in the future.

An alternative to the using virtual office hour time for academic questions is to use the time for social conversation. A virtual social experience helps create a closer bond with instructor and classmates, furthering the strength of the learning community. This is a form of the "cyber sandbox"[11]. The cyber sandbox is defined as a generic discussion or bulletin board area for students to just hang out and talk about

movies or jobs or whatever their interests are. The creation of a social outlet not only helps to keep regular class discussion areas on topic. "The sharing of our lives, including our travels, our observations, our emotions, and who we are as people is deliberately brought into the classroom in an effort to promote group cohesion and connection" [3].

2.1 Course Objectives

Well-defined course objectives are an important element in any course syllabus. Clearly stated objectives are even more important in online courses as students do not have the opportunity to participate in the opening day syllabus discussions so common in many traditional courses[6]. The communication of course objectives is also important because in an online course, much of the responsibility for learning is placed upon the student. Failure to properly inform the student of the course objectives leaves them feeling confused and puzzled about where each assignment, and moreover, the entire course is headed.

2.2 Attendance Requirements

Attendance requirements should be clearly stated, as attendance is necessary for courses that utilize online learning communities. "If clear guidelines are not presented, students can become confused and disorganized and the learning process will suffer". The online learning community requires students to take active roles in helping each other learn. Students who do not participate not only cheat themselves but also those in their learning community[3].

Participation requirements must be defined for an online course. Ko and Rossen (2004) recognize "if students aren't graded, the majority won't actively participate" (p. 67). Some students think that if they take an online course, they can take a vacation and still catch up with their coursework upon their return or do a few modules ahead of time before they leave. While online courses do allow for flexibility, students must participate. If instructors want good participation, the participation requirements must be clearly defined. Students may ask if they can post ahead of the other students or take the course on a self-paced schedule. Because of the prevalence of this question, online instructors should have a policy regarding early posting and state it clearly in the syllabus.

Participation in online courses is inherently different from traditional courses. Students do not automatically understand how to participate in online courses. Course assignments and participation requirements should be defined in the syllabus and with each assignment. Where possible, assignments should be grouped into familiar

categories such as class discussion, web searches, quizzes, reading assignments, etc. You may identify each type of assignment with icons. Creating a sample discussion or model may increase students' understanding of the participation requirement and how credit is assigned.

2.3 Late Work Policy

The instructor should create a policy for late assignment submissions and missed exams. Again, students who are not actively participating in the learning community are not assisting other students. Because of this interdependence, some instructors have a "no late work accepted policy," while others assign reduced credit. Another option is to create alternative assignments or exams for past due work or tests. To facilitate course management, these alternative assignments could be offered at the end of the course for those who missed assignments during the normal time period.

2.4 Course Schedule

One of the most important elements of an online course syllabus is the course schedule. The course schedule should list each module with beginning dates and due dates, assigned reading, assessment, and other activities. The course schedule becomes the map for the student and should be placed in the course syllabus, inside the course material, and redundantly throughout the course. In fact, "In an online environment, redundancy is often better than elegant succinctness"[7].

Therefore, If the website or course management system allows linking from the syllabus, then link each module of course content to the course schedule making it readily available to the student. Instructors should provide the course schedule in a printable format along with a digital format. Students should be encouraged to print out and follow their course schedules. Along with the course schedule, each learning module should contain a checklist to facilitate management and completion by the student. This should be print ready so that students can print and read them offline. Course content that presents an easy to find and understandable assignment checklist will save numerous emails from students inquiring about due dates and making pleas for deadline extensions.

2.5 Orientation Aids

An orientation note or hints for success for the student should be written and available for the student . This may include hints for time management

and good study practice. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) support self-help in answering questions (Jarmon, 1999). This allows the students to look for information before emailing the instructor. Over time, as questions are and answers are provided, a comprehensive FAQ will emerge. Therefore, FAQ page can "reduce the number of questions at the start of the semester" and throughout the duration of the course. If a chat room is used for virtual office hours, relevant questions should be added to the course FAQ[3].

2.6 Grading Scales/Rubrics

Grading scales and rubrics should be defined for each assignment. If the courseware management system allows, each assignment could be linked to the rubric for clarity. When group assignments are utilized, instructors should use a grading rubric for the students to grade each other individually as well as the entire group. This motivates students to participate and provides for equity in grading of group work. It is also helpful if the instructor assigns groups or teams the first time. The class should get to know each other before group self-selection is allowed.

2.7 Communication Practices

An inbox consistently full of email will be overwhelming to any instructor. Therefore, it is important to include in the syllabus elements for class behavior, guidelines for posting to the discussion boards, email protocols, and digital file submission procedures. Establishing email protocols and other communication guidelines will assist the instructor in online classroom management. Many instructors require the course session number in the subject line so that the email related to the course can be filtered to a separate mailbox. Students may be asked or required to use their institutional email address so that instructors are not confused by changes in address mid-term or are required to deal with bounced mail from full inboxes on students' free email accounts. An instructor can create individual email sub-folders for each of the online students. Email that has been answered and or graded can be filed away, providing for a record of all course correspondence. Another tip for instructors is to read their mail backwards from newest received to oldest. In many cases, students have solved their problems so that the earlier questions become irrelevant.

2.8 Technology Policy

A technology policy should be stated in the syllabus that directs students to a helpdesk or resource other than the instructor for technology problems. Additionally, instructors should encourage students to create drafts of postings or assignments in a word processor and save them before posting to the discussion board.

This will minimize spelling and grammar mistakes and provide a backup copy for the student in case of a technical problem. Students should be d to save all of their work on a computer hard drive and also to a removable device, such as a floppy disk or USB flash drive. Saving their work to a USB drive allows the student portability between home, office, and campus systems, and a chance of recovery if their systems go down. They can then take their files with them, use them on the computer of a family member or friend, or any publicly accessible computer in an office, library, or cybercafé.

3. Sow the Seed – Opening the course

The second step for successful online teaching is opening the course and the initiation of instruction. An enthusiastic and engaging opening week of class is a great way to start the course. This time of seed germination is a fragile period; disruptions or unnecessary interferences may set a tone that stifles learning during the remainder of the course. It is important to create an initial impression that will stimulate development of the learning community and nurture the students to maturity. Open the course by sending a welcoming email and announcement, initiating class-wide introductions, encouraging students to read the syllabus, and establishing a tone of excellence.

3.1 Welcome Email and Announcement

Several tips for the first session of class: send a welcome email that invites the students to join the class, telephone students who don't appear in the classroom the first week, and duplicate your welcome email in a class announcement if the course management system allows. The announcement should encourage students to check their email regularly. The first week should have fewer assignments to allow students to post introductions and get to know each other. Technical issues should be dealt with immediately; provide information on helpdesk support if available[9].

3.2 Introduction to the class

The instructor should spend time getting to know the students individually the first week of class and encourage the students to do the same. An introductory discussion inviting the participants to introduce themselves and to share something in particular with the group is a successful strategy for building the learning community.

The instructor should participate heavily in this discussion and should respond to one or two things in the introductory posting of each student. The "initial postings in the discussion forum, your first messages sent to all by email or listserv, or the greeting you post on your course home page will do much to set the tone and expectations for your course. These 'first words' can also provide models of online communication for your students"[7].

Offering an icebreaker in the first session, such as "share your silliest moment in college" or "name the animal you most identify with," helps to alleviate the nervousness and provide insights to the personalities of fellow students. Several good icebreakers that also provide an instructor with a basic student learning inventory.

3.3 Emphasize the Syllabus

A great hint for the first session of class is to create a syllabus quiz or scavenger hunt that "teaches students how to navigate your course" (Schweizer, 1999, p. 11). Then, offering bonus points to assess syllabus comprehension is a successful way of engaging the student in the first session of class. Encouraging students to review the syllabus in a more thorough process can alleviate confusion later in the course as they familiarize themselves with the course requirements.

3.4 Establish a Tone of Excellence

The first several weeks also set the tone for academic participation. Instructors should grade discussions/assignments stringently in the first few assignment cycles. Establish a tone of excellence early and encourage students to do their best. "Students want to receive timely and personal feedback" early in an online course[3]. They may not be able to assess their progress as easily online as they would in a traditional course. It is also helpful to remind the students of these expectations throughout the course. It is always easier to lessen the workload later than to increase it[2].

4 Nurture the Growth – Nurturing the Learning Community

The third step of teaching online is to nurture the learning community. The learning community must be established and then become self-sufficient. The learning community, like a garden, must be cultivated. This cultivation occurs when an instructor provides ample communication, facilitates the discussion board, treats each student as an individual, adds emotion and belonging, responds quickly to questions, models required behavior, creates appropriately sized groups, and clearly outlines expectations for group activities.

4.1 Provide Ample Communication

Online students are eager for communication. Lack of instructor-student communication early on will create a negative learning community thus disabling the learning process. Instructors should use class-wide announcements, group emails, and chat archives to facilitate accessible, public communication in the online course. As the course grows, students should be encouraged to facilitate the discussion and assume some of the roles previously controlled by the instructor.

Communication must be both reflective and proactive. Many courses use class-wide journals or summaries to bring closure to modules. Sending out class-wide summation/introduction/transitional emails at the end of each module, wrapping up the previous content, and introducing the next module provide for a sense of transition. Reminding the students of requirements for the current module, such as projects or exam dates, is very helpful to the students. It takes about ten minutes a week for either of these tasks, yet the benefit provided is far more valuable. Proactive communication yields fewer questions, saving dozens of hours answering the questions individually. Instructors should keep their interaction with the class as open as possible. Using the "Course Announcement" area frequently for reminders and duplicate important information in emails will increase open communication. It is also important to communicate to the class each time grades are posted. This creates a "don't call me, I'll call you" communication pattern for grade information. Within that communication, remind students to contact the instructor if a grade is missing. This puts the responsibility back with the student for finding and submitting any missing work.

4.2 Facilitate the Discussion Board

"The key to online education's effectiveness lies in large part with the facilitator"[1]. Likewise, for the threaded discussion to be successful, the instructor should become a facilitator and review the discussions without controlling them. Many online instructors have found what many gardeners realize: at times, hands-on action produces results but in many cases, too much activity can be as harmful as none at all. This particular role of the facilitator in the online classroom can be difficult for a traditional instructor to accept.

Therefore a traditional instructor may be accustomed to dominating or controlling the discussion through lecture, but in an online class, all students have equal opportunity to participate in the discussion and often do outside of the instructor's influence. It takes a good deal of time for some traditional faculty to feel truly comfortable in allowing the discussion to take place outside the classroom and without their intervention, but that is fin experience will eventually guide them. For good discussion board facilitation, the instructor should randomly and selectively reply to students and provide prompt explanations or further comments regarding the topic of discussion. The instructor or facilitator should provide feedback in the discussion even if it is merely a "cheerleading" comment, redirection, or guideline submission. The instructor should intervene when the discussion seems to be struggling or headed the wrong way [11] but should not over-participate in the discussion, as this will be considered stifling and restrictive. Some instructors prompt absentee or "lurker" students with a gentle reminder email or a telephone call. "A phone call may prove more timely and effective" [1] in helping a student engage in the discussion.

Many instructors assign assistant facilitators and summarizers for each discussion session, providing opportunities for different kinds of student involvement. Other instructors use "coaching teams" made up of students or tutors as the first line of support, then invite the students to ask the instructor for clarification or further assistance. Good facilitation of online goes beyond content. Under favorable circumstances, the "discussion will end in acceptance of different opinions, respect for well-supported beliefs, and improved problem-solving skills"[4].

4.3 Treat Each Student as an Individual

Instructors should value individual contributions and "treat their students as unique"[15]. A simple technique is to use the students' preferred names or nicknames in all correspondence. It is also important to add positive emotion and visual cues. The online environment can be limiting when the communication is mostly text-based. Emoticons serve the same purpose as nodding a head in agreement or offering a welcoming smile as would occur in a traditional course.

4.4 Add Emotion and Belonging

When online learning is facilitated incorrectly, students can feel isolated and cheated of a valuable learning experience. This could lead to feelings of separation and disappointment that negatively impact learning. [15] advises that "a positive emotional climate can serve as a frame of reference for online students activities and will therefore shape individual expectancies, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors throughout a program" [15].

4.5 Respond Quickly

Time delays in a threaded discussion can be frustrating for students. This is especially true if the response was misunderstood and the students have attempted to clarify. Online instructors should try to post daily or on a regular schedule that has been communicated the students. Some instructors create homework discussion threads for content support, which provides a forum for students to help each other.

4.6 Model Behavior

Instructors who engage students in collaborative groups should facilitate development of social skills. This begins at the onset of the course when the learning community is formed and students recognize the online classroom as a safe place to interact. Group skills should be modeled by the instructor and outlined in the course syllabus. For example, if a two paragraph introduction is expected, the instructor should model that in their own introduction to the class in the opening discussion.

4.7 Create Appropriately Sized Groups

Most students enjoy the online social interaction and find that it encourages their learning experience. Independently minded students find that the asynchronous nature of the course enables them to participate more readily than in the face-to-face classroom. In creating groups, instructors divide students into groups instead of allowing students to pick their own groups. Students may find it difficult to meet online and form groups quickly. Many instructors search the introductory material to find common elements among students to hasten the group cohesion[7].

Groups should not be too large or too small. The most effective group size appears to be four students per group. Utilizing these suggestions, the group work should begin early to promote a positive learning experience in the online classroom. The actual process for completing the project should be outlined by the instructor, but the final outcome should be the group's responsibility.

5. Harvest—Plan For the Next Semester

The final stage of online instruction is assessment. It is a rewarding experience to watch learning take place in the minds of students. It is why many instructors choose relatively low pay for teaching compared to lucrative jobs in the for-profit world. Just like gardeners in autumn, assessment is a time of reflection and satisfaction for a job well done. Tiny seeds sown early in the season are actively growing and producing. At this stage, instructors should evaluate each student's performance against course objectives. What worked well and what needs to be improved for next season? This can be accomplished by keeping a journal and by soliciting feedback on instruction and course content.

5.1 Keep a Journal

Self-examination and contemplative thought are successful approaches for course improvement. A recommended practice is to keep a journal that records items that should be redesigned or altered the next time the course is taught. The instructor should make notes of assignments that worked well and those that struggled, and critically evaluate the effectiveness of content and instruction.

5.2 Solicit Feedback on Instruction

Student feedback improves the instructor's teaching. A good place to gather the feedback is inside the course management system. It is helpful to survey for student feedback during the course, not just at the end with course evaluations. The instructor can develop a discussion thread for students to post feedback anonymously about the course, including possible suggestions for improvement. If a student does offer feedback, the instructor should acknowledge the feedback and be appreciative for the remarks.

Feedback instruments should provide the students with a way to communicate what they like the best and the least about the instruction of the course. If possible, mid-course changes in responses to students' comments will allow students to feel empowered through taking an active role in their education.

5.3 Solicit Feedback on Course Content

All online instructors should look for possible course revisions. Course content should never stay static. Therefore, because online course design and teaching are so new, evaluating the effectiveness of your course and then refining it based on the results of that evaluation become imperative[9]. If using end-of-course summary feedback, the instructor must receive this feedback in time to reevaluate the course for the next semester and add suggested changes, if necessary. Another possibility is an end-of-session discussion regarding the focus of the next session, thus allowing for minor course revisions even as the course continues to be taught.

6. Conclusion

Online teaching has brought a new modality to distance education. It has also brought frustration and anxiety to the instructors attempting this new methodology. Therefore, one faculty member who had only just finished her course online said it was like diving into a great chasm, blindfolded" [9]. Instructors who are comfortable with the traditional methods for teaching in the classroom struggle to engage students over the Internet. While many of the same techniques apply, teaching online requires additional techniques for success. These techniques are similar to the same steps a gardener takes to develop a garden. In the online classroom, the ground is prepared with a carefully designed syllabus and policies, the seed is planted in the first session of class, and the learning community is nurtured to grow and become self-sufficient. These steps yield students who are engaged and working toward completion of the learning objectives. By utilizing these strategies for teaching online effectively, an instructor will engage the online learner, nurture a successful learning community, and alleviate the frustration and fear that goes along with teaching online.

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