

How online learning enriches the teaching and learning experience

Ilana Turetsky, EdD

The upcoming summer semester will mark my fourth semester teaching online courses at Azrieli Graduate School. I have found the experience to be enriching, broadening, and stimulating. While some may envision online teaching as a direct transfer from the live classroom to the virtual setting, I perceive online teaching as a categorically different enterprise. Allow me to share three brief thoughts on my experiences teaching online, highlighting some of the unique features that I believe online learning affords.

1. Student processing of information

Student processing of material learned in my online courses is, in certain ways, far richer than in a traditional face-to-face course. This is due to a simple reason: students are asked to generate some kind of product on every topic they learn.

The driving force behind constantly asking students to produce is twofold:

- (a) **Accountability:** In a live setting, a student's physical presence indicates some minimal form of engagement with the course and thus serves as a basic form of accountability. By contrast, the lack of a physical presence in an online course necessitates creation of accountability in other ways. I can assign an array of rich and stimulating resources to explore. However, without asking students to *do* something with that material, I have no way of ascertaining whether students even looked at the material, let alone engaged richly with the ideas therein.
- (b) **Promoting active learning:** My preparation for each online learning module, that is, weekly learning unit, involves a two-step process: (1) "What is the most important content that I want students to master this week?" Once I identify my primary learning goals, I consider (2) "What learning experiences can I create to help my students master that material?" More often than not, this step of crafting active, meaningful, and engaging learning experiences requires far more time, creativity, and effort on my part than the preparation of the actual content. Though in theory this focus on the *process* of learning should be no different in a traditional course, I find the online course setting to be more promotive of this two-step preparation process. Perhaps this is because the online context lends itself less naturally to the traditional lecture format or because presenting a written explanation of each week's module forces the instructor to carefully and sharply think through all elements of that week's learning process.

2. Student-Teacher interaction

Rarely in my live classes do I have the opportunity to hear from every single student on critical elements of every single lesson. In my online courses, because lessons are structured in such a way that each student submits weekly assignments on primary elements of that particular module, I have the opportunity to hear from and engage with each individual student. As a result, I get to know my students better and also engage with them one-on-one on a weekly basis, a frequency of direct interaction that would be impossible to achieve in a live course setting.

3. Feedback loop

Each weekly module in every single one of my online courses ends the same way, with a 'One Minute Paper'. This One Minute Paper asks students to reflect on the most important thing that they learned that week and also on any unanswered questions they still have. I have found this brief assignment to be an invaluable tool in helping me understand how every single student experienced that week's learning and also in creating a concrete, structured venue for students to voice their questions, even if the questions aren't pressing enough that the student would have taken the initiative to email me. In this context, I respond to each student about the major or minor questions that are lingering in their minds in reaction to that week's material. Furthermore, through this forum, I have received very valuable feedback that has driven subsequent adjustments to my courses. At this point, I can't imagine conducting a class without the use of this assessment tool. My experiences with the One Minute Paper in my online course would likely lead me to incorporate this tool into any course that I would teach, traditional or online.

Conclusion

Though traditional and online courses both involve students, instructors, and course material to be learned, the learning process that occurs in each setting often looks very different. Through teaching in an online context, a setting that was not initially the most natural for me, I have been forced to think critically about the most basic components of effective teaching and how to implement those elements in the online context. While every model has its own set of strengths and weaknesses, and while the success of the model will inevitably be a function of how it is used, I believe that online learning has the potential to promote incredibly rich student learning, an increased degree of student-teacher interaction, and unique systems for feedback loops that empower both teacher and student with valuable information.

Ilana Turetsky, EdD is an instructor in Jewish Education at Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration.