Preparing to Teach a Fully Online Class

Recently my department decided to offer our undergraduate Research Methods in Psychology course in a fully online format, and I am slotted to teach the first section in fall 2016. I have never taught an online class before and have mixed feelings about it.

The ostensible (and laudable) goal of offering this class fully online is to serve students who require it to complete their degrees but cannot attend classes in person because they have since started full time jobs or relocated, and so on. As such, this class will be fully online (i.e., no formal in-class meetings) and asynchronous (i.e., no formal real-time interactions between teacher and students). I have received fantastic support from my college to develop the class. I was awarded a year-long teaching fellowship by Baruch’s Center for Teaching and Learning to attend their series of workshops designed to support faculty in developing their hybrid/online classes.

Although I’m excited to learn different skills and try something new, I am concerned about the potential for the fully online class format to undermine the quality of students’ education. University administrators often like online classes because they are economical: class sizes can be large and physical space is unnecessary. I also worry that a purely online education will degrade students’ social experience, undermining more distal and nuanced outcomes like student professionalism and social networks. At a more granular level, is an online format suitable for research methods, which we teach as a hands-on class in which students (often for the first time) develop and conduct their own psychological research? Will it work if students are unable to interact with each other in real time? Finally, I love the interpersonal aspects of teaching, the relationships one forms with students, and the immediacy of the feedback on students’ engagement in class. I wonder how much I will enjoy teaching students whom I may never meet in person!

As a result of these concerns I’m very motivated to figure out how to do the best job I can. As any good I-O psychologist would, I started by looking at what the research literature
has to say about online education. Not surprisingly, there has been considerable research on this issue over the last 3 decades. I will touch on some highlights, but this isn’t a formal literature review—hopefully the citations below will provide a helpful preliminary reading list.

Bernard et al.’s (2004) meta-analysis of distance education showed that asynchronous online classes produced superior achievement outcomes to classroom-based classes, but the effect was in the opposite direction for synchronous online classes. Use of problem-based learning strategies and accessibility to the instructor via e-mail both positively impacted achievement and attitudinal outcomes in asynchronous distance education. However, there was substantial variability in almost all of the effects. Partly this is simply because pedagogy and methodology have large effects on achievement outcomes and vary independent of class format. In addition, the use of technology is often confounded with class format. Does the technology we use matter? Schmid et al. (2014) meta-analyzed the effects of the extent to which various educational technologies were used in post-secondary education. They found small positive effects for technology used to support presentation of information on achievement (e.g., PowerPoint). However, the largest positive effects on achievement occurred for technology that provided search and retrieval support (e.g., electronic databases, hypertext links, search engines) and cognitive support (e.g., wikis, concept maps, spreadsheets). Effectively using these technologies is important in online classes and most online classes make use of at least some of these technologies by necessity. However, these technologies are important in classroom-based classes too.

So, in summary, (a) educational technology does matter but its importance is not limited to online or hybrid class formats, and (b) it would seem that you lose something as an instructor by not being in the room with your students, but these losses are made up for (in asynchronous classes) by benefits arising from students being able to learn on their own time. Part of this latter effect may result from students spending more time on the material in online compared to classroom-based classes, and hybrid formats that combine face-to-face time with increased flexibility may be the most effective (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). However, I still have questions about the social experience of students in online classes and how to go about designing an online class from scratch.

For some hands-on advice, I e-mailed my colleague Erin Eatough, assistant professor in I-O Psychology at Baruch College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. Erin has taught 10 fully online classes and three hybrid classes in psychology and business. She is the chair of SIOP’s Students and Academia subcommittee of the Visibility Committee, a teaching and learning faculty fellow at Baruch College, and an active peer reviewer for Quality Matters.

Loren: Thanks for talking with me Erin. What advice do you have for someone preparing an online class for the first time? Erin: Well, I think the best piece of advice I
can offer is not to underestimate the importance of the design and structure of your course. For example, some questions to ask yourself might be: Will you have a synchronous or asynchronous approach? If asynchronous, how will you deliver your lecture material? Will you have weekly units? How long will the material in each unit be available for? Alternatively, will you have modules that span several weeks? What are the built-in structural components that will require student engagement and when will these activities take place (such as required discussion board postings)? These kinds of decisions are important on the front end to ensure you have the appropriate resources available to execute your plan (e.g. Do you have a synchronous tool available for live lecture? What kinds of student-engagement formats does the learning management system you are using support?) and to better explain to your students from day one how this class is going to work. I think in online learning, having a clear, organized structure to the course helps students know what to expect, and this expectation management is crucial for aiding students in meeting the self-regulation demands in these kinds of formats. There are many resources to help faculty designing a new online course (or converting an in-person course to an online course), such as those offered by the non-profit organization Quality Matters. Alternatively, many institutions actually have in house instructional designers for this very purpose! Usually, these individuals are part of the team that manages whatever learning management platform your institution uses (such as Blackboard). It might just be a matter of sending an email to figure out who this person is at your own institution.

Loren: So the timing of class events is really important, and rather than being imposed by the class meeting schedule in traditional classes, it’s something the instructor has to determine. That’s really interesting. What do you like most about online instruction?

Erin: I like the most the fact that online courses break down sociodemographic barriers that prevent students from having access to education. Many nontraditional students, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with numerous competing demands such as childcare or employment are often only able to enroll in fully online courses because of the flexibility associated with online administration. Furthermore, offering courses online allows students from less accessible geographical locations or with transportation barriers to have access. Especially for nontraditional students, I have personally found that online courses can offer a less intimidating environment than the brick-and-mortar classroom setting. In fact, student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction can actually increase in an online setting because everyone (regardless of personality, native language, comfort level with the material, etc.) has equal opportunity to voice opinions and perspectives (for example in an online discussion forum). Further, for students who might otherwise have anxiety about participation, such as ESL students, online formats offer students time to think longer about written or verbal communications and share their comments publicly when they feel ready, reducing self-consciousness about participation. I feel it allows me to reach students who might other-
wise not be able to register, and this fact is extremely rewarding for me.

Loren: What do you like least about it?

Erin: I like least the very thing that makes online classes possible: the technology. Well, I should say the technology quirks that for a person like me, who is of average technological capability (by my estimation), will drive you nuts. For example, dealing with long wait times in rendering video files, errors in uploading that must be done and redone until the magical Internet fairy offers her blessing, hidden toggles in Blackboard that make things not appear when they are supposed to appear, those kinds of things. Dealing with the technology involved takes a lot of time. Especially the first time. When I first offered Intro to Psychology online, I estimated it took 3x longer for me than offering it in person. Of course, after that hurdle, the time investment decreases and the learning curve flattens out a bit, but I would still say what I like least is not knowing the shortcut keystroke to just make it happen!

Loren: I think I have had some of the same frustrations with Blackboard as you have! One last question Erin—do you find it more difficult to connect with students on a personal level online compared to in person, and how much do you think this matters?

Erin: Actually, I do not find it any more difficult to connect on an intellectual or personal level. Participation is a major and mandatory part of my courses and because the format is less intimidating than raising your hand in a classroom, I actually feel I get to know each student better than I do in an in-person setting where some students may be shy and not speak up much throughout the whole semester. What’s missing, though, is knowing them by face. If I passed one of my students on the street, I might not recognize them, which is somewhat of an odd feeling. When walking through campus, people may recognize me, but I don’t recognize them. Is that the definition of a celebrity? I’ll leave that up to you. I do ask each student to upload a picture of themselves (although it is not required), but the learning management system I use makes the photo next to each student’s name so small, you need a microscope to see it and yes, I have tried left, right, and double clicking (back to technology being a double-edged sword). Some students will take me up on virtual or in person office hours, so in that case I do know them by face. So overall, my answer is that I do not find it difficult to build meaningful relationships with the students and feel in some ways the format fosters a depth of connection I don’t always experience in person. Even if I do now have the strange desire to wear oversized sunglasses and get a purse dog.

Loren: The heretofore unknown perils of online teaching... Thanks Erin!

Below are a few citations of readings for those interested in learning more.

