

## 11 Practice Priorities to Promote Empathy in Online Courses

By Richard G. Fuller, DEd

Some instructors generate and display great empathy in their online teaching, while others do not. Empathy allows an understanding of students' reactions from the inside, a sensitive awareness of the way learning seems to students. Empathy promotes the motivation to learn and influences the learning process in a positive manner. Empathy is fostered by using a variety of techniques that promote friendly, conversational interaction in supporting learning opportunities. Instructors need to develop and conduct their teaching in both the pre-active and active teaching phases in an empathetic, caring manner. There are 11 practice priorities that can help to increase the sense of empathy in an online course.

### Practice Priority 1: Provide a "tips for online course success" document

Instructors should provide a tips page that gives the students technical ideas for success as well as how to approach the course overall. Posting tips for learning and the skills for self-motivation, adult learning, and how best to stay organized will help to maximize the learning opportunity. This can be

posted on the shell portal for student reference.

### Practice Priority 2: Minimize the use of synchronous chat rooms

Many empathetic instructors choose not to engage in the online synchronous chat rooms, as the posting in chat rooms is generally more "superficial" than postings in an asynchronous discussion board. Some students are not able to keep up due to keyboarding skills and the ability to post coherent, well-thought-out ideas quickly.

### Practice Priority 3: Find common ground for students in technology and content

There are a variety of technological options that instructors can explore to enhance content, such as streaming video, audio clips, PDF files, and podcasting. However, not all student technological capabilities are the same. Some have access to large bandwidths and technology; others do not. The decision about how and when to include large data and media files needs to take this into consideration. Publishers' course cartridges and CD-ROMs can provide significant information and reduce faculty production time.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3 >>

## TIPS FROM THE PROS

### 7 Indicators of Community

The following are some questions to ask to determine whether or not your course has "the kind of communal infrastructure that makes learning fun and exciting."

- Do you and your students know each other's names?
- Are students comfortable engaging each other in discussion?
- Does the discussion occur inside and outside the instructional context?
- Are you and your students' goals similar?
- Is there a sense that the classroom environment is a safe environment for learning?
- Do students display a shared sense of responsibility?
- Have you and students made an emotional commitment to the course?

### Reference

Baker, Jason D. and Woods, Robert. "Social Dynamics of Online Learning: Pedagogical Imperatives and Practical Applications." 18th Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning. Accessed January 17, 2008 at [www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/Resource\\_library/proceedings/02\\_4.pdf](http://www.uwex.edu/disted/conference/Resource_library/proceedings/02_4.pdf). @

**Practice Priority 4: Careful and deliberate facilitation of discussion boards**

The use of higher-end questions helps students to synthesize a great deal of the content and then process it to formulate responses and opinions. How students are facilitated to interact is an equally important part of this dynamic. If students are committed to one side, they can be facilitated through a series of questions directing them to explore the opposing side of an issue. This allows the empathetic instructor to serve as “devil’s advocate,” facilitating a broader learning opportunity.

**Practice Priority 5: Instructor presence is practiced so students know the instructor is there**

Instructors practice presence through selective discussion board postings and frequent email contacts individually and with the group. Instructors should prepare themselves to actively participate every day. Online teaching requires a higher degree of instructor presence than the traditional learning environment. Students need to know that they are not just sending their material into cyberspace, never to be seen or heard from again. The online instructor needs to interact more with his or her online students and be more available through email and discussion boards than in a face-to-face class. Instructors should respond to their students through email within 24 hours, seven days a week, and establish phone conferences with students as necessary. Empathetic instructors provide personalized feedback every week with every assignment. When they do not hear from a student, they act to communicate. If an instructor is going to be offline for any period of time, he or she should inform students.

**Practice Priority 6: Exhibit high and deliberate empathy and nurturing**

Empathetic instructors are always available to their students and need to understand that their students are traveling or juggling education, career, and family. The online instructor should be careful in making assumptions about student intentions and responses. If there is a question about the tone of student language and motivation, the instructor needs to contact the student directly for clarification.

**Practice Priority 7: Design “think-forward” lessons with meaningful titles**

For clarity, instructors should provide a high degree of redundancy and consistency of structure, and lessons that are laid out similarly from week to week. This allows students to think forward regarding expectations. Providing this level of clarity allows learners to direct their attention to learning the concepts that must be mastered.

**Practice Priority 8: Create a sense of trust early in the course**

Creating an environment of trust allows students to feel that they are important to their instructor. Trust can be promoted by employing a conversational approach in the discussion boards, emails, and general communication. This sense of trust needs to be established from the beginning of the course and carried out consistently during the term.

**Practice Priority 9: Use frequent checks for learning and understanding**

To apply empathy, instructors can frequently check that learning is occurring and that students understand both content and structure of the class materials, activities, and assignments. This is an overt move through discussion boards and emails, where instructors frequently

open lines of communication with the entire group as well as with specific students.

**Practice Priority 10: Make personal connections prior to class beginning**

This can be accomplished through online introductions and telephone connections. Utilizing direct telephone communication sets the tone of a personal touch and opens students to interaction with the instructor. It creates a personal connection and makes the students feel welcome. In the opening online introductions, respond to each student’s posting with a positive response about the student and connect something of mutual interest. The personal connection can also be made through posting digital pictures and biographies.

**Practice Priority 11: Interact at a higher level and with more frequency**

The empathetic instructor interacts with more regularity and with greater intensity than in the traditional classroom. Students have greater access to the instructor and should be encouraged to take advantage of the increased contact.

This article reviewed 11 practice priorities that establish a deliberate empathetic focus to learner needs. The distinction in empathetic practice from the traditional class becomes clear and is the product of deliberate action in the pre-active and active teaching phases. These Practice Priorities can assist instructors in exhibiting high and deliberate levels of empathy and nurturing to their online students.

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