



From *Jump-Start Your Online Classroom:
Mastering Five Challenges in Five Days*
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The following is an excerpt from the unedited manuscript.

Chapter One

The Online Environment

“To teach online, I must make the commitment to build a learning environment in which learners and I feel safe to explore ideas, to comment frequently on those ideas, to be present in the space, and to contribute to the ongoing discourse. . . . Teaching an online course requires adequate preparations, clarity, and concern for your learners. It can be rewarding when done with caution.”—Tim, graduate teaching assistant

“As a classroom teacher, one of my biggest struggles has always been taking a step back and letting students work things out. I’m definitely an extrovert who likes to help, and that can sometimes be counterintuitive. When I teach online, I need to remember this and avoid being too heavily involved in discussions, viewing myself as a moderator, facilitator, and clarifier rather than a lecturer.”—Sarah, new online instructor

Five Aspects of Online Learning Environments

Your process of becoming an online instructor involves how five aspects that comprise an online learning environment affect your teaching: social practices, tools, participants, learning community, and outcomes. Each of those elements will influence your practices as an online instructor. After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Explain social practices that help create an environment for learning.
2. Describe tools used to create private and public learning spaces.
3. Name ways to help learners feel connected to you and one another.
4. Identify ways to foster co-ownership of the teaching and learning process.
5. Describe the role of authentic assessments in measuring outcomes.

Interactive, Collaborative Framework

The challenges you will face as a new online instructor mirror the characteristics of the environment in which teaching and learning will take place. The use of electronic tools and the availability of information can foster a learning environment that is highly interactive, collaborative, and constructivist. We envision online learning environments as having the following elements: social practices, tools, participants, learning in community, and outcomes.

Figure 1 illustrates that components of the framework that reflect your immediate online teaching challenges (Stein & Wanstreet, 2011).

Figure 1.1: Elements of the Online Environment



Social Practices

Social practices regulate actions and interactions within the online learning space. Instructors need to understand how learners interact with their digital devices and one another. Faculty and instructional support staff help learners manage text-based and voice-based interactions to promote critical thought and deep learning. This involves skill in coaching discussion groups, providing feedback on the quality of online discussion, and offering guidance on expressing oneself online through text and paralinguage.

As faculty change their mindset from being the primary source of information to guiding students in critically selecting content, what faculty say will become less important than what they do to help generate critical thought. Learners can receive guidance instantly from international scholars, join teams of inquirers from around the world, and work on their academic journey anywhere. Learners are able to knit together formal and informal learning resources to

complete an inquiry. How learners form their study teams and what the team learned about the inquiry can become more important than any single individual with whom learners study.

Tools

Instruction is shaped by the interaction of tools, learners, and the instructor. Tools include any device that mediates or shapes the instructional interaction, such as synchronous and asynchronous technology, books, online resources, group size, online learning theories, and self-concepts. Tools constantly change, and in the process they change how we teach and learn. For example, new Internet technologies, social networking sites, wikis, and virtual environments extend learning environments beyond our time and space boundaries.

Participants

Participants in our online classrooms include faculty, learners, subject matter experts, and instructional support staff, each have roles in the learning process. In the online classroom, instructors focus on the learning process rather than on imparting their content knowledge. Learners build knowledge by bringing global content sources available anywhere on the Internet into the class to challenge instructors and one another. Experts and other in instructional support can provide immediate assistance and resources to aid learning. Instructors help learners manage this complex, media-rich environment by orchestrating multiple views and helping learners to make new meanings.

Box 1.1: Insights from a New Online Instructor

“The truth is when you work with other people, work will rarely be divided fairly. We will have some members who do not contribute, some who take control over the whole project, and those who do their fair share. These are the traits of different people. I have been in many groups where I have felt like one other member and I did all of the work. I have also been in groups where I tried to contribute but another members really did not allow it. There will be a learning experience one way or another. I feel the trick is for the instructor to

Learning Community

Ideally, learning takes place in academic communities that recognize that learners are co-producers of knowledge. These communities are based on the idea that social groupings can facilitate individual and collective learning. Learning in community means acquiring new basic skills, including the ability to work in groups with persons of various backgrounds; to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing; to combine independent and interdependent work to produce a meaningful outcome; and to use social networking and collaborative software. Learning in community means being engaged in the task of knowledge building rather than being engaged in knowledge acquisition and retention. Even in courses that emphasize individual knowledge acquisition, the instructor, at a minimum, becomes part of the student's learning community.

Outcome

Outcome is the target of the learning activity. Outcome refers to the problem space at which activity is directed. An example might be the problem of changing a traditional course into a

Web-based course. The problem is shaped or transformed into outcomes with the help of mediating instruments, tools, and signs. Yesterday, courses were focused on content dissemination and acquisition decontextualized from the daily lives of the learners. Today, courses are sets of knowledge demonstrations. Instruction helps students connect their experience of learning to real-world applications. Faculty and learners alike assess and monitor the validity of content from multiple channels to achieve learning outcomes. In an online course, for example, the course Web site with its discussion boards, chat rooms, e-mail, and other tools of technology are used by the instructor and by learners to produce course outcomes, such as research, presentations, projects, or papers.

The interaction among tools, participants, social practices, community, and the outcome create an environment for a meaningful online educational experience.

Relating Online Elements to the Five Challenges

The five elements of the online environment provide a framework for addressing the five challenges that new online instructors face.

1. Making the transition to online teaching is a challenge based in social practices. Social practices include establishing your presence through email, discussion posts, and feedback. Communication processes are more sensitive online and can be easily misunderstood, which makes it imperative for you to model appropriate practice. Preparing a course calendar that lists the due dates for assignments is another practice that aids your learners in adjusting to an online environment. Your words and actions, including the times of day that you are online each week, help you establish your online persona and create an environment for learning.

2. The challenge of building online spaces for learning may be viewed through the tools available to you. Weekly spaces for direction, content, and the context for learning are fairly standard tools, as are community spaces on discussion boards for questions for the instructor and break rooms for nonacademic talk. Spaces may also include private areas for learners to record their emerging ideas and shared spaces for learners to negotiate meaning.
3. Preparing learners for online learning may be viewed through the perspective of the participants, who will need to feel connected to you and one another. Give your learners an opportunity to learn about you and each other. Preparing learners includes providing them with the syllabus, policies, procedures, expectations, and an opportunity to pose questions and concerns as well as providing them with opportunities to explore the course site before the start of the class.
4. Learning in community provides a framework for the challenge of managing and facilitating the online classroom. Community provides a powerful context for learning where the members interact with one another in a meaningful way and accept co-ownership of the teaching and learning process. This includes, for example, moving discussion to higher levels by clarifying, expanding upon, explaining, critiquing content, and respectfully pushing others to see the assumptions behind their statements.
5. The assessment challenge is rooted in the learning outcome. Authentic assessments based on a combination of academic content and real-world problems reflect the course or unit outcome. Meaningful, timely feedback that addresses the strengths as well as areas of improvement promotes the outcome.

<H2>Challenges and Completion Plan

A number of reflection activities throughout this book are designed to help you meet the initial challenges you will face as a new online instructor. The following plan will help you manage your progress in designing a schedule to accomplish each challenge. Indicate when you intend to complete each challenge. Mark the date completed as a record of your accomplishments.

Table 1.1 Challenges and Completion Plan

Element of the Online Environment/Challenge	Activity	Suggested Due Date	Your Intended Completion Date
Social Practices/Making the Transition to Online Teaching			
	Complete Chapters 2, 3, and 4 reflection activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete the Beginning Online Instructor Questionnaire in Appendix A. • Complete the Attitude Toward Online Teaching Questionnaire in Appendix B. • Develop Communication and Time Management plans for working on your course with 	Day 1 11:59 p.m.	

resources in Appendices C, D, and E.
Tools/Building Online Spaces for Learning
<p>Complete Chapter 5 reflection activity: Day 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore technology tools (some are listed in Appendix F) and assess the extent to which they promote learning in your course. 11:59 p.m.
Participants/Preparing Students for Online Learning
<p>Complete Chapter 6 reflection activities: Day 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft a course welcome letter and expectations message (samples are in Appendix G). 11:59 p.m. Read and reflect on How to Develop a Scavenger Hunt in Appendix H.
Learning Community/Managing and Facilitating the Online Classroom
<p>Complete Chapter 7 reflection activity: Day 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Read and reflect on Appendix I: The Case of the Disgruntled Student. 11:59 p.m.
Outcome/Assessing Learner Outcomes
Complete Chapter 8 reflection activities: Day 5

- Retake the Beginning Online Instructor Questionnaire in Appendix A.
- Retake the Attitude Toward Online Teaching Questionnaire in Appendix B.
- Read and reflect on Appendix J: The Case of the Considerate Clergy.
- Reflect on technology tools and the type of assessments that can help build confidence.

Box 1.2: Points to Remember

- Social practices help you establish your online persona and create an environment for learning.
- Use tools to build private areas for learners to record their emerging ideas and shared spaces for learners to negotiate meaning.
- Give your learners opportunities to feel connected to you and one another.
- Learning communities provide a powerful context for learning where the members interact with one another in a meaningful way and accept co-ownership of the teaching and learning process.
- Measure outcomes through authentic assessments and timely, meaningful feedback.

For Reflection

1. Examine Table 1.1 Challenges and Completion Plan.
2. Adopt or adapt the completion plan to your schedule.

Reference

Stein, D. S., & Wanstreet, C. E. (2011). Teaching in the future: A blueprint for faculty development. In S. D'Agustino (Ed.), *Adaptation, resistance and access to instructional technologies: Assessing future trends in education* (pp. 445-459). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.