Dispelling
Myths *About*
Online Education

Think online learning isn't effective? Think again,
say two online educators who stress that online learning
can—and should—offer rich learning opportunities
that are interactive, engaging, and experiential.

BY ROSEANNA DeMARIA AND TED BONGIOVANNI

Educators and students continue to question whether online education is as good as face-to-face. But we believe that debate misses the point by trying to draw direct comparisons between the two educational experiences. We argue that both have equal—but different—potential to enhance student learning. When educators stop trying to translate traditional classroom best practices into distance-learning venues, and start recognizing the unique advantages of digital education, they can unleash the power of the virtual classroom.

It has become imperative that business educators do just that. If schools are to prepare students to excel in today's technology-driven business environments, educators must confront distance learning on its home turf and rethink the very nature of learning. In doing so, they'll discover a powerful learning tool for higher education.

Community Building Is Key to Online Learning

BY KRISTEN SOSULSKI

At the New York University School of Continuing and Professional Studies (NYU-SCPS), we work to ground our programs firmly in the knowledge that learning is an inherently social activity. We know from research that people learn best when they are part of a community of practice. So in our online courses, students and faculty are part of learning communities filled with industry professionals, peer practitioners, and experts.

If schools want to design online courses that are dynamic, engaging, and educationally rich, I offer the following do's and a couple of don'ts:

Do…

…allow faculty to design their courses. This leads to teaching that's filled with enthusiasm and creativity—the kind of teaching that builds dynamic learning communities and keeps students returning to the online classroom.

…hire practitioners to teach. Some of our faculty are CEOs, CFOs, CLOs, and CMOs who bring their experiences to the online classroom. Their firsthand knowledge and passion for the topics they teach adds an applied dimension to our curriculum and leads to high student-to-student and faculty-to-student engagement.

…offer 24/7 support. No matter where students are located, they must be a part of their school community and the global network of the university. For that reason, we work to deliver the same support to distance students that we do to our on-site students. That support includes online office hours, student orientation materials, 24-hour technical support, and tutoring help. That infrastructure helps online students feel included in the school.

…design structured "meet-and-greet" activities. We want students to feel part of a learning community with their peers across NYU-SCPS, so we offer weekly online student orientations. During these "office hours," we offer

structured opportunities for students to meet one another, learn about the student services available, and even see and talk to each other online, in real time. It's critical to create such opportunities throughout the program, so that the school can connect with online students to ensure they feel supported and are aware of the resources available to them. The orientation is delivered online, enabling students to complete it at their own pace prior to the start of their online classes.

…give students a head start. A week before courses begin, students are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the course expectations and introduce themselves to their instructors and fellow classmates. During this period, instructors lead community-building activities to engage students and set the tone for the weeks ahead. For instance, faculty ask each student to build a digital ePortfolio, an online profile that includes the student's picture, biography, and résumé. Throughout their careers at NYU-SCPS, students use their ePortfolios as a place to curate examples of their course projects, papers, and other achievements.

…provide opportunities to network. Faculty provide multiple opportunities for students to network and collaborate with their peers and experts from the field. These include team-building activities, discussions led by special guest experts, and group projects where students work on actual problems facing an organization.

Don't…

…use only text-based tools. Online courses must be more than posts to discussion forums. Instead, we take advantage of a wider ranging tool set. We encourage communication and collaboration through online workspaces that allow for synchronous and asynchronous voice, video, and text-based communications. This method is consistent with the research on learning styles—not all students communicate best through writing or learn best through reading.

…let the end of class mean an end to learning. Learning and career development are lifelong activities. They don't end when an online course is over. That's why NYU-SCPS online courses never expire. Students continue to communicate with their former instructors and classmates and access course materials. Whether they've taken one course with us or earned a master's degree, students will find their ePortfolios are always available. Students can even use these ePortfolios to demonstrate their competencies for career and networking opportunities.

As a whole, this approach is simple, but it's not easy. A more efficient, but less effective, approach is to arrange for an instructional designer to work with an expert to create content for online courses. But this approach leads to generic courses, bored students, and disengaged online communities where students have few incentives, aside from a credential, to continue their online studies.

We avoid that by designing our courses to live up to the vision that NYU President John Sexton has established for us to be a "Global Network University" that connects and educates students around the world. From creating learning communities to designing classes with leading practitioners, we strive to deliver online educational experiences that continue long after our students finish their programs.

In addition to teaching in the NYU-SCPS, Kristen Sosulski is clinical assistant professor of information, operations and management sciences, and director, Center for Innovation in Teaching and Learning at NYU's Stern School of Business.

**Claim:**

Online learning doesn't engage students.

Fact:

Online learning can engage students more.

One of the biggest criticisms of online courses is that they lack the face-to-face engagement of the physical classroom. However, when online courses are done well, active engagement can be at the core of all of their activities.

The New York University School of Continuing Professional Studies (NYU-SCPS) offers 3,000 courses each year, including 400 online courses. Its Leadership and Human Capital Management graduate program includes 30 courses, of which about 15 are online. In each of these six-week courses, students meet online two times a week for three-hour synchronous, video-supported sessions. Outside of class, students must contribute to asynchronous forums and blogs. Courses are taught by adjunct faculty who are practitioners in the field.

These classes are designed like consultant firms, in which the professor is the CEO and the students are C-suite executives. Compensation is in the form of grades, and client projects are our "exams." Every synchronous online class session opens with a fast-paced, intense, and interactive exercise called the "CEO's Shock and Awe Roundtable." In this exercise, the CEO asks a question about the prior session's learning, and his or her direct reports must answer in three thoughtful sentences that will engage the CEO
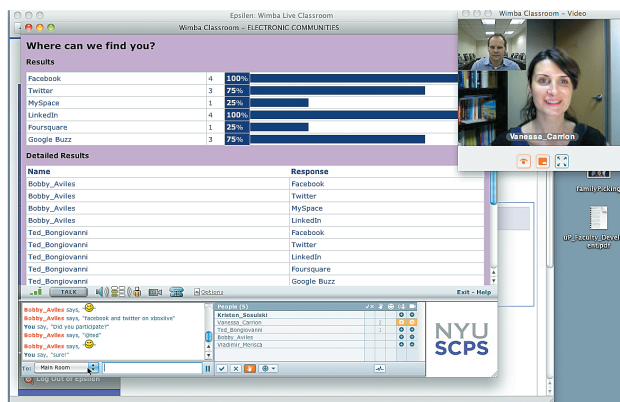
A live online classroom, such as this one at NYU-SCPS, encourages interactivity through blogs and live chat.

in a meaningful way. For example, after students have read a case study regarding the "Cola Wars" between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, the professor might ask, "As CEO, what is the biggest mistake I can make in vertical integration?"

Participants can see the face of the speaker on their screens. If their answer contains any "uhs," "ums," or "likes," the professor cuts the student off immediately. If the answer is too fundamental, the CEO typically shouts back, "And you think I don't know that?" These sessions are recorded and archived, so that students can review their performances after class—a benefit that is often not available in an on-site classroom.

After the online session, students often blog about how their heart rates increase and their palms get sweaty in anticipation of the discussion. One student even explained that during the first shock-and-awe session, she was sitting down on her sofa with her laptop on her lap. When it was her turn she began with "Um," before the professor cut her off. After that, she got up from the sofa, put her laptop on her desk, and stood for the rest of the session!

This exercise demonstrates the undiluted power of virtual engagement, which any professor can incorporate in an online classroom. This

level of interaction, which is anything but passive, helps students enhance their ability to think under fire and develop a habit of reflecting on their performances. These capabilities will serve them well in the business world.

Claim:

Online learning doesn't promote critical thinking.

Fact:

Online learning tools enhance critical thinking, especially in high-pressure situations.

Today's generation has grown up in a world of ubiquitous communication technologies. They are master task switchers and can comfortably text, scan Web pages, and converse with friends in fluid sequence. Simply put, they are accustomed to "thinking out loud" in multiple online settings. The virtual classroom allows us to channel our students' capacity to "think out loud" into an ability to practice focused, multidimensional critical thinking.

For example, when teaching a case study in an online class, the professor often begins by asking the group a question and calling on one student to answer. However, as the student progresses through his or her analysis, the professor texts related questions to the other students in the class. These texts appear to the entire class in a box onscreen, alongside the classroom whiteboard, roster of participating students, and a picture of the speaker. Now the entire class is thinking about both the student's ongoing analysis and the professor's

query—they then can text back their own responses. At the same time, the speaker can react to those texts simultaneously.

When professors use text and voice simultaneously in online discussions, the cohort becomes fully engaged, able to think out loud together. And because this level of interaction demands total focus, all the time, students are forced to think in more disciplined ways. Done well, this approach is a potent answer to teaching multidimensional thinking and critical analysis on the fly.

Claim:
Online learning can isolate students.

Fact:
Online classrooms can promote greater inclusion and confidence.

In face-to-face classrooms—not to mention in actual business settings—intense, high-pressure interactions can exclude individuals who are shy or fear failure. Because of its "public/private" nature, the online classroom offers shy students a safe environment to share their ideas. Those who might feel excluded in traditional classrooms often feel more empowered to participate in online synchronous discussions. In the process, they can develop their creativity, take more risks, and contribute more to the conversation.

In their blogs, students often share what it was like for them to learn to be more active contributors. One student wrote, "I'm not one who normally participates in class, but I've made an effort to contribute more and admit it makes class more interesting."

This is one of many similar comments students wrote in their blogs. Professors who develop multiple modes of contribution in their online courses are likely to discover that more students participate, not fewer.

Claim:
Online courses are static.

Fact:
Online courses are dynamic, reflective, and experimental.

In business, much of the preparation for boardroom meetings takes place well before the board meets, and it's no different for our online courses. The synchronous classroom is only part of the online equation.

To ensure richer learning environments, each week professors pose key questions on the discussion forum that help students deconstruct the case that will be under discussion during the synchronous online session. The professors help direct discussion with brief responses to student postings, acting much like CEOs who use their BlackBerries to respond to emails. Students use these forums to try out their ideas and practice their analytical skills without the time constraint of live discussion—with each post, they're preparing for the learning crucible of the live classroom.

We also require students to write blogs, where they reflect on what they are learning and connect it to

their prior knowledge. These blogs, which we view as learning journals, are not private diaries, but public reflections shared with the professor and the class. In these blogs, students are invited to bring in their expertise from their fields and review their past performances. This exercise helps students not only make deeper connections to the content, but also create a community of supportive learners.

'Living the Learning'

At NYU-SCPS we embrace a "living the learning" approach in our online course design. The tools we use in online classrooms are the same ones that global firms use to coordinate global teams, manage projects, assure the quality of project results, improve productivity, and align objectives across the organization.

In other words, a virtual classroom does not simulate the virtual experiences our students will have in the workplace—it *is* the virtual experience. For that reason, it's imperative that educators explore ways to maximize the benefits of online learning tools on their own terms, not continually view them as "substitutes" for face-to-face techniques. Our commitment to business and higher education demands that we take this journey. Our students deserve nothing less. **Z**

Roseanna DeMaria is an associate adjunct professor and Chief Learning Officer in the Leadership & Human Capital Management graduate program at New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. Ted Bongiovanni is the director for distance learning and an adjunct instructor at NYU-SCPS.

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50 Years

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