



Five Tools For Teaching Your First Online Course

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Abstract

As we progress through the digital era, more and more institutions are encouraging online instruction. Online education training is typically offered or required prior to teaching online and offers a wide variety of digital resources. However, you can quickly become overwhelmed by the amount of software tools at your disposal. Using a few choice ones wisely helps make the most of your first online course. This article covers five options to get started.

Introduction:

Preparing For My First Fully Online Course

Medical Advertising was an online topics course that I co-taught at Virginia Commonwealth University where students learned the pros and cons of marketing medical products and services to consumers. The course, which consisted of 40 students, was conducted through online lectures, discussion and tests, and six projects that consisted of individual and group work. Because this was the first online course taught by either instructor, co-teaching was extremely beneficial since it allowed us to learn from each other as we progressed through the semester.

Prior to teaching online, we were both required to take the Online Learning Experience course at VCU. This six-week course was rigorous due to the barrage of activities that involved bookmarking sites, exploration of digital resources, social media posts / responses, video chats and video creation all while updating your progress via blog posts. Below I've highlighted a few of the best tools that came out of this experience.

Video: Course Promotion

A promotional "trailer" video is a great way to generate some buzz about the course, particularly if you are teaching online for the first time. For our Medical Advertising course, we created a :40 promotional video that used voiceover, music, text and still visuals to help drive student interest while giving an overview. As a result, the course filled up within one week.

When making the video, find an interesting way to tell students what they can expect from the course. Keep your video short and consider using an editing program such as iMovie to incorporate background music, title cards or a few relevant still photos. It will benefit to keep things simple because video production and editing can become very time consuming if you're not careful. Finally, be sure to include course registration details and your contact information at the end of the video. These promo videos must be short (two minutes is longest students hang on) and any detailed course information should be in text on screen, not simply spoken.

Keywords: Online Instruction, Tutorial Videos

Video: Course Introduction

Once the course begins, create a video to introduce yourself and go over course objectives. This will give your students some face time while providing them with an understanding of course content. This is an opportunity to set the tone for your course and will allow you to come across as formal or as accessible as needed.

As with the promotional video keep things interesting but simple and short, preferably under two minutes. If speaking to camera, take into consideration your appearance, lighting and the background. All of these elements will impact the quality of your video. For our course introduction video we both spoke to camera in conversational style. However, we fumbled a few parts of the presentation which resulted in performing several extra takes. Ultimately we edited the video down, using only the best footage. With performance in mind, consider writing a script or creating a checklist that you can read from the screen while recording your video with your computer's camera. Be prepared for some trial and error as you may need to do a few takes before your video is perfect.

Video Conferencing: Remote Speakers Add Value

Adding an outsider's perspective can be very beneficial to your course. Consider hosting one or more remote speakers using a video conferencing tool as we did for this Medical Advertising [course video](#). We used [Google Hangouts On Air](#) specifically because it allows students to attend the live conference or play back the recording later if necessary. This is a free tool that only requires the user to have a Google+ account and a YouTube channel. An alternative is [Zoom](#) that offers a free plan with limited functionality or professional plans with premium features that run between \$14.99 - \$19.99 per month.

Some logistical planning will be required to ensure the availability of your remote speakers but more importantly you'll want to test your technology beforehand. Performing a dry run prior to the speaker date will ensure that you both have the proper internet connection, quality audio and video as well as screen sharing functionality. During the dry run with our first few speakers, I was able to casually troubleshoot and resolve problems well in advance, resulting in a smooth run during the live video conference. Additionally, be sure to get your speaker's approval in advance if you plan to record the video.

Concluding your video conference with a Q&A

session will be a nice touch. However, it's best to prepare a few scripted questions just in case your audience fails to do so. During one of our initial video conferences only a few participants asked questions at the end, so moving forward we prepared questions for all of our remaining speakers.

Digital Community: Facilitating The Conversation

Using a tool like Facebook Groups to create a digital community for your course can be very beneficial as it adds interactivity and discussion. However, you may find that someone needs to kick start the conversation. An interactive assignment will allow you to do just that. Ask each student to post a minimum number of photo or video examples (all relevant to the topic of your choice). Once the posts are complete, require students to give a minimum of two comments on their classmates' submissions. Encourage students to write meaningful comments that convey their thinking and to avoid comments that are shallow or subjective. This type of open discussion can establish camaraderie for the group and help pave the way for future assignments.

In our Medical Advertising course, we asked each student to research infographics then post their favorite two to our Facebook group. While some students made the most of the assignment by finding strong infographics and providing thorough commentary, others appeared to have spent the minimal amount of time on the assignment which resulted in weak infographics and comments. As a whole the assignment was successful in kick starting the Facebook Group. Throughout the semester students continuously used the group as a hub for the course.

Although Facebook usage may be on the decline with today's college students, Facebook Groups still work because of the familiarity with the social media network. All 40 of our online students joined the group as instructed without any complications or concerns.

Screen Recording Software: Showing Is Believing

When teaching online it's difficult to explain how to use software, websites or other online tools. Instead of searching YouTube for an existing video that will help demonstrate the point, make the video yourself. Screen recording software programs allow you to easily demonstrate anything that appears on the screen while recording voiceover instruction in real time.

Posting easy-to-follow, shareable videos will allow students to learn software skills by pausing and playing back the demonstration.

When teaching Advanced Art Direction, a smaller traditional advertising portfolio lab course that consisted of 14 students at VCU, I quickly realized that several students could benefit from customized tutorials for Adobe Creative Suite. Rather than demo these programs during class time, I created a few quick videos that would help students as they moved through their assignments. I slowly began to build a small library of these instructional videos which I've posted on my [teaching website](#) as resources for future classes. Several students thanked me for creating these videos, stating that they actively used them during their projects. The only downside of making these tutorial videos is simply setting aside the time to create them. Once you get the hang of it, though, it's actually quite fun.

I personally use [Camtasia](#) which allows for screen recording, has a built-in editor and special effects features. This program is available for both Mac and Windows but is considered high end and is priced at \$249.00. If you don't have funds available, consider a few of the free screen recording programs. [Flashback Express](#) runs on Windows and is packed with features and tools that rival many premium programs. If you are a Mac user, [Quicktime Player](#) comes pre-installed on all Macs and is very intuitive for beginners, making it very easy to use.

Closing Thoughts: Start Small

When searching for the best digital teaching strategy for your first online course, stay focused on utilitarian tools that you understand well then adopt new tools when you're ready. As with a traditional classroom course, allow your online course to evolve from semester to semester by making improvements to your technique while staying relevant with the latest technology.

I found my first online course overwhelming at times, particularly since I was accustomed to creating projects that worked well in the traditional classroom setting. I made the mistake of thinking that these types of projects would work equally as well online, which wasn't the case. Additionally, a few of the tools I used didn't live up to their expectation, thus further complicating the learning experience of the students. Based on our course evaluations, several students commented that a few of the projects seemed too complex

in design and were not a good fit for an online course. Looking back, I realize that keeping things simple in the beginning is the best course of action.

Jay Adams teaches advertising portfolio courses at the Robertson School of Media and Culture at Virginia Commonwealth University. Jay's professional experience drives his teaching methods as he engages students in real world projects, challenging them to work on regional and national clients such as Anthem, Capital One and Virginia Tourism. He can be reached at jwadams@vcu.edu

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