



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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CLASSROOM AND COURSEROOM TEACHING: DIFFERENT GAMES, SAME RULES

It's a New, but Familiar Game

After years of success in the traditional, face-to-face (F2F) classroom, some seasoned instructors are reluctant to try teaching online. It seems too different, like an entirely different game that they would rather not play. Teaching in the online courseroom and teaching in the classroom are, in fact, two distinct tasks. However, these somewhat different games share many of the same underlying rules about course management and how best to teach adult learners.

Engagement Leads to Retention

No instructor likes to lose students. In the classroom and the courseroom, engagement leads to retention; and engagement begins with immediate acknowledgment from the instructor. In an online course, instructors can acknowledge students with a welcoming message, or “post,” at the beginning of the course, or a few days before the course starts. I write at least one personal post to each student every week. In a discussion-based online course, no student can “hide on the back row.” Consistent, thoughtful participation is expected.

In a F2F course, instructors can smile, establish eye contact, and address students by name. Students we address by name tend to come to class and participate appropriately, and generally are more accountable for their behavior because they know that they have appeared on our radar screen. It is the same in classrooms and courserooms—if students are not engaged quickly, they will drop the course or work just hard enough to get by.

Negativity is Never Productive

As every instructor knows, students sometimes say things that are off-target, incorrect, or even obnoxious. Our challenge is to respond patiently and positively, *no*

matter what. Students respond poorly to authoritarian tactics such as criticism or sarcasm. They respond well to correction that is delivered with a dose of empathy.

Empathy, the cognitive skill of taking the perspective of another, helps to preserve a positive instructor-student relationship. Once, an online student incorrectly accused me of not responding to her posts for the first few weeks of the course. It was tempting to scold the student, but instead I replied with an empathic statement, acknowledging her “frustration at the thought that I would ignore her contributions,” followed by instructions for retrieving the unread messages in the courseroom. We avoided a power struggle, and the student completed the course. In both online and F2F courses, it is useful to focus more on what students have done well than on their mistakes. For example, if a student gives an incorrect or off-target answer, we can tease out the satisfactory part of that answer. I rarely find it necessary to tell students they are wrong. Instead, I say: “Your answer could be strengthened by including...” or “What might make your answer even *more* correct?”

Cooperation Yields More than Competition

The structure of discussion-based online courses encourages cooperation among students. In my online courses, the support that students provide each other is substantive. They provide emotional support (e.g., “Don’t worry. You’ll be a pro at WebCT in no time!”) and practical support (e.g., “Check out the attached article. I think it may apply to your project.”).

In F2F courses, students can be encouraged to support each other. Why not offer extra credit to students who support their peers’ learning by directing classmates to relevant readings or offering feedback on drafts of papers? Research tells us that learning is in large part a social process. Instructors can use this to full effect in both online and F2F courses.

There Is No Such Thing as Being Too Clear

Teaching discussion-based online courses requires writing, and no matter how clear your instructions and



explanations, your message may be misunderstood. Recently, I had to admit that in a previous post I had referred to a client's weight gain as *creeping* (i.e., slow and steady), not *creepy*. The students and I shared a good online laugh. It is important to be sensitive to how the words we choose can be misheard or interpreted in idiosyncratic ways by students in a F2F classroom, as well.

Reflection Seals the Deal

Students truly learn material when they reflect upon it and when they actively construct knowledge by making previously disembodied information personally meaningful. In discussion-based online courses, instructors often use Socratic questions to initiate the reflection process, which is continued in the students' discussion posts. In F2F courses, I try to leave five to ten minutes at the end of each class for students to reflect and respond in writing to a Socratic question. This helps to solidify what we have covered that class meeting, as well as inspire thoughtful questions to consider during our next class period.

Conclusion: Dare to Try a New Game!

Teaching in the online courseroom and the F2F classroom are two different games. We simply cannot *transfer* what we do in one platform to the other (e.g., post lengthy classroom lectures and call them "lessons") and expect to be effective. However, seasoned (and new) instructors can be successful and find it personally rewarding to *adapt* their classroom teaching skills to suit the requirements of the online courseroom. Many of us enjoy keeping one foot in the classroom and one in the courseroom, and find that teaching in one platform strengthens performance in the other.

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