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Teaching Online: How NOT to get Overwhelmed

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For those of you who are just making the transition from regular teaching to online teaching, there are quite a few transitions that you need to prepare yourself for. Preparation and planning will make the change from going to work to working from home much, much easier. While working from home sounds great, and it is, it, like a regular teaching job, has its pitfalls. However, if you are aware of what those are, you will be less likely to fall into the pit than you will if you blindly enter into this new cyber-world. Thus, I would like to provide a few suggestions and helpful hints for those teachers just crossing over into the exciting world of online teaching.

I was, as many instructors are, very excited when I started to teach from home. It was nice not to have to get up in the morning, fix my hair and make-up, and spend all that time worrying about appearance. It was also nice to not have to wake up to an alarm every morning and drive through rush hour traffic. However, what was not so nice, and what took a lot of getting used to, was the fact that the students now had non-stop, 24-7 access to me. Just the sheer thought of this can be overwhelming. Students can, and will, Email you at all hours of the day and night and if you’re not careful, they may call you, too. Many online teachers who just get their start find themselves feeling like their lives revolve around Email and phone calls, and since one never knows when the Email and phone calls will come, it may actually feel more restraining than what a regular job did. Beginning online teachers often think, “I can’t leave the house–what if a student calls or Emails with a problem” or “I can’t go on vacation–the students wouldn’t know what to do without me for four days” or even “I can’t take weekends off; they will contact me with questions.” Truth is, somebody will always need you for something at all hours of the day. However, in order not to fall into this stressed out cycle, one must establish regular working hours with the students. I tell mine that I am usually home nine to four o’clock (barring any doctor’s visits or anything like that) but after that, I will not respond to any Emails or telephone messages until the following day. Most schools expect their teachers to enjoy their weekends, even if the teacher is teaching online. Thus, you can tell students to be prepared; let them know you won’t be available on weekends. Sometimes it does take reminding students that teachers
have lives and families, too, but most of the time, once students are reminded, they understand.

Most online institutions do not have issues with their instructors taking vacations, either, as long as the institution is forewarned. I did this when I got married and let my administrators know what was going on, and that I would be gone for four days. I also informed all of my students, so they would know why I wasn’t responding to them. Expect one or two students to Email you several times wondering where you are (it happens) but be forgiving of them when you come back. Some students will miss Emails or announcement postings, and simply wonder why you are not there.

Another very important thing to do is to wean yourself from using Email for everything. While it may be tempting, especially if you are new to a system or the software a college uses for online teaching, to use Email simply because most people are more familiar with it, avoid this at all costs. Use the tools provided by your college’s software system and use them to their fullest extent. Most of these tools are linked to grade books and other useful resources, and they organize themselves, which is beautiful. Most software systems allow instructors to have the system automatically grade quizzes so that instructors do not have to do so. I’ve also noticed that many systems use the drop box feature now for assignments; this is a great feature because it allows students to send their work to you through the course (thus you will not get a virus like you might if you stuck with regular Email) and the drop box feature usually links right up with the grade book, so once the grade is submitted, it sticks in the grade book for both the teacher and student to see. Other than viruses, the main drawback to using Email for everything is that you are asking for more work for yourself. You will have to do all the organizing and grading yourself, and it can be overwhelming to see all those Emails in your inbox and to feel the need to reply to every single one of those assignments with grades. The other problem with Email is that it is often unreliable, and as many people have discovered, can bounce documents back. So a student may have submitted his or her work on time, but the work never made it to the teacher. This can be quite a problem, especially if the teacher decides to deduct late points from the student if the student has to resubmit the assignment past the deadline. It’s simply best to avoid these situations by using the materials provided for you in your online course.

One website I read through while writing this article was http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/learning/yrk12focusareas/learntech/blended/emailflood.php. They provided a great list of how to avoid getting overwhelmed by Emails:

1. Firstly, establish clear guidelines about turnaround times when you set up the course. Ideally, these guidelines will be included in written notes that you provide at the orientation session. A realistic turnaround time for emails might be 48 hours, which means that part-time teachers would be expected to check for emails from students three times a week (I usually tell my students 24-48 hours, although I usually respond much sooner than that. I’ve made it a habit to check my Email three times a day; in the morning, afternoon, and in the evening; for me, this seems to work out well).
2. Secondly, try to have a part of the online module you’re using devoted to ‘frequently asked questions’ (or FAQs). After all, many questions are repeated by a number of students, so why not provide a thorough answer that everyone has access to? (*This is a great idea and I use it in my courses as well. Often if you but in a FAQ, students will answer each other’s questions and assist you with your workload. This also works out great because if a student is experiencing problems with Emails, he/she has another option to contact you through*).

3. A variation on this theme is to post your answers to important queries onto the course forum. Not only does that mean everyone can read your answer, but they can respond and elaborate as well. (*This works out well, too. I usually have an announcement board somewhere where both the students and myself and post to each other*).

4. You can divide your class into groups, and nominate a group leader to co-ordinate email queries:

‘The leader was made responsible for collating information, and for directing composite answers and queries back to me. I also buddied people up, so they worked on tasks in pairs. These two changes provided a buffer. As soon as I made the changes, the number of emails dropped dramatically.’ (*This is another great idea. I have students help each other out often; I often have them review and comment on each other’s work since I teach English. While I still list my comments regarding papers, especially final drafts, this really cuts back on how much one needs to do when reviewing rough drafts. Have the students do peer reviews. You’d be surprised how willing they are to help each other, and their teacher, out*).

5. Fourthly, it helps to give students very specific guidelines about what is included in the ‘subject’ section of the email. If they are required to include the name of their subject, and the essence of their query, this means that the teacher can sort emails into subject- or query-specific folders without having to open them. If a number of emails arrive with the same query, the teacher can quickly issue a broadcast email to clarify things for everyone. (*This is another great idea; I set up a group Email list so I can answer the question in one quick swoop*).

Thus, as one can see, there are several steps and measures a beginning teacher can take to avoid becoming overwhelmed. Remember, stay focus and set limits; every online college wants their teachers to be able to enjoy their lives and not feel toppled by 50 Emails a day. The key to this is to make things run smoothly so that you enjoy your job and your life.

For further reference, see:


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3 THOUGHTS ON “TEACHING ONLINE: HOW NOT TO GET OVERWHELMED”
nigeria
on February 4, 2014 at 10:18 AM said:

Thank you for your sharing! I have the exact same problem.

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nigeria entertainment news
on February 4, 2014 at 10:29 AM said:

unhappy for the huge analysis, but I’m very loving the post, and hope this, and the excellent analysis some other persons have written, will aid you decide if it’s the proper alternative for you.

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nigeria entertainment news
on February 4, 2014 at 10:39 AM said:

I and also my buddies came searching at the beneficial tips located over a internet site and ahead of extended I had a terrible feeling I by no means thanked the net website owner for those tips. All of the men and women are genuinely warmed to understand them and have now actually been creating one of the most of these things. Numerous thanks for actually becoming really sort as well as for figuring out particular extremely excellent themes most men and women are incredibly needing being aware of. My trustworthy apologies for not expressing appreciation to earlier.