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Teaching Tips:

Virtually Speaking

Susan Bluck, Ph.D.

**Center for Gerontological Studies/Institute on Aging and Department of Psychology
University of Florida**

I wasn't sure how to react when my first assignment as an Assistant Professor was to be a Virtual Professor, that is, to teach a web-based course in which I would never have face-to-face contact with the students. Mirroring the famous, "But is it art?" I asked myself, "But is it education?" My answer, after virtually teaching the class three times now (maybe not the best N...) is, "Yes, it is education!"

Of course this is not an unequivocal answer. There are many different web-based courses to choose from as well as the option to design your own. I can speak only for the class that I have taught and my tips are based on my experience with that class. I am the virtual instructor for a course that was created by Ageworks, a division of the Leonard Davis School of Gerontology at USC's Andrus Gerontology Center. The University of Florida's (UF) Center for Gerontological Studies/Institute on Aging is able to offer the multidisciplinary course, "Fundamentals of Gerontology," on a pay-per-enrolled-student agreement with USC. USC provides us access to their excellent website as well as technical support for the duration of the 15-week course.

But is it education?

The comparison of online and in-class education is a tricky one, and certainly worthy of debate. No definitive answer to that question will be attempted here. My view is that online courses can be just as information-rich, stimulating, and even interactive as traditional classes given the right circumstances. The following tips are based on insights that I have had about what works, and what doesn't, with graduate and undergraduate students who have completed this online course through UF.

The tips

Make sure students have the hardware and software that they need.

Machine and software requirements will depend on the site you are accessing. In any case, wherever or however students register for the class, make sure that **before they register** they are made aware of both the hardware and software requirements necessary for active participation in the class. Hand out a description of the minimum hardware requirements, modem requirements,

and word processing and graphics packages necessary for accessing the site and completing the assignments. Of course, all students must also have a reliable, easily accessible, email address from which to send assignments and receive feedback. Making these requirements clear upfront ensures that students will not fall behind or have to drop the class due to technical problems.

A beauty of online courses is that they are accessible to individuals with special needs. I recently had a blind student begin the course with me. In such cases there may be additional equipment and software issues that need to be resolved before the class begins.

Help your students have self-discipline.

Education always requires some self-discipline but distance learning stretches that requirement. The wonderful thing, and the terrible thing, about online education is that you can do it anytime. So, wonderfully, if a student wants to 'take a class' in the middle of the night they can get up and turn on the computer and do just that. And if they feel they missed something, they can review it the next morning: verbatim, not from class notes of variable quality. Terribly, this also means that a student can always decide that the best time to sign on to the site is... "tomorrow." In order to help my students, I have provided a lot of structure that encourages self-discipline. My syllabus is clear and definite in setting up deadlines for weekly assignments and I will not accept late assignments. Similarly, exams must be emailed in on time or they are not counted toward final grades. "Incompletes" are given only for emergencies - not for just not getting the work done on time.

If students are kept to a weekly schedule and progress through the online course at a steady pace, I feel they can learn a lot and have fun doing it. If, however, the course is not well-structured, and students sign on for the first time in Week 14 of a 15-week class to begin doing all the assignments.....well, you can imagine the outcome. That's not education.

Encourage student-instructor interaction.

The first thing to say about this is that it doesn't take as much encouragement as you might think!! Or, well, as I thought. One criticism of online education that is bandied about is that the student doesn't really have a chance to interact with the instructor. My guess is that student-instructor interaction may be more a function of class size than it is of traditional versus online classroom instruction. Compared to a small seminar class, online education may provide less chance for interaction. However, in my experience, compared to a large lecture class (e.g., 100 students) online education can provide more interaction! What I noticed is that the medium of email takes away any anxiety related to 'approaching the professor' or 'asking a question' that might be seen in a large lecture class. It also makes the professor available 24 hours a day, not only during class or office hours. The student can contact you any time. To use my own time efficiently I put aside blocks of time for answering students' email (instead of actually being available 24 hours a day).

I was impressed with the frequency and depth of interactions I was able to have with students. Aside from various other email exchanges concerning the material, I provided substantial

feedback to each student each week on the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas expressed in their assignments. Of course this is only possible with a small enrollment (usually I have had about 10 students). Some people suggest that a benefit of online education is that it can reach hundreds of people at a time. Yes, a website can do that. If a component of the class, as it has been at UF, is to also have personalized weekly student feedback, then class size needs to be capped at, I would suggest, a maximum of 20 students.

Remember that all exams are open-book, open-site.

For the Ageworks course there are required readings from a textbook as well as the readings and exercises on the website. I usually post the exams to the site for at least 2 days before the hand-in deadline, to give students some freedom as to when they complete the exam. Remember that these exams must, of course, be considered completely open-book with full access to the site. I think this is great educationally. If a student doesn't know an answer on the exam, well, they go ahead and look it up (i.e., they learn it). In addition, examination of learned material does not occur under time pressure. Basically, in combination with weekly exercises, this seems like a type of examination that promotes learning.

Here are two things to think about though. First, remember to set your grading criteria to reflect the fact that these are open-book exams with no time restrictions. Students will do much better on assignments and exams than in a classroom where exams are not usually open-book. Second, make it very clear in your syllabus that it is not acceptable in either exams or assignments to cut and paste answers from the website. We have all become very fluent in cutting and pasting!! I think, however, that this is a place where education could be compromised. If students only cut and paste responses instead of actually reading the material and generating their own responses, an important step in their learning and understanding of the material has been omitted.

Education: the multi-method approach

In sum, given the right conditions, online education can be satisfying both for the student and the instructor. I mentioned earlier that being a Virtual Professor involved never having face-to-face contact with your students. That may be true during the class, but what I have found is that many students who take the online introductory course get interested in aging. They end up taking my and my colleagues' other aging-related classes, decide to do a minor in gerontology, or volunteer to work in our research labs. That is, many of them get involved with "real" professors in a variety of contexts. My view of education is that the multi-method approach is a good one: online education is a nice complement to outstanding lectures, scintillating seminars, and hands-on experience with research and practice in gerontology.

A Few Resources:

Go to www.usatoday.com/2000/educate/edu003.htm for a USA Today list of websites for learning more about distance learning.

Visit the USC Ageworks site at www.ageworks.com