

# Teaching Better Electronically or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Internet Teaching

M. Louise RIPLEY, M.B.A., Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Marketing, Women's Studies and in Environmental Studies  
School of Administrative Studies, Atkinson College, York University  
Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3 Canada

## ABSTRACT

Internet teaching is a worthy topic today because changes in society demand "that learners change their knowledge and skill bases and change them faster than at any time in history" [1], and Internet teaching is proving to be one of the best ways to reach those learners. This paper explores ten of the most common difficulties of online courses. It explains how the proper use of readily available technology can be brought to bear on these difficulties in ways that will reduce worry and stress both for beginners faced with teaching a first course and for professors who already have taught online courses but may be seeking ways to improve upon the experience.

Keywords: Internet Teaching, Teaching Difficulties, Technology, Cybernetics

## INTRODUCTION

Eight years ago, I swore I would never teach on the Internet because my courses need discussion and interaction. Then there came a time when I owed Dean Ron Bordessa of Atkinson College a favour and he wanted to be able to offer our entire degree online. So I grudgingly agreed to teach not just one but two online courses. I insisted that if I hated the experience, I would never do it again. I ended up loving online teaching so much that now by choice, I teach half my load online. I accomplished all of this through the wonders of technology.

### The Ten Most Common Difficulties in Preparing for and Teaching Online Courses

1. Obtaining Advice from Others
2. Finding Time for Advance Preparation
3. Getting Materials for Your Website
4. Getting Enough Help from Your Employer
5. Knowing What to Expect from Students
6. Knowing the Professor Must Be Part of the Group
7. Keeping Assignments Learner & Goal-Oriented
8. Avoiding Making Extra Work For Yourself
9. Keeping the Course from Taking Up Your Whole Life
10. Remembering to Have Fun

### 1. OBTAINING ADVICE FROM OTHERS

Technology makes it easy to access a lot of advice, which can be useful but also daunting in designing an online course. If someone, as is my practice, uses no passwords, you can easily check out their site without even asking. It is better, though, to tell them of your interest as they may be willing to help you in your quest. Ask about their experience; teachers are always willing to talk about teaching and what they have experienced will most likely apply also to you. Do not, however, expect to hear consistent advice. Just as classroom teaching styles differ,

so do Internet teaching styles, except that online we also have differing styles of web page preparation and presentation. One colleague will love a particular software and another will hate it. One will use synchronous time meetings and another will insist they do not belong in an online course with its promise of flexible time.

Internet teaching reaches to the heart of cybernetics' focus on the combination of machines and living organisms. It is different from classroom teaching because it involves placing a computer between the teacher and the student. If you have never taught online, there is a tendency to translate Internet problems into what you know about classroom teaching. You need to try to hear with new ears. You may need to start with a fairly simple web site; you may be speaking to people who have taught online for many years and their web sites may have taken years to develop. In your search, learn also to be discerning in your tastes and to trust your instincts. When you come upon a site that you find overcrowded with glitzy, over-animated icons, move on. Remember that just because something has been posted to a web site hosted by a university does not mean it is of high quality. Talk to a number of people who have taught online and get an idea of what alternatives are available, then choose delivery technologies that best suit the kind of teacher you know yourself to be.

### 2. FINDING TIME FOR ADVANCE PREPARATION

Ideally, all of an online course should be available to students from the first day of class. At a minimum, you need a basic course syllabus, and in addition a week-by-week (or alternative) outline, an item that tells students "What You Need to Complete This Course", instructions for using the Internet Platform (WebCT, Moodle, etc.), and a set of rules about the Discussion Group.

If you are encouraging students to still try to follow a week-by-week format, you may use an outline similar to an on-campus course. If not, you may wish to present the material in units, separated as appropriate by the material rather than by the number of weeks in a term. Either way, it is best if students can see the entirety of the course from the start. Technology can help. If you are stuck teaching an online course with little lead time (it is not unheard of for new professors to be told with a few week's lead time that they will be teaching an online course), you can put up the names of all the units but "block" all of them except the few early ones, with a note to students that you are asking them not to work too far ahead in order to encourage full participation in discussion of current material. The same works with links not yet activated. This can buy you time, while letting students know what is coming. Platforms like WebCT and Moodle offer entire course structures essentially ready to go. Be wary, however, of the technology staff person who says s/he can just upload your current course material into a

platform. If you have developed your current course material in another programme like Microsoft Front Page or Word, if you use a lot of graphics and colour, much of this may be lost in the move, leaving you with at best a drab website, at worst a huge restructuring job. I created both my course websites in Microsoft Front Page before my university was doing much online. The websites would not translate well into the university's new platforms so I left them where they were, with links from the university's site to them. You can access all of my online material because I use no passwords. This is the link for my first course, Introductory Marketing:  
(<http://www.atkinson.yorku.ca/~lripley/imsyllabus.htm>).

### 3. GETTING MATERIALS FOR YOUR WEBSITE

Preparing materials for an online course is fundamentally different from preparing for an on-campus course, moving from the linear model of print to the non-linear model of the web. Try to avoid ever thinking of an online course as just an on-campus course offered online, as a place where lectures are offered on the computer screen. From the beginning, think "WEB" and consider everything that is now available to you that was not available when teaching on campus. If, for instance, you always hated lecturing, now is the time, not to put those lectures on tape, but to think through a different way of presenting that material that does not involve the centuries-old concept of an expert speaking to a group of the uneducated. Technology opens up a whole new world of possibilities for teaching. You can put material you want your students to learn onto web pages where they are asked, for example, to click on links to the web where they can further explore the concepts. In the Marketing Strategy unit where we talk about companies' mission statements, I provide links to the websites of well-known companies and their actual statements. The students are then asked to work with what they find there.

Copyright is another major way online courses differ from on-campus courses. Where we are allowed to copy a magazine picture and show it on an overhead projector for classroom discussion, we are not allowed to copy that same picture for a website for discussion in an online course. Your technologically advanced publishers will have solved part of this problem for you, contracting with companies to provide copyrighted materials that you can use online. Publishers also provide a myriad of online materials such as study guides, self-study quizzes which they mark and return to students, and facilities for creating puzzles and games with your course material. Pearson Canada, Inc. has been especially helpful.

You need permission to use material from another web site, but most people are delighted to give it. Asking something like, "Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I will be posting it here" with a link to your site, reduces required correspondence, but I have always heard back and the answer has always been and enthusiastic "Yes". Even group work can be done online, and more easily than in on-campus courses; with so many students working great numbers of hours to afford university, they struggle to find time slots in which to meet. With electronic communication, they enjoy group work more because they are not wasting time scheduling or travelling to group meetings. Other advantages include being able to make changes to course materials immediately and being able to bring in current events quickly. I provide a section of the Discussion Group for this purpose.

Not everything is solved by technology. I still give tests on-campus, with truly-distance students taking theirs with a local invigilator. Sometimes the technology does not work and students take their anger out on the professor. Be prepared for this, is my best advice. Build grace periods into assignment due dates; for example. I set mine at 7:00 p.m. because I usually teach evening classes and am then online at 7:00 to tell students experiencing difficulties with the technology not to worry because I will not pick up the papers until the next morning and I do not look at the date/time stamps. Finally, do not try to be Michelangelo and paint the Sistine Chapel. Just design a simple web site with which to teach your course.

### 4. OBTAINING ENOUGH HELP FROM YOUR EMPLOYER

Find out what help you are entitled to from your school, your Dean, your university, and make good use of it. Today, most universities have good Technology Departments with staff skilled in web page design and in moving your courses online. Plan to work with them. Some colleagues recommend leaving all the technical work to the computer experts, but I strongly advise taking part in areas where you can. You want to know something about the technology with which you work.

Find out what others have received in the way of compensation for the work involved in preparation. It varies widely, from none at all to course release, money, computers, or all three. Resentment can build if you find yourself doing work as part of your normal workload for which someone else was paid extra. For better compensation, talk to your faculty union. Ours at York University in Toronto, YUFA, has been successful in gaining us ownership of our online course materials, one of the strongest clauses on the continent.

### 5. KNOWING WHAT TO EXPECT FROM STUDENTS

It is always difficult knowing the backgrounds of students you will teach, but this is multiplied many times over in an online course. You also have two levels: their knowledge of the subject matter and their knowledge of technology. One of the important lessons of online courses is that students are still students. They do not automatically become paragons of academic behaviour just because they enrolled in a technology-based course. I thought they did. When I first taught an online course, I assumed that anyone urbane enough to enrol in a course requiring knowledge of computers and the web would also be sophisticated enough to know that one must read instructions and course materials carefully, prepare ahead of time, start assignments early, find materials on their own, and respond to professorial requests. The professors I had contacted about online teaching had not lied to me. My online students were just like my on-campus students. A major problem our administrative staff complain of is the number of requests they receive for information that is readily available in the online syllabus. Students often simply do not read the material that is readily available to them online. Some solutions I have found useful include:

1) Adjust Your Expectations to Match Student Behaviour. I offer the on-campus test on two separate days to accommodate schedules. I used to ask students to email me about which day they would show up so that I could request appropriately sized

rooms. Out of 100 students, only a few would write. I now just order two rooms for 100.

2) Set and Enforce Deadlines Like Those of On-Campus Courses. I started out being highly flexible about due dates, figuring Internet students took these courses because they wanted flexibility. I soon found most students nearing the end of term with most work unfinished. I returned to my practice for on-campus courses of deadlines for material due throughout the course.

3) Lay it Out in Print as Well as Online Material. My course materials are all provided online, but my students receive a long detailed letter in the regular mail about a month before the course starts, outlining important rules and procedures, providing links and email addresses, clarifying just about everything that previous classes have taught me students worry about. The course kit, letter, and web site establish a formal agreement between you and the student. Associate Dean Gary Sprakman of Atkinson College, responsible for overseeing online courses says, "Be explicit on what you will deliver and deliver on your commitments" [2].

4) Demonstrate Where You Can. In places on your website where you would in the classroom demonstrate something, try to find interesting ways to demonstrate it online. There are a myriad of ways to do this from video-stream to Power-Point slides to audio-instructions with photographs [3].

5) Be Available to Your Internet Students. With their busy schedules, which are often the reason they took your online course in the first place, Internet students need you to be available to them in ways other than the on-campus model of in-the-classroom-plus-official-office-hours. I am an email addict and love spending time online but we will examine more about this in the section on Keeping the Course From Taking up Your Whole Life.

6) Don't Expect Not to Have Oddballs. My colleague Diane Jurkowski, an early pioneer of online teaching, had a irate student come to her office to see her. He lambasted her for requiring that he have a computer for her course. He did not own a computer, it was too much effort to come to campus to use one, how dare she make such requirements. She gently explained to him that it was an online course and it did seem quite natural to expect students to have some sort of access to a computer. It turned out he did not realize he had signed up for an online course.

## 6. KNOWING THE PROFESSOR MUST BE PART OF THE GROUP

There are professors who never converse with their online students. I believe that if the reader were one of those, s/he would not be reading this paper, and so I shall merely state what I take as a given: To Maintain Quality, Teaching a Course Online Requires a Discussion Group, and cite a few experts in the field to back up my claim [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]. We know that the most successful learning experiences are those where students take an active part; "good learning is collaborative and social; learning is not a spectator sport" [9]. Good online learning is about "collaboration, active learning, and community building" [10]. If we are to have a good Discussion Group, the professor must be part of it. What remains is how to do it.

When I first taught online, I needed a way to get my students to discuss the material. Picturing an active classroom with hands raised eager to answer a question, I came up with the Waving Hand Exercise, inserted throughout the Learning Units, one unit for each week of the term. Online, the hand actually waves:

	<b>Exercise Need/Want</b>	If they meant exactly the same thing, they wouldn't be two different words. What is the difference between NEED and WANT?
---	-------------------------------	---

The rule was that students had to answer all the Waving Hand Exercises, send their answers to the listserv, then also respond to the messages of other students. I, as the professor, would respond to many of their postings and keep the discussion on track. At this time, we had no WebCT or other platform and I was spending untold hours keeping up with the email. With 20 questions in each unit, 10 units in the course, and 100 students, if students only answered each question, there would be 20,000 emails! My presence there with them, however, was crucial to the success of the course, as I found out through their evaluations, and especially one term when, busy with negotiations for my faculty union, I did not participate nearly so much in the exchanges. I have since reduced the number of required exercises to ten.

## 7. KEEPING ASSIGNMENTS LEARNER- AND GOAL-ORIENTED

I first had prepared the Waving Hand Exercises without full realization of how they would work. It was not until I took part in the Discussion Group with my students that I realized the problem with questions like, "In what range of colours was Henry Ford's first car offered?" The simple factual answer "black" grew rather irritating when it arrived in 100 emails. I knew what I wanted students to do. I wanted them to say, "Black, because that was all that Ford produced, but there was no other car so people had to buy his black cars". Students, however, will usually answer the question you ask, and they answered, "Black". So I soon changed the question to read, "Henry Ford said of his early automobile that people could have it in any colour they wanted as long as it was black. Why was Ford able to make this statement?" They now engage in interesting discussions about exactly the issue I wanted them to consider – how Marketing differs when supply and demand differ. This not only provides more interesting answers, it makes for more learner-centred exercises. A key point to remember is that students taking online courses want meaningful tasks [11], even if they do take the easy route if offered. I also found that as I made the questions clearer, my job of reading and responding to their answers became easier and more enjoyable.

When my university moved onto WebCT (we are now moving to Moodle), we were able to follow the second half of Zywno's warning, that students also want things to be easy to do. Technology can simplify things, but it can confuse students if not used properly. Interaction of students, professor, and technology is key to the success of an online course. Without me there to notice that students were all writing a single word response to the question about Henry Ford, that exercise might never have changed and students remained frustrated.

Participating fully, I could quickly see the error. Participating, I also experienced the overwhelming glut of emails, and when my students who wrote to me to suggest that we migrate to WebCT in order to save our sanity, I knew what they were talking about. If they did not know me from my close and personal interaction with them, I doubt they would have felt comfortable writing to an unknown entity who never entered their discussions.

Internet facilities are useful to students who need extra help. If someone raises her hand in class and says she still does not understand a concept, I can keep the whole class waiting while I go over it once again or I can ask her to see me after class and hope she does not have a train to catch. In an online course, she can write me and receive individual help. I can copy her exact words and write a personalized note that says, "Here's where you went wrong." If our discussion is useful to everyone, I can ask her permission to post it online. Students also can express themselves at greater length than would be feasible in a classroom. Others can feel free to read the first few lines and move on; I read them all, sometimes finding gems in the later part that might have been lost if I had had to gently cut the student short in a classroom discussion.

The online course also provides ways to help special needs students. Without much effort, web sites can be designed to make them accessible to blind students who use screen-reading software. Students with mobility impairment often find it easier to take online courses. Students with learning disabilities may appreciate the more flexible schedules of online courses. You need to be aware of issues such as labeling images so screen-reading software can handle them, but the joy of seeing someone complete a university course who might never have been able to is worth the small extra effort it takes.

The truly fun part of online teaching has been moving away from lecture and getting students out into the world and find answers for themselves. One of my students' favourite Waving Hand Exercises is one where I ask them to go to a coffee shop, buy a drink, observe the customers, and then try applying Peter Drucker's Five Questions about Business Strategy to that shop.

## **8. AVOIDING MAKING EXTRA WORK FOR YOURSELF**

Preparation and teaching of an online course will provide you with far more work than you can imagine, especially the first time through. You therefore need to get rid of anything that someone else can do and save yourself for being there for your online students where it matters. The first thing is to try to ensure that in your first experience, you are converting an already existing course rather than trying to invent a course and simultaneously create it for the web. We have already discussed moving to platform-based courses that keep your inbox free of 20,000 emails. Prior to teaching my first online courses, I was always a do-everything-myself type, but even I learned to delegate as much work as possible to secretarial, computer, technology, and decanal staff, anyone I could find who would take it. I learned to assume that technology, as great a boon as it is, will not work perfectly all the time and to stop apologizing to students as if it were my fault. Find out if there are funds, release time, equipment, tutors, markers, graders. Do not spend time learning full details of new technologies unless you are interested as most universities now have excellent staff in these

areas. York University has excellent computer staff and I have enjoyed and profited from working with them. I learned the true meaning of, "Don't give a trout; teach them to fish." Wherever possible, download responsibility for student success to your students. When they email to ask about something, encourage them to find the answer rather than just writing it out for them. The exception here is if you have a student who is clearly stressed out and your quick kind reply can make the difference in their staying in the course. Do not try to keep too close track of student assignments and enrolment. In my early online years, I followed my errant students about like a mother hen. I still tend to do it, but I try to watch my time commitment. Do not back down on rules you decided were important; every rule you allow a student to break is guaranteed to cost you time. When I first taught an online course with group work, I established the rule that after handing in the first assignment, people could leave a group but everyone kept the same first mark. Later, feeling sorry for people who had worked with difficult groups, I allowed students to rewrite the first part. Not only did I have extra papers to grade, but I lost the aspect of group work I had most wanted to impress upon them, the fact that group members are responsible for making a group successful. Do not spend a lot of time defending your policies. Internet students seem to feel freer to ask for justification of rules and procedures, perhaps because of the relative ease and seeming anonymity of email. I have created online Policy Pages with full explanations of just about everything I do in my courses. If a student writes asking why they have to do something, I just email back a short note giving them the link to the Policy Page. For those who truly want to know why, it is all there. For those who may just be blowing off steam, it is a lot easier response for me. Do not encourage private correspondence. If a student writes a question privately which should be open, e.g.: "What is going to be on next week's test?", answer it on the Discussion Group. Prepare "boiler-plate" responses that you can block and copy and send quickly to students who ask frequently-posed questions. For test results, post examples of full-credit answers using numbers to stand for different comments, and then post only the numbers for each student and a common list of what they stand for. Do not accept the computer-age equivalent of "my-dog-ate-it." Broken printers, the net being down, are problems a university student should be able to cope with, and every excuse you accept not only creates more work for you but is usually unfair to students who handed in their work on time. Do not try too hard to be helpful to those you may not be able to help. A small percentage of students can devour your time with endless problems they ought to be able to figure out on their own, leaving you with no time for the fun part of Internet teaching, which is interacting with students keen to learn. Remember also that few of us are trained psychologists and more serious problems are better referred to a Counselling Centre.

## **9. KEEPING THE COURSE FROM TAKING UP YOUR WHOLE LIFE**

This section follows immediately on the last one and deals more with general attitudes than specific techniques. What we have to remember as we spend extra hours on online courses is something that Professor Avi Cohen of York University pointed out at a recent conference on Internet Teaching: most of us who teach online do it because we love it. We love the advantages that the combination of machines and living organisms brings to the education of young (and not-so-young) minds, and we love what many of us have found, that in a time of slashed budgets

where on-campus class sizes have swelled to unspeakable numbers, impeding good class discussion, online students love to “talk” on the keyboard. I enjoy far greater discussion with my students in my online courses than I do in my overcrowded on-campus classes. You do, however, need to protect your time or you will find yourself, as I did in my first years of online teaching, with them 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. The problem is often one of expectations. If, early in the course in an effort to be helpful, you answer students’ emails immediately, Wednesday mornings and Sunday afternoons equally, then in week 8, when a student emails you at 3:00 p.m., but you are watching Roy Halladay pitch a winning game for the Toronto Blue Jays and you do not check your email until 7:00, you are likely to find an irate email asking, “Why haven’t you answered me?!” (true story). There are no easy answers to these problems. Some professors set specific online office hours. Others, like me, still answer 7 days a week from when I get up until I retire because I am on my email all the time and it is easier for me. And when it’s Sunday afternoon in baseball season, students just have to realize it may take longer for me to reply. I consider part of my unwritten curriculum for them is about balance in life and I remind them to take time off too.

## 10. REMEMBERING TO HAVE FUN

I always tell my students that education should be fun and the same goes for teaching. It has always been fun for me, and when I told Dean Bordessa, to whom I owed that favour, that I would teach the online course one time and if I did not like it I would not do it again, I meant it. I had tenure and seniority in my department. So when I state that I spend three times as much time on an online course as I do on an on-campus course (and this is typical) and that I have my choice of courses to teach and still choose to teach half my load online, you must believe me when I tell you that I have fun teaching online. The students, for the most part, are eager and interested and interesting. They talk a lot more in the Discussion Group than in on-campus courses. I thoroughly enjoy the creative tasks of putting together the web pages, finding graphics and tables and charts, and increasingly moving images and sounds, to accompany the written material. The fact that I am almost completely self-taught has meant that I can be helpful to my students, giving specific individually tailored answers to problems I have recently faced myself. It makes the students feel comfortable and I feel good having helped them. If most of what I enjoy about Internet teaching has to do with helping students, it is not selfless altruism. When my students are happy, my life is a lot easier, and in these days of such large classes, it feels good to hear from a student about how much help you were. It has replaced the personal touch that got lost in fourth-year-honours seminars of eighty students.

## CONCLUSION

Internet teaching, as it helps us help those learners who are being required to change their knowledge and skill bases so fast, carries with it the excitement of combining technology with people, machines with living organisms – the very definition of cybernetics as it focuses on communication and control, as we work to control the environment in which we work to better communicate with the students we are working to educate. It can be scary, but it is good to remember that the best cure for fear is preparation. We can handle most problems that new technology presents us by utilizing the same care and concern for our

students that we always have had, and ideally we can have fun doing it.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Berge, Zane L., “Concerns of Online Teachers in Higher Education”, 2005, p. 2.  
<http://www.csun.edu/cod/conf/2003/proceedings/259.htm>.
- [2] Spraakman, Gary, Associate Dean, Atkinson College, York University, Interview, March 2002.
- [3] Saindon, Jean, Professor, Atkinson College, York University, Interview, November 2001.
- [4] Berge, Zane L., “Example Case Studies in Post-Secondary, Online Teaching”. In Hart, G. and Mason, J., eds. **Proceedings of ‘The Virtual University? Symposium’**. Melbourne, Australia, November 21-22, 1996, pp. 99-105, p. 99.
- [5] Berge, Zane L., “Concerns of Online Teachers in Higher Education”, 2005, p. 2.  
<http://www.csun.edu/cod/conf/2003/proceedings/259.htm>.
- [6] Gilbert, P.K. and Dabbagh, N., “How to Structure Online Discussions for Meaningful Discourse”. **British Journal of Educational Technology**, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2005, pp. 5-18, p. 5.
- [7] Mason, R., “Moderating Educational Computer Conferencing.” **Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University**. DEOSNEWS Vol. 1, No. 19. The Distance Education Online Symposium, 2005, p. 3.
- [8] Muilenburg, L. and Berge, Zane L., “A Framework for Designing Questions for Online Learning”, 2005, p. 1.  
<http://www.ed.psu.edu/ACSDE/>.
- [9] Chickering, A. and Gamson, Z., “Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education”, 1987.  
<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidelines/principles.html>.
- [10] Owston, Ron, “Techniques for Effectively Structuring Online Discussion Groups: Lessons Learned From Experience!” Conference on Technology Enhanced Learning, York University, Toronto, May 2005.  
[http://www.yorku.ca/cst/ideas/resources/owston\\_discuss.html](http://www.yorku.ca/cst/ideas/resources/owston_discuss.html).
- [11] Zywno, G., Keynote speech at conference on technology enhanced learning, York University, Toronto, May 2005.