In the Classroom 51

The First Day of Your Online Class

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thank you ever so much for coming in and spending time with me listening to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you can be doing other things. Maybe you are doing other things, but you're also hanging out with me. This week, we're going to take a look at getting your online course started on the right foot. The new term is about to start. I'm ready to launch my courses. I know a lot of you are getting ready to launch your courses and how you launch your course sets the tone and the expectations for the rest of the term. If you can get it off to a great start, lots of momentum, then it's going to end up being a really great course. There's some things that you probably should do and we're going to talk about those things.

The first is you need to really make sure that your course is ready to go, that you have all your content loaded, that you may have built this course previously, you're doing it again, so having that content copied over, that you've gone through and reviewed everything. Don't just expect that it's going to work simply because you copied it over. Go through and make sure that everything is working the way it's supposed to. Check for broken links. Sites come and go. Making sure that those links are working, that's really important.

Also, it's a great opportunity to refresh some of your content, that you may have some stale content, and throw it out, put some new stuff in there. You also want to make sure that your activities are set, that the new times and dates are set, they open and close when you want them to. The same with your assessments. Along with your assessments, you want to make sure that your grade book is set up so everything is just going to work. That'll be less frustration for you, less frustration for the students.

The other things that you want to take a look at is go through your past course evaluations to look for ideas or areas where you can improve your course. This is ideally a good time to also take into consideration universal design for learning and those principles, which I have talked about in previous episodes. I will include links regarding those. Look for pinch points. Look for areas where students struggled, that you can go in and make tweaks to it and just improve your course. As I mentioned, make sure all the dates are correct, get those onto a course calendar. If you can make things easy for your students where they can just focus on the content, that will help your course immensely as you go forward.

One last thing that you want to do is make sure that you look at your course from a student's perspective. That in most learning management systems that I've seen, you have a student view. By selecting that, you get to see and make sure that students-- Seeing what they see. Make sure that the course is working the way you want it. The

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content that you want hidden from students, that's all hidden, and the things that you want them to see on the first day are available. That's really important.

The next thing you want to do is make sure that your course has a clear navigation structure. I know from being an online student, if I went into a course and I could not find anything-- Nothing's more frustrating to a student who wants to go and do a great job but they can't find anything in the course. It's not clearly designed. Spending time there, making sure step by step that students can work through this course will do wonders in improving the performance of your students.

I create a top-down structure. I expect students to start at the very top and we're going to work our way down through the course throughout the term. That's basically how I build the course. My very first folder, at the very top of the course says "start here". In there, I provide a number of things. First is an introduction to the course. It not only talks about the introduction to the course, but also an introduction to me.

One of the things that I've noticed as I've evaluated courses over my tenure as an instructional designer is the number of faculty who do not spend time to introduce themselves. They'll do it in a face-to-face class, they'll tell all about themselves, but they won't do it in an online course. I don't understand this. It is a very easy way to humanize the course.

Otherwise, it comes off as a correspondence course. Students don't want that. They want to know who their instructor is, they want to know why their instructor is passionate about this topic. The more that you can address this why, the more success your students are going to have in the course. Take time, go in there and put together an introduction. Write up something.

Also, I would create a video. Some of the things that you may want to include, talk a little bit about yourself, your personal bio. It's up to you how much you want to reveal about yourself. Things to talk about, your education history, hobbies that you have, recreational interests, how long you've been at the university, what your research interests are. Talk about your education.

Why did you choose this field? What makes you passionate about that? Why are you an expert in this area? Maybe projects you're working on, papers that you're currently writing. That can all be put in there. A little bit about your teaching philosophy, courses that you've taught, how you normally teach them, expectations. Those all can be part of this introduction. That just lets students know about you.

It comes down to know, like and trust. People do business, and I know education's not a business, but people do business with those they know, like and trust. If you want to have success in your courses, you need to have your students to get to know and like and trust you, then they will do great work for you.

Another thing that I put into my start here is a course orientation. In this course orientation, I will walk them through the navigation. Normally I do this in a video. The same with your introduction, that you should have a written introduction, but also a video. For my course orientation, it's more video, although I have the transcript.

Basically, I give them a guided tour. I do a screen cast and I walk them through the course and show them different parts of the course, things that I emphasize. Parts of it may be the syllabus, things that I think are important about the syllabus.

This is a great time to set expectations as far as your course. How much time are they expected to be putting into the course? Students often well underestimate the amount of time that they're going to put in the course. You want to set those expectations. Letting them know how to submit assignments, that's all part of your course orientation. That if you want it in a certain format for a certain reason, let them know why and how and they'll be happy to accommodate you. Well, maybe not happy.

Also, how do they get a hold of you? When are you going to communicate with them? What's your grading expectations? If they turn in a paper, when do they expect to get it back? If they turn in homework, when do they expect to get it back? What are ways that students can contact you if they need assistance and what certain expectations? It could be that on weekends, that you don't receive calls. That's fine, let them know. If you're out traveling, you certainly want to let them know that, too.

When are you going to have your office hours? For me, I've started to set up my office hours for the time that I am grading online discussion. Normally, I will get my discussions to a certain point, and say Tuesday, probably Wednesday evening I'll start grading the discussions or reviewing them. That's when I will hold office hours. I'll actually hold office hours usually Wednesday, Thursday, Friday evening because that's when I'm usually busy in the discussions. I'll shoot an email out to students, but I also put that in my syllabus and let them know when they can expect me to be available for office hours. Also, you want to tell students in this orientation how you will assess them and how that all works.

The next thing. You've done the introduction, you've done orientation, a discussion forum. I honestly believe that discussion forums should be part of online classes. This is a way that you can build community in your online courses and discussion boards are a great way to do that. I talked about those in episodes 29 and 30, go check those out.

A couple of discussion boards that you want to have out there, one is a student lounge, a place where they can just have a conversation. Also in week one, the first week or even the preview week is having an online discussion where students can introduce themselves, where they get to tell a little bit about themselves, what makes unique. Basically, it helps to humanize the course.

I would definitely encourage students to post a picture, a representation of themselves. It doesn't necessarily have to be a picture about themselves, but some type of avatar. I would encourage them to post that. Because when you're looking at eggheads in a discussion forum, nothing's worse. Everybody looks the same. You start to identify different people based on the avatar that they post. I would definitely encourage that. Also, when you have this online discussion, make sure that you introduce yourself. Now I know you went through a post and you had a video, but show them what a good post looks like and do that by introducing yourself and participate in that initial discussion. Welcome students to the class.

Another thing that you may want to consider for your class is having a pre-course survey. A survey is great for gathering additional information, maybe ways that you want to contact your student, but also to get a feel what they know about the subject that you're going to present to them so you can personalize it just a little more. That pre-course survey is important. That all typically goes into my Start Here folder.

One of the other things that I want to do is make sure that I send students an email. The first day of class, I will push out an email welcoming students to the class, let them know when the class is open, how they can start proceeding by going to that Start Here folder. I may also include a link to the video as a welcome or I will just make sure that they know where to find that in the course.

Other things that you want to consider putting into your email is if there's a textbook required, making sure that students know how to get a hold of that textbook or any other software information that they need in order to start off on the right foot. Also, technical assistance. Maybe they can't get into the course and they can't jump in and get involved with the content that you provided. Where do they go get help? By providing that information, that's important to them for that technical assistance. Information about disability, accommodation, the fact that you accept them and how to go about getting one, and any other information that you think will be useful. Just starting them off on the right foot.

The last thing that I want to talk about is really talking about that first week. Keep track of your students to make sure that they've gotten into the course. That's really important. Keep an eye on your grade book because that's where you can usually see when the last time they've accessed the course. Make sure that your students are getting in there to access a course. If they haven't got in there by the first half of the week, reach out to them and find out if they're having any issues logging on. Don't let a week go by or two weeks go by. That's too late. In that first week, when the week's about half over, make sure that you contact them if you notice that somebody has not checked in. Certainly, you're going to want to make sure that they know what the withdraw policies are and what the timeline is for that. From there, just go on and have a wonderful course.

Some of the things that we talked about, one is make sure your course is ready to go. Make sure it's current, make sure everything is working, everything is in place, you're ready to go. Make sure that you have a clear navigation. That's part of setting up your course. Having a start folder where you have an introduction, a video that's introducing yourself, one that's giving them orientation to the course. I usually split them up, I have those as two different videos. From there, having a pre-course survey, get to know your students just a little bit, as well as having a discussion forum, an introductory discussion.

Humanize the course. Being an online student, it can be a little isolating, but this will help you do a great job there. Then, getting that email out, making sure that students are welcome, they know the course has started and get ready to go. From there, if you haven't seen someone check in, make sure that you pull them into the course, contact them and make sure that they know the course has started. Well, that's it. That's getting the course off on the right foot. Before I let you go, here's a plug from my book.