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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Interacting with Online Students: Nuts and Bolts

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Like so many aspects of the online course, we must pre-plan student interaction and incorporate it into the course at the design stage. I find it helpful to distinguish between organizational interaction (exchanges that help learners understand, and thrive in, the structures of the course) and social interaction (ways that the instructor mediates social presence to learners and helps them do the same with the instructor and with one another). Here, I focus on organizational interaction. In a later post, I will focus on mediating social presence online.

A running theme animating the following suggestions is "What do we owe our learners?" It's easy to get caught up in easy bashing on "entitled students," and it's true that learners are sometimes unskilled in knowing reasonable from unreasonable expectations in higher education (it's a weird environment!). But in our more measured moments, instructors acknowledge that we have obligations to our students, among which I include clarity of expectations and a willingness to admit the imperfections of our course designs.

Pre-Term Communication: Interacting with learners online begins when class registration opens, months before the term begins. Learners considering your online course have a right to know what they are getting into. A syllabus for the online class is a learner's first chance to discern whether the class is a good fit. Before registering, a learner should know:

- information about required synchronous sessions: Zoom, Skype, Google Hangouts, etc.
- the shape, or "flow," of a typical week or unit; for example, "Readings are due Mondays," "Discussion forum posts are due Tuesdays with replies to peers by Fridays," "Short

written assignments are due at the end of every three-week unit."

- the planned assignments and activities; these may be in brief "draft" form but must be reliable
- policies: participation policies, late work policies, disability/accommodation policies, academic integrity policies, instructor contact policies

Don't stop at the registration point: email registered learners a month before the first day of the term, directing them to the syllabus and reminding them of first-week activities and requirements. Do it again at the two-week mark, and once more the day before the term begins. *This* is the time for potential students to weed themselves out. If your online class is not the right fit for a learner, better for everyone if they realize it now, rather than in the third week of your class! Weed now, or pay later. Which brings us to . . .

Squeeze them out! This is a tough interaction, but necessary. If I am confident that all my registered learners have received the information they need about early-term expectations, then with a clear conscience I can employ a draconian first-week participation policy . . . and I do employ a draconian first-week participation policy. My reason for this is that (at least in my experience) there will be a few students who sort of drift in around the middle of the second week, or even later, now ready to start getting involved. Without exception (again in my experience), these learners will not prove to be a good fit in terms of meeting deadlines and accomplishing work according to instructions. By requiring learners to have participated in all activities during the first week (on penalty of an immediate withdrawal), these students are spared a likely failing grade, and these students will now NOT soak up a disproportionate block of the instructor's time and attention at the expense of other learners. Those who show up have a right to our time and attention, and students not yet prepared to succeed have a right to be dealt with honestly. Squeeze them out.

Mid-term evaluations: In this instance, I mean "learners evaluating you." (Hopefully, your learners have been receiving early and frequent feedback on their own work from the instructor.) By allowing learners to evaluate their learning experience mid-term, and by *responding promptly and honestly*, you communicate to learners that their experience matters. Even small "mid-course corrections" in response to learner evaluations can pay off large dividends in the form of student goodwill . . . right at the time in the calendar when learners and instructors alike are prone to grow frazzled and, shall we say, disenchanted with one another.

Of course, also designed into the course will be the modes and means of interactions: emails, video or audio lectures, remote office hours, possible synchronous sessions, social media, and so on. I will address these in a later post on mediating social presence in the online course.

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