

Dixie Dixit: New Trends with Technology
Tips for effective online learning:
An interview with Nicole Eustice, Part 1
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Current educational trends allow learners to select among three different types of learning environments: totally face-to-face, totally online, or a combination of both, also known as blended learning. The three options offer different advantages, as well as some disadvantages.

Research shows that blended learning is the most effective, because it combines the benefits of the face-to-face environment with the advantages offered by technology (Bernard, et al., 2004; Means, et al., 2010; Zhao, et al., 2005). This is not always an option, though, for some learners or in some circumstances. Learners who find it hard to travel to learning centers because of time or distance constraints may decide the option of online learning is the best for them.

As teachers, we may be asked to work as online tutors for different types of programs. Even if we have plenty of classroom experience, online learning involves a series of challenges that we will need to address. How can we ensure that we and our students are successful?

I asked Nicole Eustice, of the American English Institute of the University of Oregon at Eugene for some tips concerning this theme. Nicole holds a Master's in Linguistics from the University of Iowa and has ample experience in ESL programs. She also has knowledge as an online tutor and course designer, most notably on the Distance Education Program for Teacher Training with the program for Critical Thinking in Language Learning and Teaching. This program is offered to teachers around the world. I had the opportunity to take the course and found it extremely valuable. Nicole presented a talk at MEXTESOL, Puebla on *Online Discussion Today, Learner Autonomy Tomorrow* (2014). The following is the first part of the interview I had with her.

DS: *Nicole, when I took the course with you, the first thing that struck me was how carefully the instructions were explained and exemplified. Why is that necessary?*

NE: We recognize, as teachers, that creating instructions is of the utmost importance in any case, but when we cannot add emphasis through intonation, personal character, and physical expression, we must ensure that succinct, precise instructions are provided. Further, in the face-to-face (F2F) environment, we constantly assess and reassess the efficacy of our instructions, even below our conscious thinking, based on student reactions: their facial expressions, questions, and attempts to comply. We do not have this luxury online, especially in asynchronous courses.

The goal is that all participants in the online environment consistently understand what is expected through only written instructions. We have to carefully consider the many different perspectives that students will bring to their reading of the instructions, and it

may take many revisions as you find participants' interpretations vary beyond the creativity of your imagination and provision.

In a nutshell, what can we do? Be mindful of the organization of information and 'spaces' within the website. When there are options, keep them to a minimum or organize them hierarchically. Keep the language of instructions absolutely straightforward. Avoid popular catch phrases, buzzwords, and figurative or colloquial expressions. From week to week or lesson to lesson, keep the style, tone, and organization of instructions and materials the same. This consistency increases the likelihood that students/participants will follow your meaning precisely. After a first or second draft of instructions, let them sit for a day or two, then return to them trying hard to immerse yourself in a typical student point of view. Try to have someone not taking or teaching the course read them. Consider students' ability to understand the diction and structures you have chosen. Read them backwards and consider the logical flow carefully. Now you are ready to try them, but be sure to make online students feel as comfortable as possible with asking you questions, offering to answer their emails anytime and suggesting that you expect and welcome questions and suggestions. Acknowledging your fallibility as a teacher helps students feel more comfortable approaching you. In many cultures or even families, questioning authority is not acceptable. Even if you present yourself as a peer, facilitator, tutor, colleague, etc., the inclination remains to think of such a figure as having some authority or expertise that we lack, as someone we may be hesitant to question. We have to work even harder than F2F teachers in helping students feel comfortable with questioning any aspect of the course.

DS: *An important part of learning in any environment is student interaction. How can an online tutor make sure that students are interacting with each other, and not just with the tutor?*

NE: It may be unnatural for participants in the online environment to enter a discussion or collaboration as they are used to simply typing up essay-like responses when it comes to academic contexts. While many are completely comfortable with online communication, it is typically informal and social in nature. As a facilitator or tutor in this context, we have to model appropriate interaction by asking questions, and then pointing out the usefulness of this to generate and develop discussion. To start with, ask open-ended questions that do not have right and wrong answers, but offer space for contemplation of ideas. Offer participants the chance to relate their own experience and require that they ask a question or two on a specific matter offered by another participant in the discussion. Continue to model and encourage such deeper dialogue tactics as students gain confidence and ability, slowly moving toward less explicit interaction with students yet carefully monitoring their interactions and giving them some individual (private) feedback in their progress in developing discussion/encouraging interaction. You may need to require students to ask questions, or assign them to small groups and give them structure to develop a dialogue.

Another question is which tool to use in the learning management system (LMS). Typically we can find at our disposal wikis, discussion boards, online chats, blogs, microblogs, podcasts and video sharing options—all the media most people are already familiar with through using the internet for any purpose. A discussion board is the

primary medium we use because it is easy and lends itself well to collaboration. Also, writing rather than speaking allows participants more reflection time and tends to be more thorough and organized than audio or video offerings unless a lot of structure/scaffolding is provided.

Theoretical considerations have frequently invoked Michael Moore's *Transactional Distance*, originally conceived well before online learning environments were possible. In a word, it is the distance, not just physical, that lies between the communication of the teacher and the student. Elements affecting this distance in online learning, according to Moore (as cited in Ustati & Hassan, 2013) include structure of the learning environment (*Structure*) the extent and depth of communication within the parameters of the structure (*Dialogue*), and the degree of flexibility in learner choice based on personal motivation and trajectory (*Learner Autonomy*). These offer a paradigm by which to consider interaction and enhance efficacy given the LMS.

Considering these, using threaded discussions to interact with students brings closeness in showing the order of posts and replies. It would be time consuming to replicate that organizational structure with audio files or videos such that all students could readily see it. Also, most LMS offerings include a way to also comment privately on students' discussion posts. So, as in F2F settings, the instructor can interact with students all together, in small group work, and give individual, private feedback.

DS: *We can see that successful online tutoring requires a change in mindset and careful planning on the part of the teacher, not only in regards to course content. Personal considerations, such as how students perceive their role, that of the teacher, and that of their peers must also be taken into account.*

This conversation with Nicole Eustice will continue in the next issue of the *MEXTESOL Journal*.

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