Keeping Up With the Reality Show: A Ten-Years-Later Review of Surviving Teaching on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

A dozen years ago, I set out to teach my first Internet course at York University, a large urban Canadian university with 55,000+ students who are mainly commuters. Two years later I wrote an article titled, "Survivor!: When the Next Reality Show is You Teaching Your First Internet Course", in which I argued that there are ten major things you should not do when teaching on the Internet. Now ten years later, in this paper I revisit those recommendations to see if they still hold true, and to see if we need to add any new ones.

INTRODUCTION

Even ten years ago, there already were literally thousands of academic articles, magazine stories, newspaper items, handbooks, texts, workshops, entire courses and degrees on the subject of teaching online. In this article ten years later, I have not updated the bibliography but include the sources from the original article.

I teach Marketing in the undergraduate business programme of the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies of York University, a large urban university whose 55,000+ students are mainly commuters. For many years I had resisted Internet teaching. The term *resist* is perhaps too polite. As head of the Marketing Area, veteran of a quarter century of teaching experience, and holder of a treasured teaching award from the alums, I had steadfastly refused to condescend to teach on the Internet. I cited among my many reasons the fact that while a straightforward numbers course like Accounting might possibly be transferred to web pages, surely a

Marketing course would need the teamwork and interpersonal interaction that is part of a traditional classroom in order to continue to be the exciting worthwhile phenomenon that we want our students to experience and I questioned how that could possibly be accomplished online.

I owed a favour to a good Dean, however, and in a moment of weakness, when pressed to teach the introductory Marketing course on the Internet so we could promise our students the possibility of taking the entirety of their business degree online, I agreed to create and teach not one but two Internet courses. Not only had I never taken or taught courses on the Internet, but neither of these courses had ever been taught outside a traditional classroom by anyone in our university. There were fellow pioneers in other disciplines, and I began to talk to anyone who had taught anything on the Internet. I went to every workshop I could find, read dozens of books, journals, and magazines, searched the Internet and read online, and experienced increasingly serious attacks of panic wondering into what bottomless abyss I had unwittingly stumbled.

I succeeded in my online teaching, thanks to a number of helpful colleagues who had gone before me. I wrote an article about it for a journal, titled, "Survivor!: When the Next Reality Show is You Teaching Your First Internet Course". I include a link to it in my university web site so students and other faculty can read of my experiences. Now, it is time to update that article and see if those ten rules are still in force and what new ones we might add. I have summed up the initial advice in italics.

TEN THINGS NOT TO DO WHEN TEACHING AN INTERNET COURSE

1. Don't Ignore the Advice of People Who Went Before You

Even when someone tells you directly that something will be a problem in Internet teaching, being accustomed only to in-class teaching, we may not give enough credit to their warnings.

Even after teaching Internet courses and dealing day to day for years with the problems that arise from their dissimilarity to on-campus courses, I find it is easy to forget that indeed Internet courses are different. This paper addresses some of those differences.

2. Don't Expect to Hear Consistent Advice

Different faculty will always have different experiences with teaching. One colleague will suggest doing all your own programming while another will insist you leave it to the computer experts. Listen to everyone and choose what works best for you and your students.

One major thing that has changed in a decade of online teaching is that more universities and professors are doing it. With that comes more help available in a myriad of places. Many universities now have an entire technical department devoted to online teaching, with experts in a variety of areas available to help by email or telephone. Builders of platforms for hosting Internet courses offer consistent frameworks for Internet courses so we may find help from a colleague even though we offer substantially different courses. Don't be afraid to experiment; almost anything can be done online. You may be working with something no one else has tried, or you may be teaching a course that has been online for many years but is open to change. There are always alternative ways of doing the same thing.

3. Don't Leave Preparation until the Last Minute

We are often warned about procrastination, but many of us ignore the warning, preferring the rush of the last minute deadline to inspire us. I had planned my schedule for an intense winter term but with only these two courses to develop. I soon realized it was imperative that I have the entire course complete and online on the first day of classes.

This simply does not always apply. I have known faculty who have been given notice in August that in September they will teach a new Internet course. When this happens, you can only do the best you can and make some adjustments such as planning to have students do the material in more synchronous time. Many platforms such as WebCT and Moodle today allow you to highlight only those units that are open to students, keeping the remainder hidden, and allowing you to work on new units as they come up. The main thing lost is the students' ability to work through the material at their own pace, but it does not have to spoil the course.

4. Don't Let the Course Take Over Your Whole Life

Many experienced Internet professors tried to impress on me how easily an Internet course can take up every minute of your day if you are not careful. I listened to this advice with only half an ear because I was accustomed to the fact that teaching, a career I loved, takes a lot of time.

This is still a crucial point. About five years into my Internet teaching experience, I realized I had failed completely to listen to this advice and had done nothing to help alleviate the problem. I even went to teaching conferences and was arrogant enough to insist that the professor must be there for her students, always, and how even though it takes time, it is worth the effort to read each posting, not only for responding to the student who wrote it, but also for what I learned from my students. Don't plan to work twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. Try to set specific days and times when you will work on the course. If there are funds or course-release time available for preparation, equipment, tutors, or technical help available, use it. I no longer attempt to read every posting. I had developed a system where I go through the postings each day and try to answer those that are new that day, but there are times when even this is impossible. I have tried dividing the class up into large groups (100 students divided into four groups), and this gives them a chance to be read more often by their other group members. I then try to answer a few in each group.

5. Don't Make Extra Work for Yourself

Don't try to do everything yourself. Don't give students a trout but rather teach them to fish. Don't be a mother hen about enrolment, assignments, etc. Don't spend too much time on the 20% who cause 80% of the problems. Use technology to advantage.

This still stands as an important rule. Do not make more work for yourself by trying to do too much or taking on responsibilities that belong to someone else. The fact that an Internet course may easily take up to three times as much work as an on-campus course is now a concern for many faculty unions in negotiations on workload. There are few easy answers, but there are some. The first is to try if at all possible to ensure that in your first Internet teaching experience, you are converting an already existing course rather than trying to invent a course and simultaneously create it for the web. Although I

previously emphasized the importance of encouraging students to find things on their own, after years of teaching Internet students I believe it is better to give them an answer, albeit short, with reference to further information and where to obtain it. Most of them are appreciative of a short quick answer that does not entail their going on a time-consuming search; they can proceed with their work. Do not, however, back down on rules you had decided were important; every rule you allow a student to break is guaranteed to cost you time. Encourage truly troubled students to access the Counseling Centre.

6. Don't Try to Create an Internet Course by Just Uploading Current Course Materials

Don't think you can create an Internet course just by uploading your teaching notes or by videotaping yourself speaking in a regular classroom. Be aware of copyright rules; things you used in the classroom may not be useable on a website.

This still stands as a crucial point. Your Internet students deserve better than second-hand material. Use the Internet as it was intended to be used. Make use of design, colour, white space, pictures, clip art, URLs, other sites, links. Put what you want them to get from you into website-structured pages. Find new sources of copyright approved visual materials through your textbook publisher.

7. Don't Expect More from Online Students

Don't expect Internet students to read directions or instructions any more carefully than regular students.

I expected much more of my Internet students. Anyone capable of taking an Internet course, I believed, would be fantastically bright and capable and able to avoid all the pitfalls into which my on-campus students fell. They are still at heart the same students you have known in the classroom, with the same needs and shortcomings, and perhaps more needs. Try new ideas such as video stream for important sections, or a series of PowerPoint slides or audio instructions with still-photographs to illustrate a difficult concept. Most important to note is that Internet students still need deadlines. I also found that Internet students do need a little more care and attention than traditional students. It does make a difference that I am not with them in a classroom, in person. It makes a difference that they cannot see my face, my smile, the subtle nuances of body language when I write something in the way of recommended or forbidden actions.

8. Don't Underestimate the Power and Problems of Technology

Don't assume the technology will work. Secure the equipment you need. Learn as much as you can about the technology. Don't take the "my dog ate my assignment" equivalent of excuses. Plan and design simply.

Much of this has changed. You now can rely much more on technology to work correctly, and it will alleviate the need to learn technical details. It is far easier to design clever original creative web pages than it used to be, and our students, masters of incredible skills in technology, want pages that excite them. Recognize that computer age dogs do still eat computer age assignments, in ways that regular dogs would never have imagined. I now, for example, assign a paper due at 7:00 p.m. on a Monday but do not pick it up until Tuesday afternoon, taking no note of when papers come in. When a few students run into problems posting and write me, I just tell them, don't worry about it.

9. Don't Lose Yourself or What You Stand For

Don't neglect your own needs. Don't try to be someone online who you are not. Don't waste time defending yourself and your policies; just put it in the course kit and cite it. Don't go too soft on them just because you feel guilty about not being in a classroom for them. Cut them some slack because Internet is different, but don't let them get away with too much. Avoid expressing annoyance, even if the question seems stupid or arrogant. You'll regret it when you see them in person at the test.

Although I start this paper advising you to listen to anyone who has done this before you, and despite what I have just said in the paragraph above, do not try to duplicate what others do. Teaching is very much a personal calling, and we all do things differently. Do what works for you. I found in my first few years of Internet teaching that I was letting students "get away with" things I would never have tolerated in an on-campus classroom. I believe in setting simple rules and insisting they be followed. I let this go for a while and it was not good for the students or for me. Today, Internet courses are fairly common and it is easier to insist that students comply with the rules.

10. Don't Forget to Have Fun

I love the flexibility of Internet teaching. I love the creativity of designing and maintaining the website. I like not having to be on campus at 10:00 p.m. on an icy February night. But most of all I love the closeness with students that I did not believe would be possible in an Internet course. I find that students are often more forthcoming and willing to "talk" on the screen with its relative anonymity than they would be in an on-campus classroom with 150 students.

This is still one of the most important recommendations, and I believe I did not recommend it highly enough at the time of the first article. With years of experience in Internet teaching, I recommend highly that you try to relax and to enjoy all that can come out of an Internet course. I have found that I still get to know students well enough to write them letters of recommendation for graduate school or jobs, that I can sense when a group is having a problem, that I still know their personalities and sometimes even recognize their writing styles. It is not only possible to do group work, on which many business courses depend, in an Internet course, they are already doing what many students in on-campus courses have been doing for some time, and that is meeting electronically. It helps with the difficulty of coordinating group work in today's university climate where so many students are working part or full time to be able to afford to attend. And it emphasizes a method that is used in most businesses today to link people with varied schedules at the same time. I also have found that students come to know each other fairly well, especially if you take the time and effort to put the class into smaller discussion groups (the caveat being that this will make more work for the professor who tries to interact with his/her students). But the rewards are worth it. One summer we all received baby pictures from a student who was pregnant during the winter term Internet course.

THREE NEW THINGS NOT TO DO WHEN TEACHING AN INTERNET COURSE, TO MAKE A BAKER'S DOZEN RECOMMENDATIONS

11. Do not take lightly the difference for students between synchronous and asynchronous courses.

Although I have done almost everything in asynchronous time, synchronous meeting time has a real appeal. You are all together at one time, just as you are in a traditional classroom and you can be assured that everyone is receiving the same message at the same time. But many students take Internet courses specifically for the lack of having to be somewhere at a specific hour. There is also the issue of time zones. In one course in one year, I had a student each from France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Georgia, and a lumber mill 2,500 kilometres north of Vancouver. Try assigning some of the work for individuals to do on their own time and some time to be all together, for such things as holding a question and answer period before a test. Warn them of parts that require synchronous work, with alternatives for those far away. I also have found it beneficial to close down earlier unit discussions as you move forward in the course. Too many students will keep returning to the part they know already, and some will delay starting the course work until nearly the end because they figure they have the entire term to catch up.

12. I have said that you should not agree to teach on the Internet a course you have never taught before. This has changed; it does happen, and there may be nothing you can do about it. It can actually be beneficial to start with a clean slate, building your website from the ground up in the new medium, instead of trying to change materials originally designed for on-campus teaching into materials appropriate for the web.

13. Do not think that keeping track of the level of participation will be easy. In order to encourage good participation in the online discussion group, it is necessary to have some marks allotted to it. Usually a simple count of messages posted has been all I have been able to do, in the beginning doing it student by student. I then found WebCT which counts messages posted. This is not ideal, since many students catch on quickly and start posting tiny little messages like, "I agree" and thereby upping their count. It is not possible to read through all messages and give a mark, nor is it even feasible with large classes (I have 100 in a class) to choose any number of postings. I have had some success with asking students to send me their three best postings, giving them the opportunity to help in their evaluation. But now that we are using Moodle, there is not even a mechanism to count postings. Any suggestions here would be most welcome; please write me at lripley@yorku.ca.

CONCLUSION

I had been teaching and living a fairly fearless life for a quarter of a century when I was asked to teach my first Internet course and I was scared to death. But I remembered what I always tell my students: the best solution for fear is to be as prepared as you can be, and to talk to others who are going through similar experiences. Some basic questions remain:

How do we appear to our students as we would like them to see us when they cannot see us? We mostly do this through our own postings that students read. You might be amazed at how clearly your personality, preferences, and quirks come through your written words, and this can be a valuable lesson for students. I am hoping that having to answer a question on the final exam about a posting regarding Dr. Seuss, taken directly from the discussion board, may encourage students to keep their sense of humour and their attention to the words of others when they become managers.

When students cannot see our faces, how do we strike the right balance between coolly professional and warmly caring, between precise technology and errant humanity, between the "I-mean-business" guy and the approachable professor, all these dichotomies that are important in any classroom but crucial on the Internet?

We do it by using technology to bring into the classroom the same care and concern for our students that we have always had. It is amazing what you can find on the Internet to put into a website that conveys your personal message as well as your academic one. We do it by knowing what we believe is right and proper and what we think does not belong in a classroom (my students are never allowed to make fun of each other). We do it by recreating in the Internet course the same fun, the intimacy, the spontaneity, the human element that we use in the on-campus classroom. It will just take thinking outside our comfortable boxes.

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