



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

WALKING A MILE IN THEIR SHOES: FROM ONLINE STUDENT TO ONLINE INSTRUCTOR

Today's students are not limited to participating in physical classrooms at the collegiate level, but rather they have the capabilities to have their entire college experience in a virtual environment. Students who are not technologically savvy may find computers intimidating and navigating online coursework scary. Many are completely overwhelmed with the online environment.

As an online learner, I am faced with countless challenges that have been presented throughout my doctoral experience. I shall explain the three challenges that I have faced as an online learner, as well as describe the transition from online learner to online faculty and strategies online instructors might use in assisting their students.

Minimal Contact. One of the most challenging issues was the lack of personal contact with the instructor. There were months in which I had little to no electronic contact. After contacting the university, I learned that only two contacts per month were expected of the faculty, as outlined by faculty contracts. This was not explained to learners prior to registering for the program, and I experienced some anxieties.

Misinterpretation. It is difficult to determine an online faculty's facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and various other communication strategies. Early on, online learners learn from their peers that their written communication skills must not be vague or left to interpretation. This could be cause for lengthy online discussion forums and justification of answers.

Emotional Aspects. Being an online learner, it is challenging to express how important completing a doctoral program is to a faculty member, simply because emotions have difficulty in being displayed via email. Many students experience anxieties when coming close to graduation, but the physical manifestations of anxieties (e.g., shaking, heart palpitations, and stomach discomfort) cannot be conveyed to faculty when they

are hundreds of miles away. However, a physical meeting between the two parties could demonstrate that the student is in distress and could call for some critical response.

From Student to Instructor: Strategies to Assist Online Instructors

Because my online learning experience was so challenging, I wanted to make sure that other online students would not be exposed to components of online learning that could be prevented. As an online learner and an online instructor, I was able to implement what TO DO with online learners:

1. Be a Real Person, Not Just an Email

Essentially, students want to feel valued within the classroom setting—virtual or otherwise. As an online instructor, I spend the first week of the course introducing myself and sending a personal welcome to each student. Limited amounts of personal disclosure can be a good thing! I inform them that I was an online student and understand some of the challenges they face. Validating students through emails can be achieved through making individualized comments on their discussion posts, responding with timely follow-up, and answering every email. Many times I will get a return comment such as "You are the only instructor who has ever emailed me back within 24 hours" or "It sounds like you know how I feel." Allowing students to know that you have walked in their shoes puts them more at ease.

2. Be Strengths-Based

Many times I discover an online student with limited online communication skills. Rather than inform the student in a public forum that his or her writing has several challenges, I take that opportunity to hold a more private discussion. Using a strengths-based approach helps students focus on the positives of their work and not dwell on the negatives.

3. Timely Feedback

Online instructors not only spend hours teaching over the Internet, but many have physical classrooms, as well. It is imperative to establish early in the online environment that you will attempt to respond in as



timely a manner as possible. I have elected a 24-hour timeline; students know that I check emails within every 24-hour period. Emails are my lifeline to the students. I respond to every one, even if it is a simple "Thank you" or "You're welcome."

What's Next?

As technologies advance, both online learners and instructors will be exposed to a plethora of opportunities for success and failure in the online environment. As we learn to navigate courserooms and become more timely with our discussions and emails, we must not forget that as instructors we have the obligations to be real people with our students and put ourselves in their shoes.

I recommend that all faculty who desire to be online instructors take an online course themselves. Learn the anxieties that accompany navigating discussion posts and assignment links, and experiencing technical difficulties. Experience what the student feels when the online library is not working, or when there has been a thunderstorm and the power is out. Remember that the student took an online course for a specific reason, and it is up to us to help them through it.

Jodi McKnight, *Assistant Professor of Psychology*

For further information, contact the author at Mid-Continent University, Department of Psychology and Counseling, 99 Powell Road East, Mayfield, KY 42066-9007. Email: jmcknight@midcontinent.edu

SHARE SUCCESSES AT YOUR COLLEGE!

NISOD invites member colleges to submit college success stories for a possible feature in the "Member Spotlight" section of *Hook'Em Up*, our monthly e-newsletter. The features are 200- to 300-word articles, sharing successes at your college and highlighting innovative practices, programs, and opportunities for NISOD readers. Less is more. We encourage submitting a short, persuasive "blurb" that drives readers to your website for the "complete story."

Email your submission as a Word document to
Christy Lewis
c.lewis@austin.utexas.edu