Best Practices in Online MBA Teaching

Mark M. Lennon, Ph.D.

www.MarkPhD.com

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Introduction

The challenges and opportunities in teaching an online graduate school course in an MBA program are different than those in a traditional classroom setting. It can be difficult for instructors to replicate the positive social interactions and sense of camaraderie amongst student that can be achieved with traditional in person teaching. How do students "get to know" their faculty and one another, if there is no face-to-face time? This is crucial because increased interaction positively influences student engagement and with it improves learning outcomes.

3 Keys to Successful Online Teaching

1) Foster a sense of student belonging.
2) Actively participate and answer questions in a timely manner.
3) Create a sense of community between students.

To accomplish this I have identified 5 "Best Practices" from my own teaching experiences. These practices are explained in the next sections through a combination of description and an example of an actual video I posted to YouTube for one of my classes.

Best Practice #1: Syllabus Review Video

Prior to the beginning of the class, I recorded a private YouTube video in order to replicate the first day experience I have in my traditional in person classes. In this video, I introduced myself, told them about my professional background and qualifications, and then most importantly read through the syllabus.

After reading each section of the syllabus, I then spoke extemporaneously in which I gave anonymous positive (and negative) examples of assignments past students had submitted. These gave students a better sense of the course, my expectations, as well as provided guidance on how they could succeed.

This video, while hosted on a public website, was made private and only those with links to the video could view it. The running time of the video was approximately 5 minutes. The video could just as easily have been hosted on an internal university server, thereby eliminating any concerns instructors may have about privacy.

I distributed this link to the video with a written message and a copy of the syllabus to all my students through the Blackboard internal email system. However, as in any class I teach, I did reserve the right to amend the syllabus if necessary but would of course give students ample warning and lead-time on proposed changes.
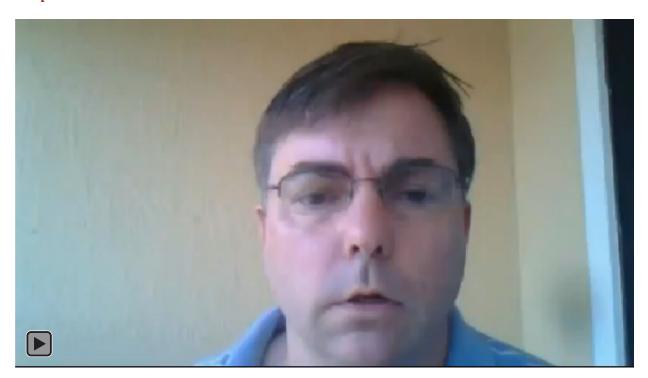
Student Feedback

From the free form answers in the course feedback given at the end of class, this initial video was clearly a hit with students. Most of them stated that they had never seen this technique used before, but greatly appreciated it for it both clarified the contents of the syllabus and perhaps more importantly allowed them to identify with a heretofore-unknown professor, which established trust. The video was also a helpful reference and time saver, for as assignments became due, students could refer back to the syllabus review video for clarification on my expectations.

Best Practice#2: "The Week Ahead" Video Announcements

Every Sunday night over the course of their six-week summer session, I posted a 2 to 3 minute video (again posted to a private YouTube account with private link) in which I previewed the readings and the work that was due that upcoming week. This helped to keep students on track, as well as to let them know that their instructor, although traveling during the summer session, was very much involved in teaching the course.

Due to the nature of the course, and given the large amounts of reading material, these "The Week Ahead" videos also helped students focus in on areas that I as their instructor found especially relevant and crucial to their understanding in order to complete future assignments such as quizzes, papers, and presentations.

Sample YouTube Video: "The Week Ahead"

Student Feedback

These videos too were quite popular with students, for similar reasons as the initial syllabus review video. Students, rightly so, realized that I cared about them as individuals and wanted them to succeed in my course. By giving directions on what and how to study the material, students commented that I respected their need to balance their student, professional, and personal lives because the videos were much faster to watch and easier to understand than to have to read a lengthy written announcement. The videos helped serve as guide posts to navigate the class.

Best Practice #3 Multimedia Blackboard Discussion Posts

In my Marketing class there was a great deal of required reading. But as students are also savvy consumers, I personalized the material by posting questions about well-known brands, and asked students to respond in the context of the material we were learning that week.

For example, when dealing with the topic of Pricing, I asked students to give descriptions of products that they consumed based on Price as the prime motivator for purchase. I also peridiocally participated in these Discussions in order to let them know that the students were not studying in a vacuum, and that their performance was being both observed and measured.

These posting need not be elaborate. Often times they would consist of simple statements like "good point" or "have you considered this in light of what we have read or what your fellow students have posted about" etc. What was important was that the students knew I was participating in these Discussions, yet allowed them the freedom to drive the conversations, just as I would in a live class discussion.

In addition to allowing text-based postings, I also gave the option to students to post videos that they found on the Internet. However, these videos were always from third parties. Due to concerns about privacy, etc., I <u>never</u> required students to post videos of themselves. Rather, when studying the section on television advertising, I asked students to post links to commercials that they considered to be either effective or ineffective, and then discuss them in terms of the concepts and terms learned in the course.

Student Feedback

Posting of videos by students was considered to be both fun and educational. The students enjoyed critiquing the various news segments, commercials, etc. that were posted by their fellow students. Given that it was a Marketing course, and the similarity of the socio-demographic backgrounds of many of the students, a certain amount of "bonding amongst classmates" occurred as they shared memories and personal anecdotes about when they had seen the original commercials or ad campaigns in their youth. This practice fostered a sense of community amongst the students.

Best Practice #4: Email Format and Questions & Concerns Discussion

Major time savings and increased efficiency can be gained by standardizing email format and consolidating responses to student's questions. In order to more expeditiously respond to student emails, I required students to submit emails to me in a somewhat strict format.

 All Students sending emails followed these Guidelines:

1) Always create a new email - not just reply to an old one. This avoids emails becoming buried in the inbox, especially when accessing from different platforms (e.g. mobile phone, lap top, etc.)

2) All emails need to have a subject line with the Course Designation. student name, and topic
   Example: MKTG 640 - Alice Jones - Final Paper

   ▪ An instructor can then easily track communications with individual students and respond more quickly to their needs.

   ▪ With the course name and number in the Subject line, an instructor can better manage time when teaching multiple courses. By sorting emails together, the instructor can respond to questions about a given course all at once.

Create a "Questions & Concerns" Discussion Area
   In Blackboard Discussions, I created a "Questions & Concerns" thread. There I posted answers to more commonly asked questions as the course progressed. Since all students received the same information, this eliminated student concerns over unfair advantage.

This practice had several tangible benefits, not the least of which was decreased confusion on the part of students and better time management for their instructor. By requiring subject line headings, I was able to easily search and sort through my email box, and thus allocate specific times to deal with student inquiries. This enabled me to more rapidly respond to their emails.

Additionally, if a series of emails came in with a similar or common concerns or questions, I could refer the students to the Blackboard Discussions "Common Questions & Concerns". In this Blackboard Discussion I was able to write far more detailed answers to topics students had raised in their emails. It has been my experience as an educator that if one student is unclear about something, odds are others are as well.

Student Feedback

While it took some initial coaxing to get the students to use the Subject line format, it soon became second nature. Students saw the efficacy of such labeling when going through their own over crowded email inboxes. Likewise, the threaded discussion was also met with great enthusiasm as it helped clarify various points about the course to all the students equally, and so no one felt that other students had an unfair advantage on an assignment due to individual communications with their instructor.

Best Practice #5: Use Fun Technology

While the course was delivered via the university's Blackboard 9.1 project, using YouTube videos enable students to be much more comfortable in the learning environment. Because they were already familiar with the technology, embedded YouTube videos helped overcome some technophobia by adult learners new to the online MBA program.

Student Feedback

Out of privacy concerns, I did not require students to make their own on camera YouTube videos. Instead I introduced them a to new presentation software technology Prezi.com that is rapidly gaining ground over MS PowerPoint's. Students were very adept at using this tool to make presentations in support of their final papers. Since the semester I first used this technology, I have heard from a number of former students who now use this robust Prezi.com technology in their workplaces to great success.

Summary

These 5 Best Practices can improve the online MBA experience for both students and instructors, and with it improve learning outcomes. These practices positively influenced students' attitudes towards the instructor, each other, and built a sense of community that often is lacking in the online teaching environment. Thus the objective of replicating and according to some student feedback even surpassing, the level of integration and social connections of a traditional classroom was achieved in an online environment.

Since other students knew that their fellow classmates had similar questions and concerns, they tended to feel less isolated. Likewise, through the use of video they were better able to identify with both their professor – who they never actually met in person – and even each other, for they had a shared experience of "seeing" the professor each week. Hence, a more "group-like experience" was engendered for the individual online students, thereby emulating some of the positive aspects of a traditional in class course which further assisted in improving learning outcomes.