

## Lessons Learned From a Decade of Teaching Online

Over the past few weeks all of my teacher friends have done the unthinkable and have become online instructors. Among the many disruptions caused by the Coronavirus, educators have found themselves suddenly faced with the challenge of providing instruction without actually gathering corporately. This means that schools everywhere are exploring how to deliver teaching content online, many for the first time.

I work at a [small Bible college](#) based in Southern California. About ten years ago we began offering classes online out of a desire to keep students in their local context while they receive education. Our transition to online classes wasn't a Plan B response to a global pandemic, so we had the luxury of time to prepare.

Even then, we made just about every mistake in the book. Of course, we expected a learning curve, particularly with all the technical aspects of filming courses and delivering content online. But the biggest lessons we learned along the way weren't technical. **We needed to change our overall approach to online education**, and refine the process long before ever touching a camera. We learned a lot from our failures, so I figured I would share a few of these lessons and maybe save you some time:

### 1. Embrace Change

As some of you discovered over the last few weeks, teaching in an online environment is *very* different from teaching in person. You've likely learned how to engage your classroom and make adjustments based on real-time feedback. But now, you're looking at a camera, and there's a very real chance your viewers are distracted by what's in the living room. The mode of delivery has changed, so the mode of teaching needs to change with it.

Our first batch of online classes were basically video recordings of in-person classes (or trying to recreate a lecture via live streaming or Zoom). What we soon learned is that we couldn't replicate the in-person experience by setting up a camera and hitting record. We made very few changes to our teaching delivery and style, which worked fine for the students in the room, but not for those watching online. It was like a bad photocopy of a beautiful picture. Of course, it's not impossible to learn in this way, but we're asking a lot of the online learners when we give them teaching materials designed for in-person engagement.

The goal is to create opportunities for online learners to *actively* engage with the teaching content. Sure, people can waste hours watching Netflix, but that's mostly passive participation. Our goal is for our students to connect with the content and apply it to their lives.

Practical Takeaway:

- **Keep it short:** When our teachers focus their preparation for an online audience, their content is more refined. Rather than creating a 45 minute video/zoom call with three points, consider making 3 shorter videos with one point each.
- **Include more voices:** Incorporate dialogue between teachers, leaders, and other students into your online courses.
- **Add breaks for reflection.** Break up the teaching with guided discussion/reflection questions. This will help your points land and give opportunities for your viewer to engage the material with others (either in their home or online).

## 2. Continue Fostering Relationships Online

Our college places a high value on relational learning, which is much more natural on a campus where students and teachers get to interact during and after classes. Over the years we've found that cultivating these relationships online is possible, but takes great intentionality.

True learning is not simply a transferring of data, it's the application of content into a very specific life and situation. This necessitates fostering relationships so we know how to apply truth into our student's lives.

We have created time throughout the week for students to interact, via virtual office hours, discussion boards, Zoom meetings, and more. This gives our teachers insight into how their students are thinking, and gives them insight to keep their material directed toward the life of real people. We also encourage all participants, teachers and students to respond in a timely manner because it demonstrates a value of relationship.

### Practical Takeaway:

- **Become more visible:** However much you might disdain social media, this is the way we are connecting during this season. Post regularly on social media (use a variety of platforms; Instagram, Zoom, Marco Polo, and TikTok).
- **Engage:** Respond to your students in the comments. Send out emails, and don't make people wait for days for a response.
- **Create Space for relationships:** Give some time before and after a streaming class to just allow people to comment and engage with one another.
- **Allow people to see your humanity:** Not all of your posts need to be serious. Post snapshots from your daily life. Allow people to connect with your humanity. Pictures, experiences, doubts, and uncertainties level the playing field and make you accessible.

### 3. Be Creative

Throughout history, the society has benefited from incredible acts of creativity -- I am thankful for the printing press, the microphone, the amplifier, etc. These acts of creativity have helped us communicate truth more effectively. As difficult as this transition has been for many, it's also an opportunity to innovate and try new things. Who knows, this experience might actually impact how you teach in person or plan classes when we start gathering in person again.

Also, remember that you're going to need the giftedness of others. I'm sure many of you have dramatically increased your amount of interaction with your media/video team and whoever manages your website. But this time might also give you the chance to embrace teaching gifts that might ordinarily go unnoticed.

One thing I've found is that effective online teachers aren't necessarily the same people as effective in-person teachers. Some of our most effective online teachers would struggle in front of a live audience, but they have a depth of insight that elevates their online teaching, or a relational gift that comes to life in the discussion boards of our classes.

#### Practical Takeaway:

- **Interactive Teaching:** Include a time of reflection/conversation during teaching. It might help anchor a teaching point if there is some space to process what's being communicated.
- **Include a Q&A time:** Create space for interaction and discussion. Host a Q&A session or other avenues of responsive teaching.
- **Take a chance:** Don't be afraid to try something new...disruption is a natural time to innovate, people will extend grace because there is recognition that we are all trying to figure it out.

These are indeed trying times, so I hope this is an encouragement. You're not alone in this endeavor. You're surrounded by many who are working through the same challenges as you. We are all being asked to 'build the plane in the air,' but this can also be an incredible time for teaching and innovation.

**Spencer MacCuish** is the President of [Eternity Bible College](#) and serves at [Cornerstone Church](#) in Simi Valley. He has a diverse background in public secondary education, higher education, pastoral ministry, and a few other endeavors. He can be reached at: [smaccuish@eternity.edu](mailto:smaccuish@eternity.edu)