

Professors Share Best Practices for the Online Classroom

Kimberly Eddleston (Northeastern University)

KEYWORDS: Teaching Methods, crisis management.

With so many professors being required to move their courses online, we'd like to ease the burden of our fellow scholars by offering advice. In this first article, we provide general tips for effective online teaching. Over the next weeks, we will share additional tips and materials that will improve your online courses. Some of these tips and materials are from veteran online instructors, while other tips are from those who just recently moved their courses online due to the coronavirus.

Regardless of whether you teach entrepreneurship, family business or a different topic, or if you have experience teaching online or not, I am sure you will find some useful advice! We can do this! And along the way, we will likely pick up a few tricks and skills that we can continue to use once life returns to "normal."

We all wish you good health!

Image by SCY from Pixabay

Set yourself up for success with the right environment

"Set up an adequate working environment. The room should, if possible, be intended for work only as it would not be prolific to teach, for instance, from your bed or sofa. You need an environment which favors productive work behavior and is free of distractions like family members or TV. I use my home office which is well equipped."

-- *Alfredo De Massis, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy*

"Worried about students seeing your home office? Programs like Zoom allow you to set a "virtual background" so that you do not have to worry about your your home's posters or general interior."

-- *Nadine Kammerlander, WHU Otto Beisheim School of Business*

"Take time to familiarize with your online "tool" and explore different ways to interact with your students. Ask your students for help and suggestions; they may surprise you with great ideas! For example, I realized that the possibility for students to simply write in a chat during a lecture helps me to ensure broader participation. Also, I found out that students can interact among themselves during the class, putting a "like" or replying on each other's comments and questions, which works really great as a form of peer-to-peer learning and exchange, and makes the virtual space feel alive."

-- *Josip Kotlar, Polytechnic University of Milan*

Communication is key

"Online designers recommend establishing "instructor presence" in the virtual course with frequent and structured reminders of upcoming deadlines in the weekly units. Each course has an instructor and designer introductory video to orient the online students."

-- *Sherri Noxel, Enterprising Generations (formerly of Oregon State University)*

"Try to over-communicate with your students. I do this by sending out a weekly announcement email indicating what they need to be doing that week, such as assignment deadlines and chapters to read. These announcements help the students understand my expectations for them and reduces their complaints about not knowing what is happening in the class."

-- *Clay Dibrell, University of Mississippi*

"Carefully plan your lectures and communicate regularly and frequently with the students. It is important that the course materials (in my case, Powerpoint presentations, family business cases and reading lists by topic) are outlined in detail and shared before the lecture starts. Moreover, it is important to establish a regular communication channel with the students. For instance,



I send an email to the students before each lecture reminding them about the lecture, the topic, the instructions to do the assignments, potential changes or updates in the schedule, etc.”

-- *Alfredo De Massis, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy*

Live or recorded classes?

“It’s always a trade-off decision between “synchronous meetings” (advantage: more direct interaction, feels more like a classical lecture) and “recorded meetings” (advantage: even international students based in other parts in the world can listen to your lecture whenever it suits them. Also helps students with various duties such as childcare). So please consider your audience when choosing one of the two.”

-- *Nadine Kammerlander, WHU Otto Beisheim School of Business*

“It’s really hard to work through a synchronous class when internet is an issue for some of our students. Instead of a live Zoom session, I have students post to an assignment (they can complete on their phones) about something new they learned from the material and something that wasn’t quite clear. It’s a brief check in that doesn’t require us all to get online at the same time, but still allows me to create a quick YouTube video to answer common questions.”

-- *Whitney Peake, Western Kentucky University*

“Regarding the lecture mode, our advice is to not insist in having LIVE teaching; it is important to organize the teaching activity so to allow lectures to be recorded remotely and put online later. Additional lectures or other ad hoc tools can be used to collect students' reaction.”

-- *Tommaso Minola and Lucio Cassia, University of Bergamo*

“Make learning non-synchronous to the greatest extent possible. This will make it easier on your students to complete the assignments from their multiple courses.”

-- *Isabel Botero, University of Louisville*

Support students as they transition online

“I have created a brief, “how are you quiz,” worth 10 points, just to make sure all my students check in. The questions are: (1) how are you in general? (2) how are you doing in this course?, and (3) are there any barriers to you in working online? You would be amazed at what I’m learning about my students, obstacles they face, etc. It also helps me to be sensitive to their needs and struggles in this strange time.”

-- *Whitney Peake, Western Kentucky University*

“For me the biggest thing with what’s happening right now has been to stay in communication with students through online announcements. To let them know that there is actually somebody there on the other end. To show students that I understand their anxiety in moving the class online I have sent them the following message: “I know this is very difficult for all of us so let’s remain flexible and stay focused to do the best we can given the situation!”

-- *Ted Clark, Northeastern University*

“Make sure that your students know the best tools and times to contact you (in my case, I use Skype and Teams as preferred contact channels, and I ask students to make an appointment). Not having a professor physically in front of them can make some students nervous, so it is important that they perceive there is someone ready to address their concerns. This is why I do my best to answer questions in a timely manner and make efforts to provide abundant instruction and feedback.”

-- *Alfredo De Massis, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy*

Technical Tips

“Consider asking students to join five minutes prior to the course so you make adjustments in order to make sure everybody is connected and not experiencing issues. Also, if you want to show video clips or other interactive material, you might want to upload them beforehand on the educational platform or on a google drive or provide the weblink to the students so you avoid encountering display issues during the course. You should also check technically that your computer, the headset and other features work well while turning off your notifications and making sure the other members of your family are aware of your work and will not disturb the course flow.”

-- *Rania Labaki, EDHEC Family Business Center*

“If you do not have the possibility of creating good quality videos and audio – do not do them. It is better to find other resources that already exist and are well edited. Students are used to high quality video and good sound. Thus, not being able to offer this will work counter to your goal – i.e., for them to pay attention.”

-- *Isabel Botero, University of Louisville*

“Zoom has a good recording function and allows you to separate the class into different discussion rooms and teams.”

-- *Massimo Bau, Jönköping University*

“For recorded lectures: It seems that videos less than 7-9 minutes work best.”

-- *Nadine Kammerlander, WHU Otto Beisheim School of Business*

“Think short pieces. Remember that many of us will not pay attention for long times. Thus, divide your lectures into short intervals. This will make it easier for you and your student.”

-- *Isabel Botero, University of Louisville*

“Make the best use of technology to create groups or pairs to discuss a case or to reflect on a question. Some educational platforms such as “Collaborate” (via Blackboard) allow group work distribution online. If you do not have access to them, you might want to create several Whatsapp groups so that students can tap into you during their group work, should they have questions. This makes them feel assured that they are listened to while waiting for their turn. Another way to do it is to ask them to work on a case before the online course then present their analysis by sharing their screens to the whole group of students and having students comment in the chat room and ask questions.”

-- *Rania Labaki, EDHEC Family Business Center*