First Person
What can you do to ensure that students are actually learning something online?

IF YOU’VE NEVER TAUGHT a course online, chances are you’ve never considered how you might adjust your tests and assignments to suit the electronic medium. At most, you’ve probably shuddered at the thought of having to devise what you assume would be a dumbed-down, self-grading, multiple-choice, Web-based quiz. If that weren’t bad enough, you probably also imagined the students being fed the answers by a friend, the two of them side by side at the computer. It all seemed so degrading, so futile.

Cheer up: In my years of online teaching, I’ve never given a quiz or a test online, much less a multiple-choice one. That’s mainly because the temptation to cheat on tests is overwhelming online, even with short-answer or essay questions, which, when administered online, are essentially open-book tests (unless they can be proctored, which is usually impractical). Actually, I’ve never given a multiple-choice test in a traditional classroom, either: I think they are a lazy, one-size-fits-all substitute for actually assessing what students have learned. But I digress.

Online teaching at the undergraduate and graduate level poses specific challenges for both instructors and students. In a column last month (The Chronicle, February 26), I sought to combat some of the myths about distance education. As I mentioned in that essay, in addition to my day job as an academic librarian at Yale University, I have been teaching online courses for several library schools since 2002, and have also taught some online courses on writing or research skills for undergraduates.

Here, I would like to offer specific suggestions for how to design effective assignments in the online realm. (I won’t offer tips on tests. I grade students on the basis of course assignments, including major papers, and on their contributions to asynchronous threaded discussions.)

Your main goal should be to enable students to learn independently. If students feel they have enough direction to be successful on their own, they will eagerly absorb and master the course material. You also want them to learn independently because, even if you were available to them 24/7, many of your students would never contact you for any reason.

No matter how much encouragement you offer, some students will take the perceived anonymity of distance education as an opportunity to hide from you and even from their classmates. I always clearly state in my syllabus that I will grant extensions if requested in advance of a due date, yet many students choose instead to forfeit points and turn in assignments late, so averse are they to direct contact with an instructor.

In fact, I suspect some students take courses online instead of face to face precisely so that they can remain below the radar. If you try to offset that tendency by, say, forcing students to work in groups, the class will hate you for it because, just like in face-to-face courses, the more conscientious students will wind up doing everyone’s work so that their own grades don’t suffer.

So your top priority in designing effective online assignments should be to make sure the work can be completed by each student on his or her own. Students should not be left to wonder whether they are proceeding correctly at any
point along their path to completion of the work. That means that your instructions on how to do the assignments have to be as explicit as they are flawless.

For example, if you ask students to "briefly identify" a list of important people, places, and technical terms for a particular assignment, everyone will immediately wonder "how briefly?" Yet few students will ask for clarification, and most will instead seek to be as long-winded as possible, hoping that their largess will translate into more points. Your phrasing, with its breezy imprecision, will have had exactly the opposite effect you intended. Instead, be specific about what you want: "three to five sentences devoted to each question" or, at the vaguest, "no more than one substantial paragraph."

If you want students to find information from a source other than your lectures and assigned readings, you need to tell them so and direct them where to look. For example, if you want students to obtain an informed, authoritative source for a ready reference question, say so upfront. Similarly, if you object to them using certain sources, you need to say that, too. If you don't consider Wikipedia a reliable source for college-level work, state that outright and, by way of explanation, direct them to a good Wikipedia-use policy, like the one crafted by Alan Liu, a professor of English at the University of California at Santa Barbara, which is available online. In a face-to-face course, you can give such directives in passing. Online, there is no "in passing."

The same holds true when you ask students to include a bibliography using a consistently applied style. If you expect accuracy, lead by example. Don't just tell them, "Cite your sources according to The Chicago Manual of Style" and assume your students will be able to do that successfully (or will even bother to try) with no further guidance. Show them properly formatted citations for books and articles that you think they are likely to use—especially for electronic sources, which are the trickiest to cite. Take nothing for granted and leave nothing to chance.

Along with your detailed instructions, it's also helpful to post models of selected assignments so students can see what you consider to be good work. I know that seems like spoon-feeding and, believe me, I would never consider doing that in a face-to-face graduate course. But somehow it hits the right note online because it cuts down on the confusion for students. Good students worry about absolutely everything, beginning with matters as small as whether they need a cover sheet and an abstract prefacing their work. If your posted model lacks those features, that's important information for some students and will save them anxiety and wasted effort.

Model assignments are simply another way of ensuring that students can help themselves if they are uncomfortable asking questions. Model assignments are analogous to the instruction manual that came with your iPhone: Many people will never take that manual out of the box, so confident are they of their ability to figure things out on their own. Others will consult it only for help with one or two specific features, and still others will want to read it cover to cover. All of that said, you don't want to stifle students' creativity and freedom to be self-directed. So mixed in with your directives should be some components of assignments that allow students to set their own agendas—within limits, again, to avoid confusion. One assignment that works especially well for many graduate-level library-school courses I've taught is an article review. I ask students to locate a scholarly article published within the last three years (or one less recent, if currency is not crucial to the subject of the course) in a peer-reviewed journal on library and information science or book history, and then present a two-paragraph assessment comprising a précis and critical evaluation. That assignment yields many benefits. First, it requires students to search indexing and abstracting databases effectively to find an article that meets the specified criteria (e.g., it must be at least 10 pages long, show evidence of research, and relate to some aspect of book history before 1700).

It also trains them to understand what a scholarly article is; to tell the difference between scholarly and nonscholarly writing; to distill someone else's lengthy argument into a concise few sentences of the student's crafting; to think critically about what they have read by assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a professional's research; and, thus, to become participants in the conversations that preoccupy members of the profession for which they are training. Most important, it empowers them to choose what they want to read and write about while still providing enough guidance to ensure that they do not choose poorly.
Thinking carefully about how to make sure that students are actually learning something online is an important question. And your answer can mean the difference between a challenging course and one that feels like a perfunctory exercise.

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