

from being unilaterally responsible for keeping the discussion going — an impossible challenge in the online environment.

40. Expect learners to be proactive.

Technology doesn't always work, and sometimes a learner might be having trouble without your realizing it. At times like these, learners need to be proactive and inform you.

Learners must also ask questions immediately if they don't understand what to do with the technology or in a course assignment.

41. Expect learners to observe the process.

Learning happens on many levels in online classrooms. In an interactive course, learners should avoid focusing solely on the assignments and the products of the course; they should also observe the process of the online discussions. Keeping abreast of the continuous flow of online discussions helps the participants stay connected with the course and each other.

42. Establish a contingency plan.

Whenever you're working with technology, you can never guarantee that it will do what you want it to do. So when you're constructing your course, be sure to develop a contingency plan and share it with the learners before the course begins.

Most organizations have a help line that offers learners technical support over the phone. Include this number in your course syllabus. Also, pair your learners into groups of "technology buddies" that include one learner who has more experience with computers and another learner who may need more help.

Have an alternative way for your learners to reach you (such as a different e-mail address, phone number, or fax number) in case of emergency. And, as the teacher, test the technology often, back up your files, and make friends with the technical support personnel within your organization.

Chapter 2

MYTHS AND CONSTRAINTS OF ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Online teaching and learning is a growing field with many misconceptions. In this chapter, we critique the most common myths and discuss some of the current constraints for learning in the online environment.

We recognize that this is just a sampling of the myths of and constraints for teaching online, and that commonly recognized myths and constraints also change over time. Still, we've attempted to offer myths and constraints that are current, and that will likely have substantial staying power.

MYTHS OF ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

43. Myth: Learners are unable to adapt to the online environment.

As the research on learning styles shows (Gardner 1993; Kolb 1977 and 1984; Sanchez and Gunawardena 1998), people learn in multiple ways and through multiple senses. Although the preference for one learning style may be stronger, most people can learn in a variety of ways.

In the online environment, learners acquire much of the course content through reading and writing. But you could encourage some of the learners to read discussion comments aloud to have some audio stimulation. Or, you could add to the course links or references to audio or video files so that the learners would have the opportunity to stimulate multiple senses.

44. Myth: The instructor has to know how to do everything.

Teaching in an online environment should be a team effort. You should be able to call upon technology specialists, instructional designers, and many others to help you develop and implement your course. Often, because there is a team of people working together, you'll be compelled to reflect upon your own assumptions and preferences — thus, the course improves.

45. Myth: Time requirements for teachers are lower in an online environment.

Often, online teaching is viewed as a quick way to get content to learners. Many teachers see it, at first, as a potential time saver. Unfortunately, though, this is not the case. As we mentioned earlier in this book, online, interactive courses are open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The tasks of establishing a course framework and rethinking your curriculum to adapt it to the online environment (with or without a design team) are time consuming and challenging.

46. Myth: Online classrooms aren't conducive to group interaction and activities.

The opportunity for group interaction in the online learning setting depends upon the software you're using and the educational model you've selected. In the model we're discussing here, group interaction is central to the learning that takes place. Conferencing software offers many opportunities for interaction in multiple group settings that you determine and negotiate with your learners.

These organized spaces can include settings for small-group work; reflections on process; socialization and informal, "outside of class" interactions; and a "help desk" for technical challenges.

47. Myth: Online classrooms aren't as social as face-to-face classrooms.

Parker Palmer (1998) reminds us that classrooms are simply spaces that have been organized especially to promote learning among a community of people whose learning goals are similar. The degree and nature of interaction among participants in face-to-face classrooms vary greatly, and the same is true in online classrooms. Online courses can be very lonely, or they can be very social and interactive in nature.

You, as the instructor, are responsible for creating the types of spaces learners want and need, and for sensing your learners' expectations. You must also gauge how important social interaction is to the participants. You can use a variety of techniques, described in this book, to facilitate greater interaction and community among your learners.

One interesting phenomenon that you should keep in mind: Many online learners say they end up knowing their online co-learners more deeply than they would in a class where they would all be physically present with each other.

48. Myth: The number of learners in online classrooms can be unlimited.

Many people believe that one of the benefits of online education is that a single instructor can work with many more learners than he or she might in a face-to-face classroom without affecting the quality of the learning experience, diminishing the content to be learned, or affecting the degree of learner satisfaction. However, socially constructed online learning demands a lot of time (online) from you, even when you organize it effectively to take full advantage of learners' involvement in their own education.

Unless you're contemplating what might be known as simply a "content dump" of materials onto the web (which is not what this book is about), you'll need to carefully develop a plan for providing interaction among you and your learners. Demand for

interaction defines the size of face-to-face classrooms and the nature of the interactions within those classrooms; the demand for interaction has a similar effect upon online classrooms.

49. Myth: Technology will always work.

Of course, technology (including software) doesn't always work. And technology that doesn't work — or that is so complex that it limits you and your learners as you attempt to achieve the learning goals for the class — can be a powerful demotivator for learning.

Yet even when technology works well and effectively, the time, resources, planning, and organizational skill required to achieve this feat go largely unrecognized. Many instructors view their role as being unrelated to the operation and support of technology, but they're on the "front lines" when problems arise. That's why you must keep in mind several related ideas and suggestions:

- Plan your use of technology carefully.
- Understand the technology as fully as possible.
- Provide 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week learner assistance whenever possible.
- Give learners detailed instructions on what they should do when the technology doesn't work.
- Develop a backup emergency plan when all else fails, as sometimes will occur.

50. Myth: The course will market itself; post it on the web and they will come.

The web is a big place, and it is growing astronomically each month. As a result, many schools, colleges, universities, and corporations are now developing online courses.

Unless your course has a predefined audience that is delineated and organized well in advance, marketing your course online can be a significant challenge for both you and your organization. So find out when you'll know who's going to be enrolled in your class. Get names and contact information as soon as you can. Will the learners have had experience with the technology and the software you're using? Can you contact the learners well before the beginning of the class? If so, you can inform them early on about

specific course elements, including preferred or required technology and software, readings, proxies, and other matters for which preparation on the learner's part will maximize opportunities for developing an effective online learning environment.

51. Myth: Learners will always understand your intended expectations for them from your clearly written syllabus.

In an online course, the class syllabus appears in a text-based format, and discussion about its content is difficult. Thus, learners don't always immediately understand the details of class materials. In addition, learners may accidentally overlook materials because those materials are located online.

So be sure to provide on the syllabus a detailed explanation of your intended expectations of learners. Organize the syllabus in a friendly and conversational way so that your learners will move through the course requirements efficiently. Use the syllabus as a working document to check each learner's progress and his or her understanding of your expectations.

CONSTRAINTS FOR INTERACTIVE ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Not everyone is comfortable with learning online. Here are some additional potential constraints that apply to an online course situation more so than they would to a face-to-face classroom setting.

52. Constraint: Fear of technology.

Some people embrace new technologies eagerly, while others are afraid of change and the pressures technology has on their understanding of the world. Although technology is all around us, some people are afraid to use it. Especially for many adults, computers are new and foreign. Thus, they add to the level of anxiety that might interfere with a particular learner's overall education and satisfaction.

Most of the people in this "category" won't consider taking a course online and will struggle greatly if they're required to enroll.

Yet, in many cases, these are the people who wind up learning the most in and from the course.

53. Constraint: Different levels of technology skills.

Learners enter the online classroom with widely differing levels of expertise in technology. This is almost inevitable in a class of any size, and it can present you with both challenges and opportunities.

The challenges may include adapting the pace of the course to allow time for those learners who need to upgrade their skills. The opportunities may include the possibility of teaming technically proficient learners with those who are less proficient so that they can be “technology buddies.”

54. Constraint: Literacy levels.

Since most of the interaction in an online course is written, a learner may be at a disadvantage if he or she has a low literacy level. Some online courses are directed at improving literacy skills, but most courses require participants to express themselves and understand others through the written word.

55. Constraint: Ability to type and use the keyboard.

Again, since most interaction in an online course is typed, learners should be able to type at a reasonable level. This is not as important if the course is offered asynchronously; however, if the course meets synchronously, the ability to type (or not type) well can determine who says the most. (Note: With the advent of speech recognition software, this is becoming less of a problem. But it is still something you should carefully consider.)

56. Constraint: Access to a computer and an Internet connection.

In a completely online environment, the computer acts as the mediator for all interactions. However, the computers and the soft-

ware being used are only tools that enable learning and interaction among you and your learners.

Remember that each learner must have access to working tools (a computer, software, and an Internet connection) in order to participate fully. Research shows a “digital divide” and a dramatic disparity of access among urban, suburban, and rural populations, and among socio-economic groups and racial and ethnic communities (National Telecommunications and Information Administration 1998).

57. Constraint: The comfort of physical work space.

The physical environment where each of your learners works can determine the quality of the online teaching and learning experience. So encourage students to have comfortable chairs that support their weight, because they’ll often be required to sit for long periods of time as they correspond with their fellow learners and complete projects.

Be sure, too, that learners get clear, non-flickering computer screens (to prevent eye irritation or headaches).

Finally, encourage learners to work in rooms that are conducive to learning and that don’t have too many distractions.

The advice above goes for you too! If you’re uncomfortable in your work space, your ability to teach will be impaired.

58. Constraint: Having a disability.

Consider in advance how you’ll address issues of access to your classroom environment and the materials you use. Many physical disabilities, such as those involving sight, hearing, and movement, can be effectively addressed in online environments through the application of specialized technologies developed for those specific purposes.

Beyond planning for learners with special needs, you should also create a process for identifying the resources you can employ in specific instances. You might initiate a discussion of this topic with the appropriate individual in your organization — for example, your program administrator, your technology support person, or the lead instructional designer of your development team. Many

excellent resources are available online; we offer you a few of them in Appendix B of this book.

59. Constraint: Not being able to correspond in the language of the course.

It's critical to be able to communicate in the language of the course being offered in order to benefit from the interaction. With the worldwide nature of the Internet, more and more learners are crossing virtual borders and enrolling for courses. Thus, assessing your prospective learners' language proficiencies is another good reason to communicate with your learners before your course begins.

60. Constraint: Reaching across multiple time zones.

Because online education permits asynchronous learning, it can be particularly effective in connecting learners across multiple time zones. At the same time, your efforts to build into your course real-time, synchronous interactions, or to incorporate systematic, team-based activities, may be hampered by the different work, leisure, and sleep schedules of learners spread across many time zones. So be sure to keep this factor in mind as you develop and implement your online course.

Chapter 3

ORGANIZING THE ONLINE COURSE

Once you've decided to offer your course online, there are many details you must address. This chapter provides tips on how to structure the class format, content, syllabus, timeline, use of technology, and evaluation.

61. Identify the course design.

For a typical course, you usually develop the instructional design beforehand by determining specific content, readings, and resources. In an online course, the element of technology also enters the mix. This section discusses the issues you need to think about when you're organizing your course design.

62. Consider course goals and objectives.

In developing a course, you begin by identifying goals and objectives that you wish to achieve with your learners. These can be specific goals of measurable achievement, or they can be more fluid, abstract goals of widening learners' perspectives or helping them see some aspect of life in a new way.

To develop an online course (or any other course), you need to clarify these goals and objectives and write them so that you can clearly communicate them to learners and others working on the course.