Exploring Online Best Practices to Implement Into Your Own Course

SPEAKERS

Michael Strawser, Tierney King, Brian Udermann, Dorian Rhea Debussy

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast, and I'm your host Tierney King. I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. This week's episode is sponsored by The Wellbeing Elixir, Magna's brand-new wellness course for educators, where experts will help guide you through wellbeing and resilience. Online learning has become a necessity, and as we consider online learning moving forward, we must continue to explore and implement best practices for teaching online. And today, we'll do just that. We'll explore online learning best practices, and then specific ideas that you can implement into your own courses. We'll start with Michael Strawser's 20-Minute Mentor, What are Best Practices for Online Pedagogy, where he talks about implementing FAQs, he talks about incorporating The Office TV show into a course, and then he explains how he does a strengths, weakness, opportunities and challenges analysis.

Michael Strawser 01:03

So I feel like a broken record in this to be honest with you, but in my mind, you know, teaching no matter what modality, I want to make sure that I'm starting with good course design as a whole. So I don't want to rely just on my ability to you know, be improvisational, I don't want to just rely on my ability to be kind of willy nilly and just kind of go with the flow. Instead, I want to be really well prepared in my classes. And this is really crucial on an online course because of just how you're interacting with students and how your students are interacting with your content. And so I think first and foremost, to be honest with you, good online pedagogy begins with good course design. What that means is that I want everything within my courses to fit together. I want to think about my objectives, my learning objectives. I wanna think about my course outcomes. I want to think about my assignments and how those are reinforcing those objectives and outcomes. And then I also want to make sure that I've designed the course in such a way that that students can easily and clearly interact with this content, come to understand this content, and that and then everything makes sense and then everything connects. One way that I try to do that for my students other than just kind of building out, you know, my modules in a way that is progressive, right? Meaning I take them through a process of learning. But one way that I try to do that is I like to create an FAQ in my online classes. And I like to help students think about practically, what does it looked like for us to engage together in this class. I'm trying to anticipate their questions. I want to anticipate the fact that they might think something is bogus or not helpful. I want to provide rationale for them where I can also want them to kind of come to that themselves, too. But I found that just a course FAQ can really be helpful for students to know where to go to have different questions answered.

Tierney King 02:48
Additionally, Strawser uses a SWOC analysis to assess himself after every class, which encourages him to use innovative ideas and think outside the box.

Michael Strawser 02:58
What I like to do at the end of every class is do a SWOC analysis, so strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges. And so I really try to assess myself based on, you know, my course evaluations, based on my student feedback, and then also just based on my own feedback and own preferences, and different things that I've seen, and really try to think practically about what can I do differently. I like to read different articles about teaching and learning, especially, you know, SOTL articles where people are collecting data on this, where I can kind of think a little bit differently and be a little bit more creative. For me a really practical example, I redesigned a Business and Professional Communication course solely around the TV show The Office, because I thought my students would appreciate that I thought it was a way to get content across in a way that was not dry, and in a way that was engaging. And I just love encouraging professors to be innovative and engaging when it comes to their pedagogy as a whole.

Tierney King 03:49
In addition to innovation and creativity, Brian Udermann also emphasizes the importance of consistency, and his 20-Minute Mentor, How Can I Incorporate Best Practices into My Online Teaching?

Brian Udermann 04:01
Another idea that, and this one's pretty kind of plastered all over in the literature of online education, but I think it's vitally important is to think about consistency. We had our students, I mean our faculty, who were students or participants in an online instructor training course, but you know, they went through this class and they were provided with lots of information, but many instructors started to do things kind of, you know, the same, not completely, not totally. But their courses and how they were doing things really started to be consistent and students were reporting that "We love the consistent look and feel of our classes." You know, and this could be in regards to how you're setting up your course navigation, you know, from one course to another at an institution. It could be what students are doing each week from week one to week two to week three. Is there some continuity there? Is there some consistency there? Are students reading and then are they watching a video? And then are they doing a self-reflection activity? And then are they participating in a discussion? And then is there a quiz? Certainly, that's not going to be the same every week or every module. But if there's some consistency there, that does make students feel a little bit more comfortable, and it helps keep them on track. And kind of the last thing I'll say about consistency is, one thing you can do is give students a checklist. They love checklists, and I've even taught seminars and workshops, or facilitated seminars and workshops for faculty and online administrators over the years and done many of those, and they absolutely love checklists. So you know, if you're going to have students do some reading, boom, they check it off. If they're supposed to watch a video or two, they check it off. And again, that can help with the consistency if you do that from unit to unit or module to module. Another idea, another best practice, is to think about community relationship building with your students. So most of you have probably taught

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online. And if you have this in your class, if you've experienced this in even face-to-face or a blended class or online class, it's great when students feel like they're part of something, they're part of a group, they're part of a community, they have a relationship with you. They have a relationship with other students is one thing that can be very helpful in regards to you know, building this community. And building relationships is instructor presence, like your presence as the instructor. And I could talk for 20 minutes just on instructor presence, but I'll just say a couple of quick things. There are lots of things that you can do to demonstrate to your students or to show to your students that you're present, or that you're there. Sometimes these things are pretty simple. It could even be something like responding to student emails in a timely manner. When you do that students think "Hey, this is great. That was quick, like this instructor really cares about me." It could be you, providing updates and announcements in your class to help students stay on track. It could be you grading, you know, assignments and things that students turn in relatively quickly. and giving feedback. It could be your participation in online discussions. Another idea is to be authentic and just genuine. Like the person that you see in this video today, me like, this is who I am, I'm like this doing this video. And, you know, I'm the same person, when I'm with my students and the same person when I'm with my family. And I think students appreciate that. I don't try to be something that I'm not when I'm teaching. I am, I just kind of try to be real and students actually, you know, provide comments sometimes like, it's pretty easy to approach you. You are pretty easy to get to know. You felt like you were just like a real individual. And again, I think students really like that.

Tierney King 08:04
While numerous instructors hope to show and be their authentic selves in the online realm, effectively using the learning management system is another element in online classes that can be difficult to navigate. In Dorian Rhea Debussy's Magna Online Seminar, Learning from Pandemic Pedagogy: Best Practices for a Quick and Inclusive Transition to Online Teaching, they explained the importance of feedback, and how to select a learning management system that fits your teaching needs.

Dorian Rhea Debussy 08:33
With online teaching there's a lot of different LMS or learning management systems. So your campus might use Blackboard, desire to learn, Canvas, Moodle is another one. And those are really important aspects of teaching online because they each come with a variety of different tools. They're all formatted slightly differently. And I definitely have my favorite out of out of the major LMS 's that are available. But what you don't want to get caught up in is thinking that the platform is sort of a thing that limits your teaching ability. You want to be able to really focus on, what are your goals for the class and setting those goals in a way that's informed by, obviously, the situation that we're in. Which is, you know, obviously a global pandemic, but you want the central focus to be what are the goals that you want to achieve. And so you want that central focus to be your pedagogy, not just the platform that you're working within. So, for instance, if your pedagogical approach focuses on hands-on learning opportunities, that's something you want to be thinking about as you're designing the way in which your course appears in that learning management system. And if your course is primarily lecture-based, and you don't necessarily have a lot of engagement, maybe you have a 200 person lecture at a large institution, and there's not a lot of audience engagement in that particular space. Then, you know, presuming that's your pedagogical proach, and you want to keep that pedagogical approach, you'll want that to be the thing that's informing the way that you're designing your learning management

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system. So at the end of the day, think pedagogy first. And think of ways in which that learning management system can then sort of fit your pedagogical needs, not the other way around. So don't think of the platform as something that has to inform your pedagogy.

Tierney King 10:24
Debussy also uses online feedback as a way to encourage informal feedback, while also implementing a three-week feedback form so you can adjust anything mid-semester. They also structure and word their questions in a way that's student-centered.

Dorian Rhea Debussy 10:39
So asking for informal feedback throughout the course is really important. This is something that, you know, I really like to do in any class, whether it's online, in-person or hybrid. But essentially asking for that online feedback is a way to make sure that your pedagogical approach is actually meeting the needs of your students. So a way that you can do this in a really simple way, is, you know, providing opportunities for this sort of informal feedback at the three-week mark, the mid-semester mark, and then that allows you enough time to adjust accordingly. And a couple ways you can do this online, you can create a quick feedback form via Google Forms. Some people use the quiz function in their learning management system. And you can zero out the quiz to make sure that it doesn't actually count as credit, unless you would want it to count as credit. But presuming it's optional, you'd probably want it to be bonus or to have no weight on the grade, of course, but essentially, with the informal feedback, generally, the three-week mark, it's so early into the semester, that folks are starting to get into their groove. So that's a good opportunity to sort of see like, How are they? How are they doing very early on, and then mid-semester, that's a great time to check in. Because essentially, you still have about half a semester left at that point. So there's still plenty of time to adjust the needs that people are sharing. The kind of favorite question that I have, when I do the informal feedback form, I like to keep it as open ended as possible. So usually, I'll go with three questions. So one is, What can we do? What are we doing that's going well, and framing it as "we as a class," so the instructor, but also the students, What are we doing that can be improved upon? So focusing on the areas that are working well, focusing on the areas where there's room for improvement, and then the third question that I usually have, is essentially asking folks, is there anything else you'd like me to know about the class? And generally, what I see when I do that is, and this is at a variety of different institutions where I've gotten the same sort of feedback from students is, usually there's a couple where their jaw kind of drops. And their reaction is, "Wow, I've never had, I've never had an instructor asked me like, what's going well? What can we do differently? How can we improve?" And usually that shows up on the informal feedback. Generally, it also ends up showing up on my end of semester evaluations that, you know, even if it's a student that maybe had some difficulties with the course material. Usually it shows up in a really positive way, where the student reports, I was really happy to have an instructor ask me that. I've never had an instructor that's really sort of put it in so accessible terms and really solicited that feedback mid-semester or early on in the course.

Tierney King 13:52
Whether you're driving to work, or you just need a 15-minute think session, we hope the Faculty Focus Live podcast will inspire your teaching, and offer ideas that you can integrate into your own course. For

more information on the resources included in this episode, please check out the links provided in the episode description.