TOP 10 SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL ONLINE EDUCATORS
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- **Become a facilitator of peer learning**
- **Establish high expectations**
- **Recognize various types of students; be flexible**
- **Provide quick, but thoughtful responses**
- **Choose your means of communication**
- **Individualize your approach**
- **Offer continuous assessment and feedback**
- **Select the proper tone**
- **Trade off time for flexibility**
- **Use humor – It's no joke**

Having been involved in online education for more than a dozen years, I have seen acceptance of the medium increase, and skepticism of its effectiveness diminish.   Yet, understanding the "art" of quality online instruction may constitute the major gap between acceptance and application. This is true in both the academic and the training worlds. More than simply *who* is willing to teach online, it is becoming a question of who can *best* deliver the courses.

I have been a Distance Ed student, I've designed and taught online courses at the graduate level, and I've taught corporate trainers and higher ed faculty at a distance. Over the years, it's become clear that the successful online educator possesses certain traits which are clearly distinct from those of a Distance Educator whose online course is only mediocre – or sadly, worse.

Here is my Top 10 list of "must-have" traits to make online students feel that distance is not a barrier, but an enabler of an enriched learning experience, and to enrich the instructor's experience as well.

1. Become a facilitator of peer learning

Peer learning may be one of the most significant benefits, yet one of the best-kept secrets in online education.   As the instructor assumes the role of facilitator -- encouraging the sharing of experiences, ideas and solutions – an online course can become a magical experience.

Even in courses where basic information, processes, procedures or policies must be mastered (e.g. – accounting, computer science, physics), online education offers students

multi-faceted opportunities to go beyond simply drill and practice. Sharing experiences, tossing out questions to the whole group, or engaging the entire class in a problem solving discussion can bring new dimensions to the content.   The online instructor can incorporate a variety of methods to accomplish this. Group work, chat, and role-play are excellent tools for eliciting peer learning. The more students feel as if they are offering their unique perspectives or helping to solve problems, the more engaged and richer the experience becomes.

2. Establish and Maintain High Expectations. Model Best Practices and Performance.

Unequivocally, most students approach online learning with the attitude that it requires less time, less involvement and less rigor than a classroom course. Wrong! Also unequivocally, a good online class will take more time than classroom delivery – for both teacher and student. This reality needs to be revealed and accepted by both instructor and learner at the outset, as a credible online learning experience demands the same – and often higher standards than in a face-to-face classroom. Since most communication is text-based, the teacher and learner need to feel comfortable with the written word, and possess the skills to manage that. Yes, spelling and grammar should count – even in the online classroom, and "I used Spell check" is not a valid excuse. The online teacher sets the standard, so brush up on your Strunk and White, if necessary.

The online instructor should also serve as a role model for student participation and behavior. Setting the bar for reasonably quick responses, and active participation in discussions is essential, and sets the tone for students' "classroom" performance.

3. Recognize various types of students and be flexible in your approach
No matter what the subject matter of the class, I have found that each online section includes these representative types of individuals:

- *The Leader* quickly makes his/her presence known by taking the lead in posting assignments and interacting with classmates (both publicly and via private e-mail). With luck, you will have several of these students whose leadership qualities one should definitely encourage. Leadership assignments in group activities or chat sessions can be used to recognize and reward that behavior.
- *The Techie* (thank goodness) helps classmates – and sometimes the teacher -- with computer issues.
- *The Eager Learner* is the student who is as enamored and engaged in the online experience as the active instructor. This participant will ask many questions, both in discussion forums and via private e-mail, and can hardly wait to put all the theory into practice. This student may demand a great deal of attention, but is a joy to observe. So look on the bright side.
- *The Learned Minimalist* completes all required work, demonstrating mastery of the material, and contributes just what is asked for. What wrong with that? Nothing is wrong, and it is hard to fault this student for fulfilling the requirements, but it can be

frustrating to accept that this student is not motivated to be a more like the "Eager Learner". One can try to nudge this type of student toward assuming a leadership role, by responding to his/her postings with questions, or suggesting partnering with another student who needs some help. But, again, this student is not a problem, so look on the bright side.

- *The Non-participant* is the most challenging of all for the online instructor. This student simply will not believe that online classes will be rigorous, will take time, and that "showing up" is really necessary.   It's imperative that the instructor clearly states at the outset that a specific level of participation is necessary. (Posting and responding to the discussion Forum *at least* once a week is a good baseline standard to set. Specific weekly assignments and responses to classmates is another method.) Having students read and acknowledge that they understand the expectations is a good practice to adopt, but will not ensure compliance. As unpleasant as it may be, when non-participation is noted after a week or so, the instructor must contact the student via e-mail or phone, to ascertain whether there is a real problem going on which prevents participation (as might be able to be picked up in a face-to-face situation), or if it's a performance issue. Often, the instructor can work with administration to contact the student and determine the true level of commitment to the course. Some students are more comfortable dealing with a third party. After several exchanges or attempts to engage the student, suggestions to re-enroll in another session, when the student's schedule might permit more participation are warranted. If this does not work, then notice of anticipated "failure" must be given.   (More often than I had expected, life catastrophes befall students during a semester, and they sometimes neglect to inform the school or the instructor. In these cases, I have always advocated flexibility in either course completion or re-enrollment.)

4. Check in often, provide quick – but <u>thoughtful </u>responses

Online instructors often get caught up in the on-campus model of holding strict office hours. While that is a valid time-management strategy, it doesn't always translate well into the world of new technology – where e-mail and the Internet are raising expectations for quick responses.   I know that when I have contacted online help-desks, and get an auto-reply saying that I will receive a personalized response in 48 hours, I am not particularly happy. I do not want to wait! Some instructors I have worked with feel that if they clearly communicate with students about their availability, this is enough. This can work, but I do not feel it's the best approach. I think a distance educator needs to accept the responsibility of operating in a wired world, and realize that frequent checking and responding to e-mail and discussion boards is required. This does not mean that responses should be hasty or thoughtless. A classroom instructor may be caught off-guard or unprepared to respond to a student's question in the proper tone or with the most useful information. But electronic communication allows one to take that deep breath, pause, and craft constructive responses. Even if one has to reply with a quick e-mail, admitting that more thought is needed ("Interesting point. Let me think about that (or look into it) and get back to you tomorrow") acknowledges that the student has been heard. You may also admit that you do not know something, and ask the student to post the question in the

Discussion Forum. Without exception, this method enriches discussion, encourages peer sharing, and almost without fail, yields productive learning.

5. Choose your means of communication
Most online courseware provides instructors and students the tools to facilitate communication with large groups, small groups and individuals. This variety allows learners to acquire knowledge, build confidence, and succeed in one-on-one interactions, as well as in groups. It is essential to know when to communicate publicly and when it's best to keep it one-on-one. E-mail between instructor and student, or student-to-student (or instructor-to-instructor) creates opportunities for collegiality that might never arise in an on-campus setting, where time, appearance, language and other factors often work at odds with getting to know your colleagues. The Discussion Forum (sometimes referred to as the "Virtual Classroom") can be a lively place, or just an endless, meaningless ball of threads. It is up to the instructor to find ways to create a dynamic sharing experience in the Forum, and not have it be simply the "inbox" for assignments. Open-ended questions and focused responses can help. Sometimes a "broadcast e-mail" to the whole class is the most effective means to grab attention. Experiment with these tools. Try them all. You will quickly learn what works best.

6. Individualize Your Approach
Counter to many initial perceptions, online instruction can provide many opportunities for individual tailoring of instruction. E-mail, discussion board messages and chat can be powerful tools. An online teacher can approach individual students in various ways, and, with some attention, can grasp the best means of communication for each individual. Some students are not as comfortable expressing themselves in writing. Others are not comfortable taking part in live chats. Some demand personal e-mail attention. Others enjoy contributing their opinions to the entire group. One instructor can employ many methods within an online "session". I enjoy the challenge of finding the best means of drawing the best work out each student.

Yet, often opportunities are missed. I've seen instructors turn over their discussion boards almost entirely to the students, while they themselves "walk away from the classroom". Consequently, discussion threads tend to be weak, and participation wanes quickly. When an instructor responds to a student's posting in a discussion forum - publicly acknowledging a participant's contributions – it does boost the ego of most learners, even adults. How can you do this in a class of 25? It does take time, but it's worth it in the end. I try not to single out the same students week after week, but tend to respond or react to everyone during a given week, and selected students during other weeks. It's important to encourage classmates to respond to each other. In fact, the instructor may have gotten to know more about certain students through private e-mails, and may be in a position to call upon that student's expertise to assist a classmate. You will find that there may be students who expect responses to each and every posting, and may even feel slighted, if you don't respond, but that's a class management issue which one needs to deal with that in an encouraging, though realistic way – possibly, "off-line" in

private e-mails. However, it is most important to make each response substantive, and, in the best cases, questioning and leading to further critical thinking. You want to encourage your students to do the same in their postings. You do not want anyone to respond with "Good point" or "nice job" too many times. That's gets old very quickly.

7. Offer continuous assessment and feedback

Continuous is the operative word. Just as classroom students crave acknowledgement, recognition and comment, many online students need this reinforcement even more. Even just acknowledging receipt of an assignment can allay fears of technical difficulties. Also, as noted earlier, the instant gratification of a quick response – or promise of a target date for responding to lengthy papers, can go a long way toward reinforcing a student's feeling of being valued as an individual.

8. Select the Proper Tone

E-mail, discussion boards, formal papers and projects are the means of communication in an online classroom. So, should the online classroom adopt an academic aura or a more casual conversational tone? Let me first restate that spelling, grammar and copyright count in each case. Second, formal papers should always follow traditional guidelines. The means of submission – "handing in" electronically -- is the only difference. E-mail and discussion board communication may have developed their own "elements of style", chiefly defined by quick, conversational messages. In an online classroom, the instructor needs to encourage well thought out, well-written postings, while also fostering a "conversational" tone to help personalize the instruction. Students need to feel that there is a real person behind the computer screen, yet, and I repeat, spelling counts! (OK, I'll admit, that, in a previous job as News Director for a local TV station, I was referred to as "The Spelling Czar".) As the cliché goes, there is a time and place for everything. It's wise to pay attention to appropriate means of communication, to model that, and to steer your students in that direction.

9. Trade time for flexibility

All of the above adds up to a time-consuming endeavor. Yes, online education takes far more time than showing up in a classroom for several hours per week. Often, evenings and weekends are exactly when working adult students do most of their work. It's also when they may need help over hurdles. I don't mean to say that a good DE instructor has to work 24/7, but frequent checking in, and rapid, thoughtful responses are mandatory in order to maximize the online experience for both teacher and student. Let's say you really don't want to check in on weekends – and that's a reasonable ground rule – then, clearly state that rule on day one. Managing expectations will help minimize student frustration. For me, even with online teaching's increased demands on my time, the trade-offs are:
- Flexibility -- my classroom is open 24/7, and I can log on in the early morning or the middle of the night.
- Proximity – no commuting
- Portability -- I can work from home, office or vacation with my ever-present laptop and national ISP).

This may not be for everyone, but, for me, it is the only way.

10. Use humor – and that's no joke
Lighten it up. You have a personality. Let it come through on line. This can make all the difference. Many online students and instructors are so concerned with the technology and the "formal" student-professor relationship that they hesitate to let their personalities shine through. Humor can go a long way toward breaking down the barriers of distance and text, and make everyone more human. It helps everyone relax in the electronic classroom, and paves the way to a comfortable, enjoyable and productive learning experience.