DISCUSSION-BASED ONLINE TEACHING TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

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STARTING TO TEACH THE ONLINE CLASS

Teachers open the door, you enter by yourself.
—Chinese Proverb

Ideally your institution will offer some sort of online orientation for new students before their course begins. They should be given their user ID and password in advance, and should be told the URL of your online course. The orientation should include a hands-on experience of the online environment, so as to become familiar with it, or, if you are teaching a hybrid class, it would be advantageous if your institution has prepared a handout explaining the basics of navigating through your online course, and you could spend some time in your campus class going through this. It has been found that students who are given a basic orientation to the online environment do better than those who do not, as they can start to focus more quickly on the course content rather than on basic operations.

So, the students should be ready for their online class, but what about you? Some new online instructors report feeling quite anxious before they start to teach; I heard one instructor say it felt like "navigating in the dark," and another say that she felt as though she "did not know where the chalk was." It is to varying forms of instructor anxiety, and methods to alleviate it, that we now turn our attention.

Anxiety

Campus teaching and online teaching involve different sets of worries. On campus there is the worry, especially before the first class, as to

how to effectively grab each student's interest and sustain that over the allotted time slot; the worry about blanking out and looking stupid; the worry about how long it will take to remember every student's name; the worry about the suitability of the room and whether the arrangement of furniture is flexible; the worry that any and all equipment which might be needed for your class to run smoothly is present and in working order; maybe the worry about whether the new shoes you have bought will pinch your toes; the worry about the possibility of delays in the journey to class. Online you can be comforted about not having to worry about new shoes, delayed journeys, memorizing names, seating arrangements, or keeping everyone interested for a rigid time period, but it does not mean a total freedom from worries. Instead there is the worry about whether the technology will cooperate; the worry of making what might feel like an indelible error; the worry that your students might understand computers better than you do; the consequent worry that you might lose command of the class; and the worry about being insufficiently prepared. We have talked about preparing your course shell, and since you will have put a lot of thought and deliberation into your course design, it will have the potential of being a stimulating and fulfilling class.

Remember, anxiety is common when faced with any new enterprise, and a little nervousness about teaching is normal, is likely to be felt by others, and can actually be tapped to enhance good teaching, as long as it does not become overwhelming (Teaching and Educational Development Institute [TEDI], 2002). Some instructors let the students know that this is their first time teaching online, and they might even tell them they are a little anxious. This immediately helps, I believe, as the instructor is not so worried about trying to impress, and probably, as a result of letting students know, is likely to do a better job. Also, spending a few days in your "Virtual Lounge" before embarking on course content can make the students seem *human* as you become acquainted, rather than part of a long list of names on a screen. When teaching, as soon as I read responses from my students and enter into conversations with them, my nervousness subsides. By then we are involved together in the academic pursuit of the subject matter, and the excitement of the voyage has begun.

Means of Engagement

Ideally we should strive to involve our students to such an extent in the joy of learning that they become deeply immersed (Vella, 1997). We can tell this occurs online when their comments are frequent and involved, as well as being deep, thoughtful, insightful, and excited. This is the pitch that we as teachers enjoy.

However, even if students participate in an orientation, they still may not always enter your online class promptly. I had always expected that as soon as the virtual classroom door swung open at the start of the semester, my students would come pouring through, but this has not always been the case for all students, as there have been delays over acquiring passwords, technical difficulties, and any manner of cyberspatial excuses. Even though the online environment is an asynchronous one, we want to avoid having stragglers who pull the discussion in a backward direction by their late participation; and ideally we want everyone in the class to be involved in the same discussion at approximately the same time.

The following sections provide suggestions as to how to engage students so that the online class is off to a sizzling start.

The Benefits of Contacting Each Student Individually at the Start of the Semester

It might be productive to assess individual student needs before the class begins, either by phone or in person (Vella, 1997). Generally in classes taught completely online, I have found that students have been gratified to receive a call, and it provides the additional benefit of making the teacher seem more of a real person to them. Students in hybrid classes might too be helped by this individual contact, as it can lead to better understanding as to *why* they should log on to the Web component of their class, and what they will *gain* in the process.

Designing an Informal First Discussion Topic

I think it is in both your and your students' interests to design a first discussion topic that is so enticing, so intriguing, and so marvelous that they really do not want to miss out on it. In other words, by providing

a meaningful challenge from the start, you are giving students an opportunity for engagement.

We have talked about constructing a "Virtual Lounge", but what should be the initial topic of conversation? In what ways can you thaw the online "ice crystals" before the course content begins? The expression, "Start as you mean to go on," generally echoes through my mind at the start of any class, as time and time again, I see that a class which starts with a great deal of enthusiasm and energy generally maintains that dynamism, whereas a class with a few straggling and occasional remarks is often harder to spark.

Asking Students to Discuss Relevant Experiences in Their Personal Introductions

You might want to not only ask students to introduce themselves, but also to ask a few questions that are relevant to the context of your course and define its parameters. For example, if you are teaching a writing class, you might ask what students have already written; or in a literature course, you ask what else they have read in this particular genre. You might choose to ask students to "free associate," and write anything that comes to mind as stimulated by a word or words in your course name (TEDI, 2002).

Completing a Sentence

Another idea is to start a sentence and ask students to complete it. For example, write, "I was riding the subway today, when I . . ." Students generally love to see what others have written and enjoy interacting with each other immediately. Your sentence prompt could be about anything, but it might be helpful to tailor it, even subtly, to the subject matter of your course.

Students Interview and Introduce Each Other

Some instructors ask students to confess a secret that they have cherished, and the conversation can actually become quite amusing. Others ask students to interview each other, especially with questions related to the course topic, and then present an introduction about the interviewee.

Providing a Hook

One instructor, as an icebreaker, asked students to tell about the "weirdest gift" they had ever received. She later used this as an analogy to some aspect of their course content, which was on special education services. Other instructors, myself included, like to tell just a snippet of a personal anecdote, as this can provide a hook onto which students can tell related stories. Telling the latest adventures of the new and naughty tricks of my dog, Homer, for example, generally inspires others to relate a bit about their pets, too.

Visualization Techniques

Some instructors like to use visualization techniques, such as asking students to imagine they are sitting together in a comfortable classroom, preferably in a circle, which eradicates the feeling of hierarchy. Others paint a cozier picture, by telling students that this class will be run like a symposium, the true meaning of which is getting together and drinking with friends, while discussing topics of mutual interest. Hull (2002), conjured up to her online students at New York University, the image of sitting with friends on the porch of an old country house during a delightful summer evening, sipping tea. I think these methods help prod the imagination into making up for any deficits in sensory stimuli of the online class.

Playing a Game

Another idea that I have seen used to good effect is to immediately involve students in playing a game. One such example is the game of the sinking ship, in which there is only one lifeboat left, with a capacity of twelve passengers, yet there are twenty passengers left on the ship. The instructor gives detailed descriptions of nineteen passengers, by age, occupation, family status, income level, state of health, and so on, and with an added flourish, says the twentieth passenger is you! The challenge is to determine who should be allowed on the lifeboat. As you can imagine, a game of this nature immediately captures the imagination and appeals to the sense of excitement and adventure. The game could be used as an example of a concept taught later in the class, such as, by analogy, a corporate decision such as downsizing.

Asking Students What They Hope to Learn from the Course

Using the story, "The Three Bricklayers," as a way to exemplify different attitudes to learning, the instructor asks her students to name their own learning objectives, which is a great way of encouraging students to take responsibility. Although she does not mention it, it seems that from here the instructor and students could develop a learning contract, and if students want to learn more about areas that have not been included in the syllabus, then she could offer them individual research projects.

Asking Students to Write Short Descriptive Stories about Themselves

Jack A. Cummings, professor of Counseling and Educational Psychology at Indiana University, speaks of how he asked students to choose eight nouns which best describe themselves, and requested that each student write a short paragraph to elaborate upon these nouns (Cummings, 1998). His own paragraph descriptions were so lovely that if I had been a student in his class, I would have warmed up to him immediately. For example, one noun he used to describe himself was *cyclist,* and this is what he said:

> I have enjoyed riding bicycles since my parents bought a bike that was way too big for me when I was about five. I had to stand on an overturned bucket to even get on it. My feet only reached the pedals for about half a revolution. Now, riding through the hills of southern Indiana keeps me sane. My goal is to ride 3 to 5 times a week. On a good week, I sometimes get in three rides. The piles of paper in my office keep me chained to the desk.

Cummings recognized, in posting this information, that he was much more wordy than he would have been if he was meeting his students on campus, but online he did not have a time restraint, so he did not feel the need to summarize quite so much. He recognized a few other differences as well, between online and face-to-face discussion. For example, just as he could write his introduction in a leisurely fashion, so could everyone else, which was different, he said, from the campus setting in which, as student contributions are sequential, the ones

asked last to contribute their introduction often have to rush before the end of the class session. Online, everyone can respond at virtually the same time, without taking up time from each other. Also, when students are asked to introduce themselves in a face-to-face classroom situation, many times they are so busy rehearsing what they are going to say, or so nervous about when it will be their turn, that they do not listen carefully to their classmates. Not so online!

Furthermore, Cummings points out, there is a permanent record of everyone's response, so if anyone wants to refresh their memory, they can simply click back to reread a student's comment. As a result of these fuller and more explicit introductions from the students, Cummings believes he became acquainted with each of the students much more quickly than in the campus class, in which it might take until midsemester to know just the more vocal students. I might add that it is also advantageous to the students as they too become familiar with each other quickly, and it eases their comfort level in participating in discussions of class content. Cummings illustrates a few student paragraph descriptions, my favorite of which is entitled "Ankle Twister":

> Ankle twister—Ever since I was a child, I have been falling on concrete, tripping on carpet, falling off my bike, and slipping on the ice. I am a very clumsy person by nature and I've sprained my ankle every year of my life. Attractive? . . . Many see this quality as simply irresistible.

I have tried a similar technique of asking students to write short stories about themselves in my online classes, often to good effect. For example, in one online class on international children's literature, I asked students to complete the following sentence: "When I was young, I traveled to [you fill in the location] and the most outstanding part of my visit was when I . . ." I then went ahead and composed my story first, as a way to illustrate to students the scope and possibilities of this exercise. I wrote:

> When I was young, I traveled to Lyons, France, to visit my French pen-pal, and the most outstanding part of my visit was when I was foolish enough to show off the few words of French that I knew to my pen-pal's mother, even though the words themselves were untrue. I brashly said, *"Je fais le regime!"* (I am on a diet) at which this

remarkable French woman, robust and with a kitchen full of tempting ingredients, declared, "*Moi aussi!*" and that started my two weeks of terrific hunger. We would pass the boulanger, the windows full of baguettes and croissants, brioches and tempting and beautiful pastries, and my mouth would water. We would walk in the square, past the street market, and I'd have to be dragged from the counters with slabs of pâté, delicately thin sliced meats, frilly vegetables, and chocolate truffles. I would stare up at the grand, ornate stone buildings, thinking only of how the two *tranches de jambon* (slices of ham), which made up my entire dinner, made me feel hungrier still. But one fine day we had a visit into the country, to see my pen-pal's grandmother, and she put before me a steaming bowl full of soft, buttery, creamy pastina, and I will always remember how truly satisfying that tasted.

I received some wonderful student stories in return. One student from Texas visited Switzerland, and having never seen snow before, built her sister into a snowman. Another student traveled alone to the Philippines and shared this story:

It was the beginning of hurricane season high up in the mountains and all I remember of the last half of our stay was sitting on the toilet in the bathroom wondering if porcelain could conduct electricity. My mother yelled at me for spending over $10.00 on a long distance phone call just to ask her that.

In an online writing class, I started by asking students to complete the sentence, "Yesterday morning I received a letter from my close friend Julie, in Australia, and she said that whenever she thinks of me she thinks . . ." I asked them to include within that letter at least *three statements* which best describe themselves. I again went first with my letter, and received some exceptionally witty responses back from students, which helped us to get to know each other and to positively look forward to reading future responses. Following are excerpts from the students' writings.

In a conversation with friends, Julie said she spoke of me proudly and my ability to remain a vegan, even though I live with a chocolate lover and am tempted daily by one and all. She herself tries to give up meat, but those darn Australian steakhouses are so tantalizing!

I received a letter from my friend Julie in Australia today and she said when she thinks of me she thinks about how heartily I laugh and how contagious my laugh is. She says she can still hear my outbursts of laughter through the living room walls when she lived next door to me

Quite a temper but a great judge of character, usually. I remember once we argued about the origins of cynicism all night. She proceeded to ramble something about how I was trying to be a cynic and even though I had an amazing "cynically-laced facade" she could see right through me. Apparently unbeknownst to myself I was an "idealist" in both thought and action. She was right. Julie was a trip.

You know she was always saying the semi-right thing at the more than wrong time . . .

hmmm . . .

kind of glad she went back [to Australia].

Spending time at the start of the course to become familiar with the students, in any of the various ways mentioned, is crucial (1) to establishing an atmosphere of trust, enjoyment and excitement, (2) to engaging them in future work throughout the semester, and (3) in being able to accurately assess their learning outcomes by the completion of the course.

Establishing the Right Tone

The TEDI (2002) article mentions the importance, if teaching on campus, of maintaining a confident demeanor as you stand before your students, and that you have a clear, energetic tone of voice, that you smile, maintain eye contact, and speak with enthusiasm. This will establish you in the student's minds as not only being an expert in your subject, but also being a good communicator of that information, and thus a good teacher.

With an enjoyment of and competence in writing, this same sort of enthusiasm can be conveyed online, not only through your choice of words, but also through your responsiveness to your students. Above all, it is important to convey to the students that your online class is a safe place in which all responses are welcomed and encouraged. Obviously feelings of safety and security (which help to promote collaborative learning) do not come all at once, and cannot be there just because

you tell the students it is a safe place. Instead you, as the instructor, need to instill it. You can do this by setting a warm, enthusiastic tone, and by replying to students, so that they are encouraged to check back to see if anyone responded to their comment. (For further discussion on safety in the online class, see in Chapter 6, "How We Show We Are Listening and Caring Online.")

When students feel recognized and acknowledged by the instructor, which is usually their first priority, they can then start becoming familiar with each other, and it is in this way that trust gradually starts to build up. In addition, a warm, conversational tone can be combined effectively with a rigorous academic approach, in which there is challenge and discourse, leading to an extensive exploration of the subject matter. Remember that you want to be a good role model for your students at all times, and you want them to consider you approachable.

Whichever icebreaker activity you choose to do at the start of the semester, I recommend that you post the first response, as this not only provides the students with guidelines and a good model, but also helps to establish the tone that you would like your class to take. It is particularly important from the start of the semester to be encouraging and supportive. The tone of your conversation is important, as it can serve either to distance you from your students or bring you into a closer circle. I recommend that you adopt a conversational style, as this assists in overcoming feelings of coldness or remoteness that working online might otherwise bring. You want as much as possible to make the online class feel like an exciting forum, in which real people are speaking to each other about mutually fascinating ideas.

Students might never before have experienced asynchronous discussions within an academic framework, so you need to do what you can to help make them not only feel welcomed but also at their peak to do their best work. I particularly recommend that you log on frequently during the early days of the class, to acknowledge students by name when commenting on their responses, so that they know you have noticed them and they feel included in the group. It is wise, when commenting on students' initial responses, to ask another question so that the conversation continues.

It is frequently amazing to me how students unknowingly mimic the tone of the instructor. If you, as instructor, answer briefly and

curtly, students will answer in kind. If you post long responses, chances are that the students' responses will be long. Often, instructors who post infrequently and have brief responses that do not address every student's comment, do not encourage discussion.

An additional topic is how instructors prefer to be addressed by their students. Some instructors, in an effort to make for maximum conviviality and the decrease of hierarchy, ask students to call them by their first names, whereas others might prefer more formality. One observation I have made is that students generally treat faculty more informally in the online setting, but if this is not your preference, certainly let students know. It is also beneficial to ask students what they would like to be called. They may want to be called by their name posted on the screen, or they may have a nickname or other preference. I should mention, as an aside, that I came across one instructor who liked to call all his students by their last name, Mr. Smith, Ms. Jones, and so on. Certainly he gave to his class a most delightfully old-fashioned Oxford or Cambridge atmosphere, and one could almost imagine old dons gliding along wood paneled corridors.

Having established ways in which to successfully engage students in the introductory stages of the online course, the concern now shifts to sustaining active participation on the part of all students, throughout the duration of the semester. The Discussion Forums are the life blood and center of energy of the online class, and it is to methods of stimulating online discussion which we will now turn in Chapter 6.