The Essential Roles of Faculty in Supporting Learners

This is an excerpt from the writings and research of pre-eminent online learning expert, Dr. Tony Bates, and is part of a series on Understanding the Building Blocks of Online Learning. It is published with permission from Contact North | Contact Nord.

In stressing that the pedagogical advantage of online learning is the ability of students to interact with teachers and each other over time and distance, Bates offers the following advice to faculty:

- *Course design*: Start with a well-designed course that sets out clear learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment methods, and clearly states expectations for students and you as instructor.

- *Online class organization*: Manage your time by establishing how and when you can be contacted, and your response turnaround time. Create a well-organized classroom that is easy for students to navigate and includes information most frequently requested.

- Focus on interaction: Invest your time more in interaction with students, and less in delivering content. The primary focus is students' individual and collaborative learning processes, but you should be active and visible as guide, observer and facilitator.

- *Introductory activity*: Welcome students individually at the beginning of the course and set a task that helps them to get to know the classroom and each other.

- *Setting the tone*: Establish a tone and culture of trust and openness that fosters participation. Model critical, but constructive feedback and exchange of ideas, showing how to agree but take an idea farther and how to respectfully disagree based on evidence. Encourage students to ask questions, take risks with sharing ideas and opinions, and to exchange with and support each other in the learning process. Foster a learner-led classroom, but set clear expectations and boundaries, and be prepared to intervene and react quickly to help students stay on track and be constructive.

- *Goal setting for discussions*: Set explicit goals for online discussions so that interaction is more than an exchange of opinions and leads to deeper learning (e.g. deepening or personalizing understanding, developing critical and analytical thinking skills, problem-solving, knowledge construction, and applying experience to new situations). Moderate discussions based on the expressed goals, and help students develop the skills to participate.

- *Knowledge construction and academic skill building*: Use class and small group discussions and projects to model and engage students in academic discourse, teaching skills, such as constructing evidence-based arguments. Through focused discussion, students can build new ideas, re-consider the meaning of their experience, develop theories and frameworks, and consider implications of application of new knowledge.

- *Learning objectives*: Match discussion topics to learning objectives, thus helping students in completing assignments through better understanding of concepts and their application to a current issue.

- *Asynchronous communication and critical thinking*: Asynchronous discussions lend themselves well to development of critical thinking. Model thoughtful questioning and response that moves a conversation farther and deeper; help students to use the wait time between postings for reflection; provide clarification without ending the conversation; and encourage students to develop and test their own meaning of concepts and ideas.

- *Group activities*: Use small group projects to help students build online cooperative and collaborative learning skills including sharing experience, using complementary strengths, and testing and developing ideas. Students who have chosen online learning for its flexibility may be reluctant to engage in group activity. As an instructor, you can guide the process positively by providing criteria for self-selection for group formation, ensuring that students are clear about the task, monitoring discussions and progress toward goals, providing frequent feedback and encouragement, troubleshooting when groups get off track, and defining the assessment process and criteria.

- *Individual participation*: Encourage participation in a variety of ways through ensuring discussions are meaningful and relevant to learning objectives and learner experience, setting tasks that require reporting, and engaging in peer critique. Check in by private e-mail with non-participants to find ways to support them and with those who dominate discussions to ensure that their participation is focused, meaningful, and does not discourage others.

- *Adjusting for differences*: Be aware of cultural, epistemological, and language differences. Students used to a didactic model of teaching may not immediately thrive in a virtual classroom until they learn to challenge their teacher's and peers' ideas and to articulate their own with confidence. Students learning in a second language may need time to adjust to an environment where reading and writing are the main forms of communication. However, asynchronous communication gives them time to absorb meaning and compose responses.

Read Dr. Tony Bates' perspectives and advice on key issues in online learning in his 8 part series on [Understanding the Building Blocks of Online Learning](#).

The series was researched and developed by [Contact North | Contact Nord](#) Research Associates, Dr. Jane Brindley and Dr. Ross Paul.