

Four Key Components of Online Instruction
Perception Is Reality
Under-promise. Over-deliver.

By Simon Ringsmuth

These four points are, in many ways, the most important components of an online class. These elements are the glue that binds everything together--the syllabus, the assignments, the tests, quizzes, discussions...all of that is important, but without these elements the class is merely a background chore for students. It is a series of tasks that must be merely *accomplished* rather than a place in which *learning* can truly take place. Without these elements students will not be personally invested in the class, their discussion board posts will be hollow thoughts resounding off the walls of a virtual echo chamber, and the class will not have meaning or significance in their lives. It will be a badge, a checked box, or a line on a resume, but it will not be *education*.

1. Communication

The instructor must always keep an open line of communication between himself or herself and his or her students. The students need to know that the instructor is involved in the class, cares about the students and their success, and is personally invested in the material. Students can tell right away if the class is not a priority for the instructor, and will respond in kind by lowering their own quality of work. Communication can take a variety of forms, including

- Online video chats via services like Google+ Hangouts
- Webcam videos recorded at regular intervals
- News postings on the Online Classroom
- Emails to remind students of upcoming assignments
- Posts to the discussion board
- Posts to class-based social networks on Twitter or Facebook

2. Expectations

Without any in-person meetings, students in a distance class rely solely on the instructor to guide them through the work. The instructor writes the syllabus, sets the schedule, creates the assignments, and sets the rules. By setting expectations for the class and clearly outlining what is demanded of the students, the instructor is giving students a clear path to success. Students might not choose to follow that path, but for those who do there should never be a question of "What do I do now?" Desire2Learn has a Checklist feature which can be utilized to help students see exactly what they need to do in class and give them clear indicators of their own progress. Instructors can also create a calendar on Desire2Learn that has assignments listed.

3. Consistency

The instructor must be consistent and reliable throughout the duration of the course in all aspects of course administration. In other words, the instructor must adopt the motto "Do what you say you will do." If the syllabus says you will respond to emails within 48 hours, then respond to emails within 48 hours. If the students expect the instructor to post updates

once a week, then post updates once a week. A lack of consistency sends the message that the course is not a priority for the instructor, and therefore it will not be a priority for the students.

If consistency is not achievable, apologize and then revise expectations. Do not make excuses--if excuses are acceptable for the instructor, then they must be acceptable for the students.

I have seen firsthand, both as a student and as an observer in my job, the crescendo of activity and excitement on the part of the professor at the beginning of class quickly fade to black, at which point the class becomes mere background noise on the part of the instructor. Response times slip. Assignments are left ungraded. Promised deadlines are not met. The impact of this on the students is far greater than an in-person class, as there is no daily interaction or personal connection to hold things together. The online instructor *must* be consistent in his or her activity throughout the semester if he or she expects students to do the same.

4. Relationships

Students thrive on personal connections. In a face-to-face class these connections happen naturally--students learn who their instructor is, what his or her personality is like, how he or she treats others, etc. by his or her interactions with the class. A PowerPoint assignment at the beginning of class can serve as an introduction for the instructor and students but does not create relationships. Relationships are built over time, not with single assignments. Students also learn about their classmates, make friends, discuss ideas, and deepen their education through physical interactions that are fundamentally different from online discussion boards. These physical interactions are not possible in an online class, so the instructor must find ways of replicating them:

- **Virtual office hours** are a way for the instructor to actually interact face-to-face with students, and one of the best ways to build relationships and let them know that you care about them and their success in class. Google+ Hangouts are ideal due to their ability to accommodate 10 individuals at one time, but Skype and other services offer similar functionality as well.
- **Webcam videos** posted as regular updates for the class let the students see a glimpse of the instructor's personality. These are extraordinarily valuable in creating personal connections and helping students feel a bond between themselves and their instructor. This will lead to a greater personal investment in the class on the part of the students, and simply make the class more enjoyable.
- **News updates** that also include non-class items. Talk about your pets, your family, your hobbies--anything that helps your students see that you are not just a faceless instructor but a real human being.
- **Engage in discussions with students on the discussion boards, and be willing to get sidetracked and go off on tangents.** Let the students see that their opinions matter to you, and offer yours to them as well. If a student mentions an event in his or her life, ask about it. If a student holds an unpopular contradictory opinion, respond by validating his or her thoughts even if you also respectfully disagree.