

Teaching Tip Tuesday

Prioritizing Effort in Online Teaching

Let's face facts: The time available for instructors to engage in online teaching activities is finite. Although there are always more potential ways that you could allocate your time to improve student learning (e.g. producing high-quality videos, interactive lessons, and having one-on-one meetings with students), the burdens of heavy contact hour loads and the desire to have a sustainable work/life balance puts real limits on what instructors can do. Therefore, it is to the benefit of students and instructors alike to prioritize effort in online teaching to emphasize those components of instruction that have either the highest return in terms of student satisfaction. The evidence-based tips below may help online instructors in a time crunch to decide where to focus their efforts.

1. **Don't deplete your time allocation producing content that is available elsewhere.** Most instructors see themselves mainly as content providers and prioritize the development of novel content in the form of lecture videos and written materials. Students, however, often find content from other sources more valuable than instructor-produced content. If the content to which you want to expose students is available on websites or YouTube, you can save a great deal of time and effort by using it, rather than recreating something similar.
2. **Prioritize assignment feedback.** Your feedback should be specific and timely, so that students have ample opportunity to assimilate any criticism and improve their performance prior to summative assessment. Students routinely rate detailed assignment feedback as the most valuable type of instructional support in online courses. In fact, the value of all forms of instructor feedback, including instructor participation in discussions, was ranked higher by students than all forms of content related support, such as websites, lectures, outlines, and summaries. This is at odds with the valuation of different types of instructional support by faculty, who tend to rank the value of content related support above the value of feedback to students on their performance.
3. **Prioritize real-world problem-solving exercises to engage students with content.** For learning to happen, students must engage content in your course. The most effecting strategies from the perspective of students are working on realistic scenarios to apply content (case studies, reports, research papers, client projects, etc.), and discussions with guiding questions or prompts that deepen their understanding of the content. These can be provided in non-graded formats, and can replace some question sets or practice quizzes, which are rated as less effective by students.
4. **Recognize that all student-student engagement strategies are not equal.** The value of student-student engagement in academic performance and persistence is well documented. But students do not value all forms of interaction equally. Overall, they report that icebreakers are the most effective form of engaging with peers, followed by interaction using online tools for collective work, as long as they are not asked to evaluate the individual performance of other group members. They also value engaging through watching student presentations, both synchronously and asynchronously. You may save time in your own evaluation of student performance by avoiding high-effort peer reviews, which are not valued by students.

Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online learning*, 22(1), 205-222.

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