



White Board

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Ten Online Teaching Tips You May Not Have Heard

At a time when online institutions are in fierce competition for students and accreditation agencies are taking a critical look at online course quality, it is becoming increasingly important for online instructors to ensure that they are exceeding their institution's expectations.

Students are also expecting more from their online courses. And while most of us know the importance of addressing students by name in the discussion board and offering students substantive feedback on assignments, there many more things we can do.

In this article, I outline 10 online teaching tips that may be less well-known but can lead to a more positive experience for both professor and student.

1. Communicate Information Using Multiple Channels – If you have important information to convey to students, don't use just one channel of communication, use multiple. For example, instead of simply posting information only in the announcements area, or only in the feedback area, or sending it only via email, include the information in all three of these places. This will reduce the number of students saying they did not get the memo. Posting information in as many places as possible will result in more students getting the information they need to succeed.

2. Sync School Email Account to Phone – Contact your institution's help desk for instructions on how to sync your school email account to your iPhone or Android. Not only will receiving email in multiple places reduce your likelihood of missing messages, it will also allow you to address urgent questions and concerns in a timely fashion. Students are often pleasantly surprised at my response time. However, it is important to set boundaries by letting students know when to expect a reply. For example, you can inform them that you normally respond within a 24-hour period, during regular business hours. This will help maintain your work-life balance.

3. Text – If you can't reach a student via phone or email, try texting! It's harder to miss or ignore a text message. Also, students will appreciate the fact that they can text you if they have a quick question. My students have thanked me numerous times for being accessible in this way. This tip comes with a caveat: While students will benefit from being able to text, it is also important to let

them know upfront (via the syllabus or another memo) that it can take up to 24 hours for you to reply.

4. Create an Instagram account – Utilize social media to motivate and share information with students. Create an Instagram page just for students to include motivational quotes, memes, reminders, tips, etc. You might even include a photo or two of yourself, your kids, or pets! Most students enjoy getting to know their professor as a person.

5. Keep a Running List of Resources to Include in Feedback – Compile a list of helpful resources to send to students who are struggling in certain areas. For example, if a student submits a paper that illustrates he or she does not know how to use commas, don't just point out the mistake, but refer to your list of resources and include the appropriate resource in your feedback. A Word document, bookmarks folder, or desktop sticky note are great places to keep these resources handy.

6. Use Reflection Questions – Get students thinking more critically about their writing assignments by asking questions, such as:

- In what ways, if any, did writing this paper change your views about the topic?
- What did you find most challenging about writing about this topic?
- What do you still want to know about this topic?
- What did you enjoy most about writing this paper?
- What did you discover about this topic that surprised you?

7. Create a Forum – If your Learning Management System allows, create a forum where students can go to find useful information and ask questions on a subject. For example, if you notice that most of your students struggle with APA, create a forum where they can easily locate resources on the subject and ask related questions.

8. Do a Welcome Call/Email – If you have time, call each student at the start of the term to say hello and find out what they hope to get out of the class. Most students will appreciate the time you take to do this. If time doesn't allow, send

a private email, addressing each student by name, and asking a direct question to start a brief dialogue.

9. Promote the Rubric – Remind students of the grading rubric for the week's main assignment in announcements and email to make sure they know what they will be graded on to eliminate questions like "How long does the paper have to be?"

10. Reflect on Your Teaching – On a weekly or bi-weekly basis, ask yourself:

- What can be improved about my individual interactions with students?
- What more can I do to make this subject more engaging and memorable?
- What is lacking in my classroom?

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Grades Due - August 3
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Professor Goldilocks and the Three Boundaries

EVIDENCE OF THE IMPORTANCE of teacher-student relationships is robust. The relationship between a teacher and a student is related to many positive outcomes for the student, including academic success, improved emotional functioning, and increased well-being even after school completion. In fact, an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported individuals who felt more connected to a professor while they attended college were more engaged at work and identified higher levels of well-being (Carlson, 2014). The individuals reported emotional support from professors took the form of excitement for learning and a caring attitude about the student's current well-being and future success.

Although the focus on the outcomes of instructor-student relationships is pervasive, there is often less discussion about the individual components of these relationships. As a professor and a counseling psychologist, my training emphasizes the role that boundaries play in the overall health of a relationship. Boundaries that are too rigid or too loose can negatively affect the relationship dynamic. Rigid boundaries, in which a professor does not try to build connections with students, may negatively impact student perception of the emotional support available to them. Conversely, loose boundaries, in which a professor fails to establish any kind of authority, takes student problems too personally, and shares too much personal information with students, may also damage the instructor-student relationship. Loose boundaries may confuse the student, potentially leading to a conceptualization of the professor as a friend rather than a teacher and mentor.

The just right, or healthy boundaries, are not in place only to protect the student, the professor also

accrues benefits. In her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) notes "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students." (p.15). At times, I forget how much my own emotional health affects the quality of my teaching and mentorship. When I become over-invested in the personal lives of my students, I have less time to take care of the person who they are turning to for guidance: myself. It is vital that I maintain both my well-being and my role as a professional. I believe this is particularly important in a climate where we see more students with mental health issues.

It is important to consider that questions of healthy boundaries are often not answered in terms of definitive correct or incorrect behaviors. As professors, we each must decide what action to take in the gray zone (e.g., whether to have students to our homes or give out our cell phone numbers). A good rule of thumb is to make sure you can maintain the role of professor in every situation. At times professors and students may work together in ambiguous boundary settings, particularly in graduate school. One study suggests the nature of the professional relationship is protected in these settings as long as students maintain a clear perception of the evaluative and mentoring role of the professor (Schwartz, 2011).

A particular gray area for many professors, myself included, is whether to self-disclose in the classroom or during personal interactions with students. To answer this question, I pull from my training in counseling psychology and internally evaluate the purpose of self-disclosure. If the information I am sharing serves the student and

our relationship then I proceed (albeit within a professional manner). For example, I may share my own personal experience with not getting into graduate school the first time I applied as a way to allay some student fears. However, it would be wrong of me to share information as a means to gain something from my students or work through an issue I'm having.

Even though each of us may create slightly different boundaries with our students, there are some definitive boundaries that should not be crossed. Research consistently demonstrates that entering into a romantic relationship with a student violates healthy boundaries. As such, many institutions have formal policies against such relationships. In addition, professors should avoid venting or gossiping about other colleagues to students. This form of interpersonal communication does not serve the long-term obligations (i.e., professionalism and mentorship) of the relationship.

In closing, I encourage us to think about our behaviors and the importance of being healthy role models for our students. In *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* Paolo Friere reminds us that "sometimes a simple, almost insignificant gesture on the part of a teacher can have a profound formative effect on the life of a student." (p. 46). As I think about my undergraduate mentor, it is precisely because of her professionalism, warmth, and mentorship that I still turn to her to help me navigate the waters of working in higher education.

References

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