

Retaining the Human Touch When Supporting Students in Transitioning to Asynchronous Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

*The transition to online, asynchronous learning poses just as many challenges for students entering the online classroom as it does for academics mastering the platform. **Cynthia Wheatley Glenn** outlines what to look out for to spot students who might be struggling and key strategies for assisting students in overcoming barriers to successful participation in online learning communities.*

I have been an online professor since 2003. I have also been an online student. Having personal experience on both sides of this spectrum has given me a deep insight into what to do as a teacher, as well as understanding what students need to be successful using an online learning platform.

Questioning, debating, and bouncing ideas between teacher and students, as well as exploring concepts in a group setting, is the general *modus operandi* of [andragogy](#), or, the study of teaching adults. It is a relatively new concept to do this in an online setting, where learning communities lack the privilege and luxury of face-to-face interaction and communication. There are still many who believe online learning is easier – after all, how hard is it to do your school work in your bathrobe, anytime you want – yet people don't always realize the amount of distraction an online student faces, particularly those who are [non-traditional](#) (older than 24) who may be returning to college while juggling many other life responsibilities such as supporting a family. It can also be harder when there is literally no place for a student to hide. In a traditional classroom, students can sit in the back row and choose to not participate, and still manage to pass a class. In an online setting, this is much harder because everything a student does (or doesn't) do is labelled and time-stamped by a computer.

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On top of this, some students are grieving the loss of something that was previously a thing of great assumption, that their teachers will show them how to learn. For many students, this means being spoon-fed information in real-time. For students who are not used to online learning, it is no small thing to realize there is more at stake when they are not only required to master content, but to master how to interact in, and navigate, an entirely new way of submitting their work.

Tips for adapting to asynchronicity

How, then, can students and professors adjust to an asynchronous online learning platform? First and foremost, remember that teaching and learning is still the goal, even if the presentation of lessons given, and what student academic performance might look like, is vastly different. For example, as you transition from ground to online teaching, the most drastic change you will face as a teacher is not being physically available to answer real-time questions, or even “change gears” when you recognize that content being presented is not effectively being received.

Whilst lecturers new to the online venue, are trained how to use a college or university's learning platform, this isn't always the case for students. This confuses me because many people – particularly students – tend to give up when learning something is not easy. If an introduction to online learning course class is available at your institution, encourage your online students to enrol. If not, ask them to schedule a meeting with the school's librarian, who is typically very knowledgeable in navigating the school's online learning platform.



There are other things you can do to make students feel more comfortable in an online learning community. This first suggestion is powerful but time-consuming: Create videos. More and more, students count on listening to, and watching videos to learn how to do something (Here are two *very* rudimentary links to peruse: for [Mac](#); for [PC](#).), and there is usually training on how to assist you.

Another idea is to provide daily updates in the discussion forum area that could include a review of concepts being explored that week, or upcoming deadlines. This is also a great place to include mini-lessons that address common errors you're seeing in your students' work, such as formatting errors that would be easier to address as a group. Something else you can do is monitor those students who are not actively engaging in class during the week and send them feedback emails and notes through the course room messaging system. For example, on how to improve their writing or a goal for active participation.

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Monitoring at-risk students

Particularly in classes that don't meet in real-time, you must rely on students' comments (or lack thereof) in the discussion forum area to guide you on how to proceed to deepen understanding. It is imperative you notice who in your online class is flailing, which is hard to do if you are also on a crash course of adjusting to an online teaching assignment. There are ways to check for understanding that are pretty obvious:

1. Are your students easily able to navigate the learning platform? Meaning, can they accurately read and follow written instructions, and attach assignments in the correct place?

2. Are your students actively engaged in the weekly discussion forums? This is typically the only place you and your students can meet as a group, so if someone is skipping out, they are literally robbing themselves of being in your unique learning community. This is particularly true if you ask a student a direct question regarding a comment they've made, and they don't respond.

3. Are your students reading the inserted comments you make in their assigned papers? Many students who are new to online learning don't understand they must physically click on the speech bubble icon in their submitted assignment to open and read any comments you might add to a submitted piece.

Conclusion

So, although the most practical idea on how to successfully transition from a ground teaching and learning to an online-only format, is to be patient – with yourself, as the teacher, as well as with your students – there are many other ways to transition successfully from ground teaching and learning to an online-only venue. For me, having been an online student myself has made it much easier to be able to understand and appreciate what students need and want in a virtual classroom setting.

Even if you haven't had that advantage, you can still make the transition from ground to online learning and teaching easier if you focus on communicating clearly with your students and helping them master the ins and outs of the online course room shell. You can provide mini-lessons within the discussion forums, and monitor and reach out to students who are exhibiting at-risk behaviour. With support from your institution; library services, technology training, and resources to direct learners, you can better serve your students as you all adjust to this "new normal" of quickly and effectively transitioning from brick-and-mortar classrooms to online learning communities.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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