

Podcast for Module 7: Execution, Part 2

Welcome to the seventh, and final, podcast for this course on Online Teaching and Learning. We covered a lot of ground in the previous podcasts and I hope all of my discussion of our text, and my additions to it, have been helpful to you.

Our authors give us some tips how to engage our students without over-engaging them in Essential Element 16. I have summed up the advice given in one easy sentence that I have mentioned before: Get out of the way. We need to be obviously present, as I have mentioned before, but we must also make sure that we are not too obviously present to the point of dominating the discussions.

We must learn to allow the students to become the center of the discussions, while we are present, encouraging, redirecting, watching, and guiding. This means that as we create the seed questions or topics for each discussion forum, we need to choose those that encourage student-to-student discussion. We do not want right or wrong answers of which we must be the judges. Rather, we want more open-ended topics that give the students room to comment on each others' ideas, summaries, opinions, interpretations, applications, analyses, etc. while, at the same time, demonstrating the students' understanding of the topic that allow us to properly assess their learning.

While we should not comment on each and every post, I do encourage you to comment on all original postings, those that are the students' answers to the seed questions or topics. These original postings are the ones that each student posts that begin new threads (those postings that are due on Wednesdays at Midnight in my courses). You should have one of these original postings for each student. Contrary to the advice our authors give us, I always post a comment on these posts, because they form a substantial amount of the students' final grade and I want each student to know that I have read and valued his or her post. But once the other students begin to reply to each other, I get out of the way. Unless I see an obvious error or breach of netiquette, I read all the response postings but do not comment. As my courses can rack up hundreds of posts, I do not have the time nor mental capacity to be involved in each and every discussion, and I do not want to kill the conversations by throwing in "The Professor Has Spoken" thoughts. I let the students work out the dialogue, as I mentioned in the very first podcast.

Our Last Essential Element, number 17, deals with what many students really focus on: grades. We need to think a bit differently about how we assess student learning in the online world just as we need to think differently about how we instruct in our online courses.

I very much encourage you to move away from the traditional memorize-and-test method that utilizes mid-terms and final exams. While we want our students to gain knowledge and comprehension of the course content, we also want them to be able to go deeper in their understanding, to be able to use the basic knowledge of content to understand the bigger picture once the semester ends. I use a combination of discussion posts, response postings, papers, and projects to assess the learning outcomes of each course. None of these require a proctor to oversee an exam and none of these require the students to memorize and regurgitate information. Rather, these assessments require the students to be constantly engaged in the material, seek out other resources, and solve problems dealing with the main themes of the course that are meaningful and authentic to their own situations.

Using such assignments as assessors of knowledge is also more interesting to me than slogging through final exam grading. The rubrics that I provide my students give them a solid framework within which to operate -- comprehensive and reliable, but also allow them to explore issues and particulars of which I am not an expert. They can take the concepts they have learned in the classes and apply them in meaningful ways that really opens up the classes to further learning for the other

students and myself. Thus, the online environment encourages them to harness resources that I have not assigned within the course. If you think back to the use of andragogical principles, you can use these to create meaningful assignments that go beyond the first level of knowledge, the memorization of facts, and into the higher-order thinking skills of comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis (or creation). To repeat the andragogical principles from the fifth podcast: Our adult students need less transmissive assignments than children while greatly benefiting from those assignments that tap into their prior knowledge, a desire to self-direct their learning, and their need to immediately apply their learning to their life situations (both socially and vocationally).

E-portfolios are another interesting assessment tool that have the potential to scaffold learning through the combination of our students' prior knowledge -- such as that gained by previous courses, life experiences, and current professional duties -- with the tools and content of our courses. Allowing our students to create such projects removes us as the arbiter of all that there is to test regarding our subjects and puts the burden of creation on our students, where it belongs anyway.

Thank you very much for listening to this series of podcasts, and I hope and pray that they have been useful additions to the text Essential Elements. Feel free to contact me with suggestions, questions, or comments -- for I am always learning. I can be reached at my email address, dharrison@holypostles.edu or my Skype account david.harrison.nevada.

May God bless you in your online endeavors!