

Rules of T.H.U.M.B for Best Practices in Teaching Online

Introduction

As we are all adjusting to so many new tasks and ways of life within the past few months, we are yet faced with enumerable questions of what will our fall semester look like this year. Will you be completely online? Will it be a hybrid set up? Will it be a shortened semester? Any or all of the above may become our reality. I have been teaching online for the past five years and have developed some standard guidelines when designing and implementing my online courses. I call them my rules of T.H.U.M.B.

T – Technology

Do not go overboard – keep it simple. Often when converting a face to face course to an online class, you work diligently to add, add and then add some more. However, my tip is to use good quality cameras, high resolution sound and make sure your internet speed is up for streaming live during your synchronous meetings. No need for fancy backgrounds, animation in your PowerPoints, nor expensive equipment. I simply recommend an HDMI 1080p resolution, built in microphone, and a wide-angle lens with your webcam (typically a \$50 or less purchase). Next tip, check out the distance on the built-in microphone. A good range is 25'. Ask these questions about your purchase, does the webcam need a separate driver or will it automatically work with Windows, Mac OSX, Vista, etc.? Does it have noise cancelling technology? This will help you deliver a crisp and clear video for your courses. A great face to face class can be a great online class with the right technology to deliver your content.

H – Harmony

Harmonize your courses with consistency and organized materials. High impact practices in online learning discuss symmetry within the course layout as one of the most important practices you can do as an instructor in an online course. Be consistent is the key. Keep things neat, orderly, and do not use crazy fonts and colors. Your navigation panel should have content related items first (announcements, syllabus, content, quizzes, etc.) then software tools (tutorials, library tools, help desk information) last. My organizing your navigational panel you will streamline your courses.

U – Unite

The biggest question that surfaces around online learning is how to get your students engaged and involved with their fellow classmates. First, you must be intentional but not irrational in your assignments. To create a sense of community within your coursework, think about discussion boards, peer critiques, and videos. Mix it up. Have them do an introduction video, comment on three other classmates posts. Next assignment, place them in a small group (think, pair, and share) and have a break out (zoom) session when synchronously holding class. Call for discussions and have the students to comment on their takeaways from a few of their classmates' thoughts. Finding intentional ways for students to interact not only with you but their classmates will help them engage and create a sense of community in this online platform.

M – Methodology

Do not stick to one methodology, mix them up. Many methodologists discuss mixing up your lecture time to 15-minute segments to keep your students' attention. The same is true in online learning. If you do a recorded lecture or video, no more than 15 minutes. Try not to do crazy, cool virtual backgrounds that distract. Less is more. Have a Ted Talks video but again look at the length of time. Break the students into groups during a live session, you can create breakout rooms within Canvas, Blackboard, and other software programs. Then bring them back to discuss what they learned from each other. Have quizzes that are short 5-10 questions to recap the lesson. The key is not to do the same thing each time, vary your instruction in the online classroom the same way you do in your face to face class to engage your audience.

B – Be Available

If I had to pick one of these that is the most important, it would be this one. Your availability to answer in a timely matter is key to the success of your class, program, etc. You must create a communication policy within your syllabus and have that in your online class design. What you expect not only from the student in terms of email communication, timeliness, and ethical writing within discussions but also your communication to your students. They are not there in person to get the feedback or learn your idiosyncrasies. You must let them know when it is acceptable to email and how long to expect a reply. What is your policy on late work and asking for an extension? Lay it all out in the beginning and stick to it. They will have many questions and they have high expectations with immediate response time. If you have a 24-hour email return policy, then make sure you respond. If you typically respond within 48 hours, put that in your syllabus. It is imperative that you evaluate your response time and make it as realistic as possible. Often, we think our directions are clear, however they may not be clear to everyone. Be prepared to answer multiple questions on your expectations of an assignment. Rubrics that are built into the assessment piece are great but still may not address every question. Be prepared to help answer those questions.

Assessment

These are my best practices for designing and implementing an online course. If you are looking at the fall semester being uncertain, go ahead and start looking for a good webcam, creating some consistency in your design, finding ways to mix your teaching methods and uniting your students in discussions and videos. Last, critically evaluate your availability and then communicate that to your students. Best wishes as we all navigate these uncertain times in academia.

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