

**Editor's Note:** Tools, timeframes, techniques, and time management for online classes differ from face-to-face classroom instruction. This article delves into literature and analyzes specific class records from Indiana University's Kelley School of Business to formulate six strategies to make online teaching more efficient and effective.

## Time Management Strategies for Online Teaching

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### Abstract

Instructors need to develop new time management skills when transitioning to online teaching. Based on the interviews of a dozen experienced online instructors from a successful online graduate program and analyses of their online courses, this article presents the differences of the time-related issues between face-to-face and online courses, followed by six strategies for time management in online courses.

**Keywords:** online teaching strategies, time management, web-based courses

### Introduction

The last five years have seen vast changes in the use of the Internet in higher education and a tremendous increase of faculty involvement in online teaching. Young (2002) points out that online teaching redefines faculty members' schedules. While many instructors consider flexibility a significant advantage of online teaching (Conrad, 2004; McKenzie, Mims, Bennett, & Waugh, 2000; Parker, 2003), others may find that their workload increases due to the heavy time investment in course planning and find themselves becoming "24 hour professors" in order to be responsive to student inquiries while teaching (Hislop & Atwood, 2000; McKenzie et al., 2000; Pachnowski & Jurczyk, 2003; Visser, 2000; Young, 2002).

While it is recognized that instructors need to develop new time management skills when transitioning to online teaching (Levitch & Milheim, 2003), there is little discussion in the literature regarding what strategies instructors can take to manage the time demands for teaching

online courses (Collis & Nijhuis, 2000). Collis and her colleague's article titled "The Instructor as Manager: Time and Task" published in *The Internet and Higher Education* five years ago is a rare piece on this topic. In that article, eight categories of instructional/management tasks are identified, and the percentage of instructor time spent on each category is suggested.

If online education is to continue to grow, faculty will have to develop effective time management strategies. This article aims to provide such strategies commonly used by some experienced online instructors today.

## **The Kelley Direct Online Program**

The time management strategies for online teaching discussed in this article are drawn from a study with a group of instructors teaching in the Kelley Direct (KD) Online Program (<http://kd.iu.edu/>) at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business. KD has offered online Master's degrees in business since 1999. Over the last few years, the KD program has experienced exponential growth with enrollment growing from 14 in the first year to over 1,000 in 2004.

The courses in KD are mainly Web-based and delivered through a commercial course management system called ANGEL (<http://www.angelllearning.com/>). Other course materials such as course packets and CD-ROMs are mailed to students at the beginning of the semester.

As part of the on-going program evaluation effort, KD faculty members were invited for interviews related to their online teaching experiences. This article is based on an analysis of the interviews with twelve faculty members, all of whom were tenured faculty and have taught online courses for several semesters in addition to many years of traditional face-to-face (FTF) classroom teaching by the time of the study. The course materials from the particular courses these faculty members taught, which were archived in the ANGEL space, were also analyzed.

## **Comparisons of FTF and Online Courses**

Because the online teaching format is still new, it is common that instructors have taught FTF classes before they start teaching online courses. FTF courses and online courses differ greatly in the processes of course planning and delivery. Many of these differences are time-related.

At the *course planning* stage, the instructor of a FTF course may choose

to only attend to the big picture of the course and develop details as the class goes on. The instructor of an online course, however, must familiarize herself with the course management system (CMS), and develop most, if not all, course materials beforehand because technology-related materials can be extremely time-consuming to produce.

In terms of *information presentation*, in a FTF course, it is verbal and sequential. Presentations have time restraints. Information is presented period by period. Students hear the same thing at the same time usually only once. In contrast, the information presented in an online course is often text-based and non-sequential. Fortunately, such information is stored online in the CMS and always available. Most course information is presented to the class from *Day-One* with instructions given as to what time to access particular modules or information. Students access information at a time convenient to them, which can be different from each other.

In terms of *class interaction*, the interactions in a FTF class are direct, synchronous, verbal, and typically one to many. Students can ask questions and receive answers instantly; instructors can evaluate or simply sense students' level of understanding instantly. The instructor controls the student turn-taking in discussions. In an online class, however, the instructor and students usually do not see each other. The interaction is many to many in both asynchronous and synchronous discussions, and thus, can be hard to follow. In asynchronous discussions, there is a delay in getting feedback from peers or the instructor. In synchronous discussions, often there is a typing delay when fingers do the talking. It can be cumbersome to impose structure to the turn-taking in online discussions. But as alluded to above, online discussions can be archived and accessed multiple times.

The *frequency of interaction* in these two kinds of classes also varies. In a FTF class, instructors and students usually interact only when class meets and during office hours. An online class instructor, on the other hand, is often available 24/7 throughout the course via web or email. Real-time interaction may also occur through instant messaging or chat rooms.

*When there are confusions or changes*, clarification and change announcements reach the whole class during class meetings at the same time in a FTF class. In an online class, however, there is usually a delay for the clarification or change announcements to reach all students because they do not always access the course website at the same time.

## **Time Management Strategies**

Because an online course is quite different from a FTF class in the aspects listed above, a new online instructor needs to learn some specific strategies in order to manage the class well. Below are six proven strategies for time management in teaching an online course.

### **1. Write concisely and clearly.**

Because writing is a major, and sometime the only, channel of communication in an online class, the importance of clear and concise writing of the course materials cannot be over-emphasized. If one student finds a sentence unclear, the instructor will need to spend valuable additional time responding to clarify. Five or ten minutes of additional time for polishing a message or task instructions before distributing or publishing may save hours in clarifying later.

Writing for digital media is different from writing for print media. As pointed out in a Web writing guidebook "Hot Text: Web Writing That Works" (Price & Price, 2002), the text on screen is usually harder to read than on paper because of lower resolution and because the text appears and disappears in a moment as there can only be one page on screen at a time. Below is some of the advice from this book that relates most directly to online course material planning and creation.

Shorten the text:

- Cut any paper-based text by 50%;
- Make each paragraph short;
- Move vital but tangential or supplemental material to the sidebar;
- However, beware of cutting so far that you make the text ambiguous.

Make text scannable:

- Create a meaningful title;
- Insert meaningful headlines and subheads;
- Highlight key works, phrases, and links;
- Turn any series into a bulleted or numbered list.

### **2. Organize information in an easy-to-follow order.**

In order to minimize student confusion and sense of being lost, course materials should be presented in the CMS in a way that all students can follow while generally meeting the instructor intent. As noted below, this

can be achieved in several ways:

**Chunk materials into weekly modules** and mark the start and end dates for each module. If the course materials mandate larger units, it is still important to mark the units with numbers and date them.

**Write a "Read Me First" document for each module.** In this document, the instructor should provide guidelines on how to use the other materials in the module. Often there are multiple folders or documents in each module. A document titled "Read Me First" is hard to miss and will significantly reduce confusion among online students and class guests.

**Label optional readings.** Instructors can overload students by providing too much information online. Making nonessential information optional can focus student attention on the more pertinent information and avoid overwhelming some students while giving other students opportunities to explore beyond course requirements.

### **3. Be explicit and emphatic about the time requirement in the syllabus.**

Instructors usually spell out their rules regarding assignment due dates and participation in their syllabi. In an online course, because the instructor cannot read the syllabus to the class, it is even more important to direct students' attention to course guidelines and policies.

Be extremely clear about the assignment due dates and times. Because students may be located in different time zones, the instructor must be clear about the time zone of each deadline. In addition, because distance students often have full-time jobs, it helps to set the deadline at midnight Sunday or Monday so students can have the weekend to work on their assignments. The following quote is a relevant example from a KD instructor in our study:

*Unless otherwise indicated, all deliverables are due by Sunday at midnight (your time zone). That is, homework in Week 2 is due on the Sunday that begins Week 3, and so on going forward.*

In the event of any necessary course scheduling change, be sure to make it as early as possible and allow students some flexibility in meeting the new requirement.

Be clear about the turnaround time for responding and stick to it. Researchers recognize that turn-around in distance education is important because when receiving feedback or guidance on assignments late, students may sometimes feel "a lack of support which could sap their confidence" (Rickwood & Goodwin, 2000, p. 52). Thus, one should establish students' expectations of instructor feedback patterns from the beginning. It is quite common that instructors promise to reply by the next day, as indicated in the following quote from a KD instructor:

*My goal is to respond to every e-mail within several hours, and always within 24 hours. However, there are times when I will be traveling, and may not be able to get back to you as soon as I would like.*

#### 4. Manage asynchronous discussions.

Asynchronous discussions, which can increase the interactivity of the online learning environment when well used, are highly popular in Web-based courses. However, the time distributions for live classroom discussions and asynchronous discussions are vastly different. Below are some tips related to how to effectively manage asynchronous discussions.

Instead of the sequential presentation of cases for discussion in the traditional classroom, an online instructor might present multiple discussion topics at the same time over a longer period of time. For instance, one KD instructor stated:

*A case discussion in real time takes about 75 minutes. A case discussion here (online) takes a week. Typically a case discussion has what we call 3 pastures. A pasture is where I introduce a question and we run with (it) and the students give me feedback and we have a discussion about it. So in a 75-minute session in live classroom time, a pasture is about 20 to 30 minutes, and in online (learning) a pasture is about 48 to 72 hours.*

Keeping each topic open for discussion for a week allows students to find a time during the week that is most convenient for them to participate.

Be explicit about the participation rules. Students need to know how often they are expected to participate in online discussions. It is also quite common that certain students are always the first ones to post their answers to the discussion questions, which can be unfair to the other students. In such a case, the instructor can assign a rotating list of students to spearhead a discussion. Post answers to frequently asked questions in a public area. When teaching online, the same question may come up repeatedly. Instructors may use the announcement area to post answers to individual student's questions so as to benefit the whole class while saving their own time.

Set a rule regarding your own participation. The instructor should make it clear to the class at the beginning of the discussion activity whether he or she will actively participate in discussion. If there will be instructor participation, then it should also be made clear to the students of what nature, how often, and at what time the instructor's participation can be expected. This way, the instructor can refrain from checking and posting too often, which can be a burden to both the instructor and the students.

#### 5. Take advantage of the technical tools available.

Often tools are available in the CMS to help instructors increase work efficiency. For example, the technology department of the Kelley Direct program has developed a group of tools, called an E-Learning Toolkit, in the CMS to meet different instructor needs.

The toolkit includes various **customized discussion forums**, such as Q&A

Forum, Round Robin Forum, and Court Forum, each of which provides a unique feature that a regular discussion forum does not offer. For example, in the Court Forum, each participant is assigned a certain role, for example, judge, plaintiff, or defendant, and posts his perspectives using that role. Such tools impose a certain structure to the discussion format, thus saving the instructor time and energy in specifying and reinforcing participation rules.

Another tool in the E-Learning Toolkit is the **Hand-in System**, which allows the batch processing function of a large number of files. When the class size is large (e.g., over 30 students), downloading and uploading student assignments can be tedious and time consuming. The system is designed to match up the original file and the graded file automatically for students to pick up. More detailed information about this toolkit can be found in "Kelley Direct (KD) E-learning Toolkit" (Shi, Magjuka, & Li, 2005) or <http://toolkit.kd.iu.edu>.

As many KD instructors have done, making your instructional needs known to your program head, peers, and technical support staff can often help to identify or develop new tools that can save time and increase work efficiency.

## 6. Utilize other resources.

Share course ideas and materials with departmental colleagues. Although it takes additional time and effort for instructors teaching online courses to meet physically, instructors may find that the time they spend sharing ideas in faculty brown bags is well-spent in the long run. In programs such as KD, where the faculty members are residential, such meetings can be extremely beneficial in helping faculty share strategies and create a sense of community.

Make use of the resources available on the Internet. Some monumental content sharing initiatives have been undertaken in North America to establish free online learning resources. MERLOT (<http://www.merlot.org>) and the CAREO project of Canada (<http://www.careo.org/>) are two good examples. By utilizing these resources, instructors can reduce the time needed for developing similar materials themselves.

## Conclusion

How to manage time in teaching online courses can be an enormous challenge for online instructors. In this article, we offer many strategies that have proven effective in the courses taught by a group of experienced online instructors at Indiana University. By utilizing these strategies, both instructors and students can enjoy the convenience of online teaching and learning without getting lost, feeling overwhelmed, or sacrificing the instructional quality and overall learning outcomes.

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