4 Lessons From Moving a Face-to-Face Course Online

By KEVIN GANNON

Where I teach — a small, primarily residential liberal-arts college — there was a time when professors would have avoided online teaching like the plague. Five years ago I wasn't teaching any online courses. This semester, my entire course load is online. And so is next semester's.

What's interesting is how many of us who work at "traditional" colleges — where dorms and dining halls occupy equal pride of place with classrooms and laboratories — are now trying to figure out how to create an online version of a face-to-face courses we've been teaching for years.

Online courses were once well outside the higher-education mainstream, derided as glorified distance-education or trumped-up correspondence courses by those who saw them as the opposite of what a college experience should be. In the last 10 to 15 years, however, spiraling enrollment pressures and a brutal fiscal environment have pushed many colleges and universities into an online presence they might never have anticipated a few planning cycles ago.

There are several positive aspects to this development:

- Online learning means increased access to higher education, which is an indisputable social good.

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- Now that online education is "a thing," institutions with teaching at the heart of their missions are indispensable parties in the conversation. We are now at the online table in larger and larger numbers.

But the trend has produced its fair share of challenges as well:

- Campus administrators might see online courses primarily as a cost efficien-

cy, for example, and ignore the very real need for the support and time it takes to teach them well.
- So long as there are still predatory, for-profit, financial-aid thieves masquerading as colleges and universities, online courses will still be held in suspicion in many quarters of academe.
- Aside from such macro-level concerns, online teaching presents significant challenges to faculty members. And one of the most significant is the myriad complexities involved in moving a face-to-face course into the online realm.

That last challenge was the one I faced when I taught my first fully online course five years ago. As I looked at the class — an upper-level U.S. history seminar — and began to think about how I would teach it online, my heart sank. How was I going to preserve what I thought was most essential — the regular student interaction, the free-wheeling give-and-take as we discussed a particular source or topic — if none of us would be together in the same physical space at the same time? How could I take a course that seemed to depend on synchronous activity and make it work in a completely asynchronous environment? And even if I was able to figure out acceptable answers to those questions, where would I even begin?

Fortunately, I had the assistance of colleagues who were more familiar with the online world than I was. I was able to tap their expertise, and get introduced to a valuable collection of resources about online teaching and learning. That, in turn, helped me develop an online version of the course that far surpassed my expectations — and students' as well, judging from the positive end-of-semester course evaluations.

The experience convinced me that online courses could work well, and I have regularly taught them since.

I vividly recall, though, how overwhelming the task seemed initially, and the sheer volume of questions I had about how all of this would work, exactly. And I'm reminded regularly of those anxious moments now when I work with colleagues new to online teaching. There are a lot of factors to consider, and the work can differ greatly depending upon the type of course and discipline. If you are in the process of moving your courses online — or just mulling how your course design and teaching would look in an asynchronous, digital learning space — chances are you're wading through the same questions and factors, too.

What follows, then, are some of the most important things I learned in the process of changing from a teacher who taught exclusively traditional, face-to-face courses to one who does both and is often immersed in the online environment.

Avoid seeing online teaching exclusively through the lens of face-to-face courses. Initially I was stuck in that very mind-set. It suffused all of my judgments and really limited my imagination when it came to designing an online course.

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No, I can't exactly replicate a synchronous seminar-style discussion in an online course. But the thoughtful, deliberative analysis and deep conversation which arise out of asynchronous online discussions can't be replicated in a face-to-face class, either. It turns out online teaching and learning isn't inherently better or worse than the face-to-face variety — just different. And in both types of courses, you'll get more out of teaching them if you focus on the opportunities they present rather than the obstacles.

Taking the value judgments out of the equation allowed me to escape the limits I'd artificially imposed on the process. When I stopped thinking about what I couldn't do online, and started asking what I could do, I found was able to think of ways to accomplish online the goals I had set for the course when I was teaching it face-to-face. My learning outcomes were the same in both realms — I just needed to take different vehicles to get there.

Online teaching isn't less time-consuming than the traditional kind. We know that effective teaching isn't the product of circumstance, but rather a significant investment of time in preparing the learning space, as well as encouraging what develops within that space. It may seem like I'm belaboring the obvious by suggesting that's true online as well but, all too often, we hear online teaching framed in terms of "efficiency."

Deciding to house your courses on the institution's learning-management system (LMS) involves far more than simply posting things on Blackboard or Canvas and calling it a day. For example, putting a course online means you have to consider even more carefully both the substance and tone of your written documents. You'd be amazed at how the absence of things like vocal inflection, hand gestures, and facial expressions can cast your words in a much different light for students. For example, gently guiding a student to a more skillful or accurate response in a discussion is a lot easier to do in person than via written feedback, where sometimes even carefully phrased comments can come across as harsh or impersonal. If you use video material, you need to ensure captioning or transcripts are included.

Good discussion spaces, course blogging platforms, curated materials to accompany each module — all of those take time to build. And it's a different process than simply compiling lecture notes loosely based on a textbook chapter.

Furthermore, the time commitment doesn't go away after the course is built. Throughout the semester, you have to spend a considerable amount of time creating and then maintaining meaningful engagement with your students.

Know your tools better than you think you need to. The ed-tech arena is a crowded one. At any given time there's at least one app or platform screaming about how it's the newest, best, easiest tool for your online course. And that app or platform is just as likely to be gone within a year as it is to become and remain a valuable teaching tool.

That said, you can find good digital tools that (a) afford students the means of interacting substantively with you and with one another, and (b) enable a deep engagement with course materials or applications. Perhaps you elect to use a web annotation tool like Hypothes.is, or a collaborative digital space like Padlet. Maybe you're using the wiki space in your LMS, or have decided that a WordPress blog will be the main course forum. Whichever tools you adopt, integrate them into your course in a way that complements rather than subverts your pedagogy. Choose your tools to help accomplish a specific learning goal in your course, not simply because they're trendy or free, or because you've had colleagues who swear by how cool they are.

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You'll also need to know the technology well enough to be the main troubleshooter for your students when — not if — they encounter difficulties setting up or using a tool themselves. At any rate, only through

using and experimenting with a digital tool can you really know if it's the right one for your course and learning outcomes.

Above all, presence matters. An online course can absolutely be a powerful learning experience, with students as deeply engaged as they would be in a seminar-style class. But that outcome isn't the product of chance; it's only accomplished when both you and your students are present in the course and with one another. Presence is perhaps the single most important ingredient in meaningful learning online. Research has shown that two types of presence in particular — social and cognitive — are key in online teaching.

Online courses may be asynchronous, but they don't have to be impersonal or atomized. There are plenty of ways to build and maintain a meaningful presence for both you and your students. (Hint: It goes well beyond relying on threaded discussions.) Tools such as personalized avatars, creative introductory posts, and video comments can be important personalizing features, while assignments designed for interaction and collaboration ensure everyone's presence is a vital part of the course's routine.

Absent any social or cognitive presence, online courses resemble the worst of face-to-face pedagogy: hundreds of students crammed into impersonal lecture halls, merely the passive recipients of "content." If that's all online courses aspire to be, we might as well just have students watch YouTube.

Ultimately, teaching online combines all the usual challenges of designing and leading courses with the issues particular to a digital environment. Yet it's also an excellent opportunity to refine your teaching practice in general. Moving a course online challenges you to consider exactly why you do what you do — from course goals to discussion questions to assignments and tests. In that process, you'll likely find you need to do things differently online. You may even conclude that your face-to-face teaching needs an overhaul, too. Either way, the experience should spur you to reflect critically about teaching, and that's never a bad thing. ■

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Kevin Gannon is a professor of history at Grand View University and director of its Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

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