Principles that Help Make Online Courses Successful

Beverley McGuire has taught online courses for 10 years, and she's been a student in them for five. From those experiences, she's learned a few things about making online courses effective. She's also conversant with current research and collaborates with colleagues. From that knowledge and those experiences, she identifies five key design and delivery principles for online courses. She teaches religious study courses, but her principles are broadly applicable.

Humanizing the course website

It's a simple but powerful principle. When students first open the course website, they are meeting the course and its instructor. What's their first impression if the website is not easy to navigate? How much text confronts them during this first encounter? "By humanizing their course website, instructors enable student to get a sense of their passion, personality, or persona, which can create a sense of teaching presence" (p. 31). McGuire continues, "Although I initially gave little thought to the appearance of my course website, viewing it as a repository for syllabi, lectures, and assignments, I now approach it as a kind of virtual persona" (p. 32).

Chunk the course content

McGuire's advice is about getting the course content into what looks like manageable units to students. Online course designers recommend units that correspond to four or five weeks of instruction; modules, which are subdivisions of units and about a week in length; and topics, which can be a lesson, an assignment, or a learning experience. McGuire recommends carefully attending to what may seem like trivial details. Each of her modules has a table of contents with an overview of the module, its objectives, a to-do list, and instructions for each assignment.

Structure and monitor online discussions

"The key to effective online discussions is to set clear parameters and expectations for discussion, ensure that discussion prompts align with learning outcomes, and monitor discussions to prevent any violations" (p. 36). Students are not born knowing how to discuss online. Participation rubrics and examples of good online posts and discussions help them develop those skills. In McGuire's content areas (as well as some other academic areas), there's a need to underscore the difference between what's being studied and students' personal beliefs about the subject. McGuire's advice is to monitor but not interject comments all that often. Her goal is to encourage students to be responsible for their own learning.

Prioritize giving feedback

"One cannot overemphasize the importance of instructor feedback in online learning environments" (p. 37). And the feedback should be prompt. McGuire writes about the frustration she has felt in online courses when the feedback was minimal. Providing lots of feedback is time-consuming, but there are shortcuts which can be used when students take similar positions or make the same kinds of errors.

Make the course relevant

Relevance is a powerful driver of motivation, and one of the challenges for online learners is that self-direction is required. If the relevance of the content is understood, that makes it easier to persevere. The relevance needs to be more than asserted; it needs to be demonstrated with examples of its application now and in the future.

The popularity of online courses continues to grow, as does our experience in delivering them. There are lessons to be shared from our experiences, and this article provides a good example of that wisdom.

Reference: McGuire, B. (2017). Principles for effective asynchronous online instruction in religious studies. *Teaching Theology & Religion, 20*(1), 28–45. ♣

In This Issue