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The 8 Most Common Mistakes When Teaching Online

Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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The current pandemic has caused faculties to scramble to move classroom courses online. For many instructors, these will be their first fully online course. Having taught online for over 22 years, it's been interesting to observe the steep learning curve many are experiencing. Here are the eight most common errors I see in the current scramble to go online.

1. **Trying to "translate" a classroom course to the online environment.** While I'd argue that there's no such thing as "online pedagogy" (there's only good pedagogy and poor pedagogy), classroom and online are different experiences that require attention to the *conditions of learning* distinct to each. Attempts to re-create the classroom learning experience, methods, and modes to the online environment is a basic error. Teaching online requires a "start over" in your course design, though not necessarily a change in student learning outcomes.

2. **Applying wrong metrics to the online experience.** For example, many professors are wondering how to take attendance, or figuring out what counts for attendance. Attendance is a rather archaic and almost meaningless metric left over from the industrial age model of schooling. A better metric is student engagement.

3. **Becoming a talking head.** It's bad enough students have to put up with a lot of poor classroom lectures. Now they have to suffer through countless hours of talking heads as professors videotape themselves "lecturing." I've been teaching online for 22 years. I've

never once used Zoom in an online course or posted taped lectures. Forcing students to watch a taped disembodied talking head almost guarantees student *disengagement,* especially if we fail to appreciate the liability of *transactional distance* in the online environment. If the content of your lecture is that important, give your students a manuscript or your lecture notes to study.

4. **Posting video lectures over seven minutes long.** The lecture method takes on a different function in the online environment. When instructors ask me how they can video tape and post their lectures online I ask, "Why would you want to duplicate the most maligned and least effective teaching method and pretend the online environment is a 'classroom' when it offers so much greater opportunity for student engagement?" The question to ask is, "What is the pedagogical function of this video?" The most effective functions are: a short introduction, an explication, or a demonstration.

5. **Assessing the wrong thing.** I see some schools wanting to assess whether students "like" the online experience. What students "like" is beside the point of the educational. A common student comment on course evaluation for online courses is, "I would have preferred to have taken this course in the classroom." The response is, "How do you know?" Ask those students if they learned what the course was intended to provide, and they'll likely say, "Yes!" Assess the right thing: evidence of student learning and achievement of the course student learning outcomes. One can also evaluate the effectiveness of the course design: structure, scope, flow, alignment with program goals, etc.

6. **Ignoring aesthetics and design when creating an online course.** Figuring out your course should not be an assignment. Your course should be designed so intuitively and aesthetically pleasing so the student perceives, intuits, and understands immediately what they are seeing and what is expected of them. Your students don't read a user manual or instructions when playing complex video games—they can immediately perceive what the game is about and what they are supposed to do. A well-designed website does not provide an orientation to new visitors. Your course should be clean, intuitive, and logical in design (and that includes not adding anything that does not directly support the learning outcomes).

7. **Attempting to go for coverage rather than depth.** Many classroom instructors fail to appreciate that because online learning requires a higher level of student engagement, they need to reduce the amount of coverage they usually attempt in a classroom course—-which usually is way too much as it is. A good rule of thumb: cut the content coverage by half and focus on student engagement that (1) helps students achieve a learning outcomes and (2) provides evidence of learning.

8. **Failing to ask for help.** Most faculty members are used to the silo-oriented isolated nature of academia. Traditionally, they develop their courses alone. At most they may share their course syllabi with colleagues on their faculties or departments, though more

often than not they are seen mostly by the dean, registrar, and library services. Teaching online, especially for first time instructors, is a great opportunity to be more collaborative in our approach to teaching. Ask for help. Experienced online instructors, your school's instructional designers, and numerous online teaching support groups are ready and happy to help you make your online course the best it can be.

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