Conclusion: Rethinking Online Course Design and Teaching

This book provides an overview of contemporary and emerging educational theories that have the potential to underpin course design and online teaching. In addition to reviewing the central elements of each theory, specific teaching strategies congruent with each theory are described. Our goal is that educators of health professionals, both novice and expert, will review the theoretical perspectives and consider using the presented teaching practices in their online teaching. Furthermore, we anticipate that by understanding the theories that give rise to the teaching techniques and activities presented, readers will know why and when specific practices work and will create new activities that will help students to achieve their learning outcomes.

We believe that to be effective, online courses and teaching have to be different from traditional face-to-face education. For example, teaching online requires deliberate actions and strategies to help course participants feel like members of an actual (real) class
community. In traditional classrooms, the grounds for establishing a sense of community occur naturally because of geographic proximity. In cyberspace, this natural association is not necessarily present, and teachers need to take steps to make themselves real to students and to help students become real to one another. We have presented many teaching practices that can be used to achieve this outcome.

Here, we bring together broad “lessons learned” in making online courses more engaging. Fundamentally, we acknowledge that online courses can have an abundance of wonderful teaching strategies and activities and yet can still be a failure. The teacher matters. Online teachers face unique challenges. How can an online teacher with a toolkit of excellent teaching techniques ensure success? How can teachers in the online medium transcend the emptiness of cyberspace to become real to students? How can educators create learning environments where classmates become as tangible to one another as if they were sitting side by side in a face-to-face classroom? We address some of these questions by providing online teachers with important take-away messages.

LESSON I: START WITH THEORY

The temptation is to start with the product. In online teaching, the desired product for some teachers could be an innovative, creative learning activity that students will be motivated to participate in and rate as transformative. But the first step in designing successful learning activities is to consider how and why activities are effective. Teachers need to consider what they believe about teaching and learning; in other words, they need to know which educational theory aligns with their perspective and preferred teaching processes. This alignment is important in structuring learning activities that are congruent with their teaching style and course design. A misalignment in teaching approaches and learning activities may confuse learners and result in
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a learning environment where students are unsure of teacher expectations. If students receive mixed messages (for example, the teacher invites them to propose their own assignments and then imposes set assignments on them), they may become uncertain, their motivation may decrease, and they may lose focus on their course work. Teachers who know which educational theory underpins their course design and instruction and then follow through with approaches that align with it provide learners with a sense of security that ultimately enhances learning and teaching.

LESSON 2: TAKE RISKS

What we have learned in our years of teaching online, echoed by the colleagues who provided “From the Field” teaching experiences, is that truly exemplary online teaching is a high-risk activity, at least in the beginning. Individuals are naturally reluctant to change, and teachers are no different. For centuries, education has been primarily lecture based with the teacher knowing more than the students and imparting this knowledge to receptive vessels. However, the online learning milieu and the technology that supports it offer many new avenues to acquire and share knowledge. Furthermore, since the nature of the learner has changed, we must rethink how education and teaching are perceived. Knowledge is within all of us and accessible by everyone. The teacher is no longer seen as the “all-knowing” person but rather as a co-creator of knowledge and a guide who helps learners to assess available knowledge to determine the relative credibility of information.

With this role change, the traditional approach to teaching is no longer as effective. Whether instructing paraprofessionals or postdoctoral scholars, today’s online health care teachers need to take risks and try new ways of teaching to align with the learning needs of students. This risk-taking means shedding the protective security of the
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top-down lecture format where teachers are held in high esteem and not questioned. Effective online teachers need to be open to learning and becoming active participants in dynamic online learning environments.

LESSON 3: CRAFT A PLAN

Good planning is the foundation of success for most things in life, and achieving excellence as a teacher is no different. After reading this book, you are equipped with an abundance of teaching ideas grounded in educational theory. If the book works as we hope it does, you will be inspired to identify and learn about the educational theory that underpins your teaching values and practices. We invite you to review the suggested teaching strategies and imagine how you could use many of these (or variations of them) in your own teaching. But there is one more step—you need to create a plan. A teaching plan, while important to success, is really quite simple: it follows the common steps of assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Begin your plan with assessment. Ask questions such as, Who are your learners? Where are they in their program of study? What do they already know? Why were they motivated to choose this particular career in health care? And how are they most likely to be able to demonstrate what they know? Assess your curriculum and professional knowledge in relation to the resources and freedoms that you have. For example, at first glance, some online curricula may seem to have little room for introducing additional teaching techniques. Yet despite this apparent limitation, we invite you to consider some of the activities and approaches that we have suggested and to personalize required curricula by introducing those that fit for you. Assess the nature of your learning milieu. Think about the experiences and events that are occurring in your program and in students’ personal
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lives. Imagine how linking these experiences to online activities might help make your virtual classroom feel more real. Perhaps most importantly of all, assess your strengths and limitations as a teacher.

In planning, consider which educational theory is consistent with your teaching philosophy and goals, and the learning outcomes you hope to achieve. Select a variety of teaching techniques and activities that will help students achieve required learning outcomes and grow as professionals. Be sure to think beyond the approaches that naturally seem to fit within your own world view. For example, teachers who feel particularly comfortable with an invitational theory approach might intentionally plan to stretch their repertoire by including transformational learning activities in their teaching plan. In planning to use a particular online teaching activity, be sure to consider questions such as, How much time will I need to utilize it? Where will it fit best in the course? What resources do students need to employ it? And how will it enhance students’ ability to assimilate needed and relevant professional knowledge?

As you implement the techniques you have chosen, remember that the best plans all require some modification as the unanticipated happens. Be open to needed changes and accept that some teaching approaches in some situations simply may not work as expected. Throughout the process of implementing any activity, make a point of continually reflecting on your teaching practice. In his seminal book *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön (1983) coined the term “reflection in action” as a way of explaining how professionals develop their expertise. As Schön suggests, throughout your teaching practice, reflect on the teaching strategies you’ve chosen and used, and make frequent refinements to your plan.

Finally—remember to evaluate your unique teaching plan. Curricula will require you to evaluate your students’ progress, and most courses in health care programs include class evaluation forms. In addition to these formal evaluation opportunities, question both yourself and your students about what went well and what elements
of your teaching practice could be improved. What surprised you? What kinds of unexpected learning occurred in your online class? How might insights gleaned from this incidental learning be incorporated into future teaching plans?

LESSON 4: STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ARE PEOPLE

Even though in the online learning milieu, teachers and students can literally be learning together while on different continents, never having exchanged eye contact or a handshake, online teachers and learners are still people. People are much more than two-dimensional photographs or online avatars. People have emotions, fears, insecurities, desires, and suspicions. People are people. These elements of being human should not be ignored in developing effective online courses or in online teaching. To ignore these human qualities in students is to destine online teaching to failure, or at least to being lacklustre. Rather, effective online teachers recognize the humanness in each learner and individualize their teaching to embrace and build on these realities.

Furthermore, teachers are people too. To be effective, teachers need to develop self-awareness of their own idiosyncrasies that impact their teaching. These unique qualities make teachers distinctive, and those with insight into themselves are able to both communicate these to learners (helping to establish their authenticity with students) and build on what they know about themselves as they develop and employ their teaching skills.
LESSON 5: WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER

Teaching has changed: teachers are now learners, and in many ways, learners are teachers. The vast amount of ever-changing knowledge on a subject now available with a few keystrokes means that no one person can ever know everything on a topic. Even if one person has an extensive knowledge base, that knowledge is continually challenged and expanded by incessant research happening in real time. Our first point is that teachers need to be open to being unceasing learners, willing to revise what they “know” and add new emerging knowledge to their mindset.

Our second point is that learners are often very well versed in their subject areas. They have instant access to many sources of information on their specific topic. In online learning communities, students often teach classmates and teachers what they know about a topic. Online education is taking place in a more democratic environment where all participants have an equal role in sharing, assessing, re-forming, deconstructing, and creating knowledge.

In our work with students and teachers from a variety of different health disciplines, we have come to trust the process of learning that occurs when students and teachers come together. Whether in brick-and-mortar buildings or virtual classes, our students come with the expectation that activities have been designed to further their professional knowledge. The stakes are high and students are heavily invested in achieving the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to practice in their chosen profession. They are both informed and dedicated. When teachers bring subject-matter expertise, passion for their field, and an enthusiastic belief that learning will happen, students and teachers can genuinely feel they are “in it together.”


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LESSON 6: TEACHING MATTERS

Whether you are teaching online, in a blended course, or face to face, teaching matters. In The Courage to Teach, Palmer (2007) writes that “good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work” (p. 11). He goes on to explain:

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used by these weavers vary widely: lectures, Socratic dialogues, laboratory experiments, collaborative problem solving, creative chaos. The connections made by teachers are held not in their method but in their hearts—meaning heart in its strictest sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self. (2007, p. 11)

In short, “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (2007, p. 10; italics in original). Although teaching has changed with the advent of online education, a good teacher still makes a difference to learners and to the learning process itself. The difference is visible in learning outcomes, particularly in the degree of excitement and engagement that students experience while taking the class, and is partly the result of the familiar qualities of a good teacher—the ability to explain ideas clearly, for example, or to pose thought-provoking questions, or to offer criticism in a constructive and encouraging manner. To a degree, however, what makes a good teacher is something more elusive and nebulous. It is a way of being that cannot be readily quantified or even adequately conveyed in words: it can be experienced, but it resists articulation.
Think about your own teachers who you recall as exemplary. What was it about these people that made their teaching outstanding? It was probably not the inventiveness of their learning activities or their firm foundation in educational theory but rather who they were as human beings and how they related to you as a student. We can write books, do research, make conference presentations, and try to teach people to teach. We are convinced that everyone can become a better educator. But there is something more—something that Palmer has captured, at least in part. As he puts it, “in every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my self—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning” (2007, pp. 10–11).

We challenge online educators and course designers to consider taking deliberate actions to enhance the effectiveness of their online courses. We challenge you to learn about educational theory, to take risks and try some of the learning activities in this book and even invent some of your own. Furthermore, we challenge you to consider Parker’s words and examine how your intellect, emotion, and spirit come together to make you the teacher you are and the teacher you will become.

REFERENCES
