Here, for your edification, is a list of events that are dedicated to exploring and understanding matters concerning online teaching and learning environments, the online teaching and learning process, and namely how to create an effective online teaching and learning environment. You should probably avoid this article altogether.

The Atrocious Assumption
Your students will know how to access your online course on the day it starts.
Your students will read every word on every page of your online course.
Your students will have a back up plan if their computer breaks down.
Your students assume that your online course is self-paced when it is not.
Your course will be easier because it is online.
You have to make your course harder because it is online.
You must suspend any semblance of a life to teach online.
Your students will understand where to go, what to do, how to do it, when to do it and what you expect perfectly and intuitively in your online course.
Every single activity must be online in an online course.
You can recreate what you do in the face-to-face (F2F) classroom online. (See The Penultimate Peril.)
You can develop an and teach the course at the same time.

What if you knew that 20% your online students have slow modem access to your online course from home (56k or lower/or don’t know)?
What if you knew that 60% of your online students were taking an online course for the first time?
What if you knew that students would NOT read every, or all of each of your course web pages? What if every online test/quiz was take home, open book, and potentially collaborative?
What if you knew that there was a significant relationship between the length of a web page with the degree of comprehension?
What if you knew that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between the amount of contact and interaction your students have with you and the other students in the online course, and their perceived learning and satisfaction?

What impact would these things have on your online course design?

The Problem:
Well, you know what they say about assumptions…

How to Avoid Them:
The only assumption an online instructor should make is to assume the perspective of the online student to aid in the design of an online course. My best advice to all new online instructors is - “Assume Nothing,” and anticipate and address student questions with the design of the course. Assume the role of a student in your course and review your course from that perspective.

Online courses differ from traditional classroom courses in several ways. Since students don't have non-verbal cues, or the ability to raise a hand to ask questions, learning activities, instructions, and writing must be clear. Faculty must “assume nothing” and anticipate and address student questions. Faculty that are able to assume the perspective of the student as they design their courses and activities are better able to be sensitive to these issues and to create effective online learning environments for their students.

The Bad Beginning
Getting off to a good start in any online course happens by design, not by accident.

Remember, like in any relationship, your students won't know what you want, how to behave, what to do, when, how, or what you expect from them, unless you clearly tell them. So, you will also have to tell them, show them, coach them, model for them, and call on them to behave in the ways you expect. Here is a tip: they will model your behavior -- if you give of yourself, they will be more likely to give of themselves similarly. If you self-disclose, they will too. If you are chatty and conversational in tone, they will be too. If you don’t watch your spelling, they won’t either.
The Problem:
A student that is not well-oriented to you, your course, your specific learning activities, and your expectations, will have confusion and many questions, will feel uncomfortable, and will be less apt to succeed in your online classroom. They will definitely not be satisfied with the online learning experience, nor will they be apt to report high levels of learning. Their confusion, questions, and discomfort will result in more work for you, your own dissatisfaction, and a crummy evaluation from the student.

How to Avoid This:
The more information you give your students about what to expect from you, when, and how, and any expectations you may have of them including details about the course and the activities in the course, the easier this will be for you, and the smoother it will be for the students. I mean very explicit redundant instructions, information, details, schedules, timeframes, etc. Yes, planning that all out and following through is a lot of work and something not typically done for the conventional classroom--this is one of those differences for the online teaching and learning environment. But this up front work pays off in the long run with fewer questions and problems from the students and a smoother more doable workload for you.

For example, just because the course is online does not mean that you are available 24/7. Of course instructor responsiveness is a very important aspect in online teaching. Students need to know you are there. especially in the beginning... they are nervous, doing this for the first time; they need to know someone is there. However, setting realistic and reasonable expectations for your presence in the course is equally important. Tell them what they can expect from you in terms of responsiveness up front, and then stick to it. Give them realistic time frames for returning grades, feedback, tests to them and then make sure you do it in that timeframe...If students don’t “feel” your presence in the course, or you don’t get back to students on questions, discussions, or with feedback in a timely way, the students will let you know they are not happy.

I recommend that you create a comprehensive set of course information documents for your course for students to read when they start your course and for them to refer back to as your course unfolds. Make this course information easily accessible and redundant throughout your course. The purposes of such course information documents are to cover the range of initial information needs you r students may have to become familiar with you, your course, and general course-related activities, requirements, and information.

Consider a welcome note that introduces you and the course to the students. Think of it as a letter of introduction. It sets the tone, gives you a “voice” and is the students' first "glimpse" of you. Provide contact information so that students know how you want to be contacted in the form of detailed specific information about communication mechanisms within the course, how to contact you for various issues, how and when you prefer to be contacted regarding course-related questions, private matters, and your schedule. Provide a comprehensive list of texts and/or materials to be used in the course. You can also provide a list optional/additional reading materials or resources for course. Provide a detailed description of each type of activity that the students will be doing during the course. Provide a detailed explanation with rubrics of how each course activity will be evaluated. Document specifically what you expect from students in terms of participation in the class, cheating, netiquette, and/or any other specific expectations you may have for students in your class. Create a detailed course schedule that clearly outlines every activity the student needs to do in your course including reading assignments, assignment due dates, scheduled tests and quizzes, special projects, discussions, group activities. (Titles and references to documents and module in your course must be referenced consistently for the schedule to be effective.) Provide instructional documents on what they are to do first, and next, this is especially important in the beginning of an online course to get things off to a good start.

Being absolutely crystal clear about your expectations is essential. Say what you mean, and do what you say. You can run your class however you want, but you have to make absolutely clear to the students what you expect and how they can succeed in your course.

The Dreadful Design
We have learned that an effective learning environment consists of well-organized and complete course information documents and activities that begin a course and are essential to help orient the students to the course, the instructor, and to what will be expected. In the design of course materials faculty need to pay special attention to the "tone" of their writing, and consistency in their module structure, document naming conventions, and instructional cues. Explicit orientations to each module with due dates, time frames, and details about what the module contains, as well as redundant, clear, explicit expectations and instructions are necessary to insure students are at all times well oriented to the content, activities, and tasks in the course. Faculty should design and create as many possibilities for student interaction as possible, both with the instructor and with others in the class.

Simply said an effective online teaching/learning experience does not happen by accident. It happens by design.

**The Problem:**
An online course replete with disorganization, inconsistencies, incomplete/incorrect/incomprehensible instructions, unrealistic expectations, undoable/unevaluated/un-engaging activities, and little opportunity for interaction, inaccessible instructor and no sense of community will not be fun for anyone, and will not be an effective instructional environment.

**How to Avoid It:**
Your pedagogical approach, the nature of your content, and the constraints and features of the online asynchronous environment are what will determine how you design the "chunks" your course.
1. Look at your content, consider how you want to teach it, and see if chunks naturally emerge.
2. Depending on what you teach and how you teach, the following are some examples of approaches to "chunking:"
   - by content-specific topics
   - by chapters of a textbook you are using
   - by date or time frame
   - by a metaphor
   - by steps in a process

**There are as many ways to chunk a course into modules, and their sections and activities, as there are faculty!**
Each course will be unique to your style and content, and to the features of the tool you use to create your course.

Once you decide on the broad "chunks" of your course, you will then begin working out the "specific chunks" of learning activities for each individual module. On the whole you want to go for consistency across modules, consistency in structure and length. That said you don't want to force it, if it doesn't work for you, or the content, either. It is a balancing act. This is the point where sequence, quantity, and pacing of your learning activities are important to the course design.

- Create consistent and complete course “chunks” or module structures.
- Design a detailed orientation to each course module/section/area.
- Use meaningful and consistent course section and document titles to organize and convey information about the activities, content, and structure of your course. Use the outline structure of the course as an advanced organizer for the course for your students. That includes the titles of course modules/areas/sections, subsections, and documents, and insist that your students use the subject lines of their own documents to add to the instructional value of their own artifacts in the course.
- Create complete well-explained online and off line learning activities.
- Provide detailed instructions for each learning activity including expectations, timeframes, navigation, method of evaluation, etc. Provide explicit instructions, directions, and signposts for students.
- Model your expectations with your own presence in the course.
- Provide models as illustrations for your students and rubrics for references on how you will evaluate their work.

**General Tips:**
- If you try something and it doesn’t work (or it breaks something)... Don’t do that again.
- A well-designed course creatively leverages the options AND recognizes the limitations of the online learning environment.
- Good online instructional practices are independent of software.
You need to think about how your students will interact with your materials and navigate your course (see the Atrocious Assumption). Your course management system will have built-in navigational buttons and a web interface that facilitates students’ navigation through all the levels of web screens. However, don’t assume your students will know what to do and where to go next. You will need to create navigational documents and instructions on your documents that explicitly tell your students where to go next and what to do.

For maximum effectiveness of your navigational instructions, be consistent. For example, use the same font, put them in the same location on your pages, and use consistent wording for the instructions. You can also use the section title and the document title to highlight a type of task, a due date or a time frame.

Use the following tips to make sure your students will be able to effectively and efficiently navigate the pages and activities in your course:

**Course Navigation Tips!**

**Create instructional documents.**
You should create documents that set up the directions and expectations you have for your various learning activities, such as for a discussion or written assignment activity, so that there is no confusion about what you expect them to do, where, how and any specifics you may have for the activity.

**Create and use instructional cues.**
Instructional cues are the instructions and directions that explicitly help students navigate the pages of your course and your learning activities efficiently. Instructions are very important in an asynchronous learning environment. Students need to know what to do, where, when, and how. And they need to be able to access information quickly and without difficulty to distract them from the task. For example, if you want them to go to the Discussion Area of your course and to respond to a discussion question you have posted, you have to tell them to do that and how.

**Use module, section, and document titles to organize and convey information about the activities, content, and structure of your course.**
Whatever type of framework you decide upon for the organization and presentation of your course activities, the module, section and document titles are the way you will implement it. Consider using titles to specify the type of activity, due date, time frame, etc. The more information you can put in the framework that the students will see from the organizational views of your course, the more comfortable and confident your students will be with what they are to do.

**Refer to the course navigation bars, links, and buttons.**
Your course pages on the web will have a navigation bar and links/buttons to help your students navigate and interact with the pages of your course. Encourage students to use them by referring to them with your instructional cues. Be sure to name them accurately! A respond “link” is not the same as a respond “button.”

**Make information accessible.**
If your students have to travel too far to find what they need or want in your course by having to click too many successive documents or scrolling through very long documents, you risk disorienting and discouraging them. The structure created by descriptively-named and well-categorized documents/learning activities also makes your course more accessible.

Assuming the perspective of a student as you create your course will help you design a more effective learning environment for your students.

**The Dilatory Dawdler**
We have statistical evidence suggesting that the less time an instructor puts into his/her course the less satisfied s/he is with the online teaching experience. The kicker is that then consequently there is also a significant correlation with lower reported satisfaction and learning of the students.
Yup, this is going to be a lot of work. . . I always tell faculty, this is going to be much more work that you think it is, not only to develop the course, but to teach it. You need to know that so you can pace yourselves and plan accordingly. This is also one of the main reasons (not the only) but one of the main ones why I strongly recommend that you completely complete the design of your course prior to the beginning of the term. Our research findings also suggest that the higher the percentage that the course is completed at the outset, the higher the satisfaction of the instructor with the online teaching experience which then also in turn correlates positively with higher reported student satisfaction and learning.

The Problem:
You are just going to have to trust me on this one, it will not be fun for you or your students to have you trying to develop the course and teach it at the same time.

How to Avoid This:
Developing a course for the first time takes a new faculty person more than 120 hours. Plan accordingly!

New faculty teaching an online course for the first time spend more time on course management activities than our experienced faculty generally do. Once a course has been developed it should not take more time to teach than you spend in a traditional classroom on teaching and learning activities. If you find that you are spending more time, then the design of the course needs to be reviewed to address the issue.

Developing and teaching an online course is a lot of work and can be overwhelming... There is a lot to know, to do, to learn, to get used to, etc. The key to managing the workload is in the design of the course activities AND the expectations you define for the students in the course.

The Ossified Outline
The online teaching and learning environment has to be flexible enough for the instructor to take into account volatile content, or the specific needs of the specific students in a specific course.

The Problem:
How do you completely design and set up an online course prior to the first day of class, and accommodate for current events, spontaneity, or the idiosyncratic needs or interests of specific students in a course prior to its start?

As detailed in The Dilatory Dawdler, I do recommend that your course be complete on the fist day of the term. However, I do not suggest that everything be nailed shut leaving no room for spontaneity, or class make-up, or current events, the exact opposite is true. But, to be able to pull that off in an online environment, and NOT have the students confused, you need to impose a structure to the course materials and set the expectations clearly, logically, and consistently to be sure student are comfortable and feel they know what is expected of them and that they can do it.

How to Avoid This:
In the online environment you have to design for spontaneity . . . it is kind of a paradox . . . but by planning and designing the skeletal structure in which your volatile content will live, you ensure that a logical, explanatory, concrete structure is there for your students and that the functionality is there and will work. This leaves you the room and freedom to insert the changeable parts of your content as needed.

For example, let's say you are teaching a current event course that will depend on the interests of the students and what ever is happening in the news that week. To pull this off you design documents that explain how it is going to work, what will be expected of the students in general, and then you design your modules in a logical way creating place holder documents or documents with general topical information that leave room to incorporate the interests or events that week. That way there is enough structure that the student knows generally what to expect and do--, i.e., the walls of the classroom are there, and have form, and make sense, and are thought out with instructional documents necessary to the environment with places built for thing will occur, and it will technically function, and there is room built in to be spontaneous.
The Graphic Gaff
If you have created PowerPoint slide presentations that you use in class to enhance your lecture, you may be tempted to simply post them on the web for your online students. Resist that temptation. :)

The Problem:
No matter how good they are, or how much time you spent on them, or how cool the graphics and transitions are, keep in mind that your snazzy PowerPoint presentation was not originally designed as a stand-on-its-own piece. In your classroom, you are standing there talking next to it using it basically as your lecture notes and illustrations for your commentary. Most such presentations need to be reworked for the online course environment to fill in the gaps that your physical presence and voice takes care of in the classroom to be effective in a completely online classroom.

How to Avoid It:
First make it work, then make it pretty.
Things to consider so you can make the best choices and decisions as you graphically enhance your online course:
- What kind of Internet speed connection will students' have, and will their hardware accommodate web graphics, sound, or video?
- Is there support on your campus to help develop and troubleshoot multimedia embellishments to your course? Are there alternatives, such as renting or distributing videos, CDs, etc.
- Is the best way to achieve “this” instructional objective by incorporating “that” visual content?

My best advice the first time through is -- keep it simple. Go for vanilla the first time and work your way up to rocky road. : ) Unless there is some compelling instructional reason, such as a concept or process that can't "get real" for your students with out visuals, or unless it is an image–based course. In that case, you begin dealing with trade offs in a considered way. If you need a visual to get a concept across, make sure it is as optimized for the web as possible. You can also plan ahead by requiring students to have sound cards, or make sure they know that video, sound, graphics in the course necessitate a fast connection to the Internet . . . and so on.

The next thing I would emphasize is you will have to test it. Test with different machines, using different platforms, different browsers, different speed Internet connections, etc. If images are key to your course content --you have to test. Make an image, put it in your course, and access it with a modem over a phone line. See how it feels to you in terms of download time and make sure it looks as you expect in terms of color, size, readability, etc., 30 seconds waiting for an image to resolve is a LONG time. 10is too long. . . (And then don’t forget accessibility.)

So just because you have the PowerPoint, doesn't mean you should put it up online without thinking about and reworking it to be sure it will achieve your instructional objectives most effectively in the online environment.

Don't forget that the next time you teach this course you can revise and enhance it--every time making it better. Think of it as an evolution. And remember, vanilla ice cream is just as delicious as Rocky Road. . .

The Ineffective Interaction
In a traditional classroom "participation" is sometimes factored into the course grade, but is often not a significant component of the students’ final grades. This highlights one of the fundamental differences between the F2F classroom and the online learning environment. "Discussion" or the students’ contributions/posts/interactions in the online course take on a significant importance in an online classroom. Rather than an extemporaneous activity by a select vocal few in the front row of a F2F classroom, effectively designed online interaction and learning activities are designed to engage all students in the course with the content, with the instructor, and with each other. Requiring active student participation and interactivity engages every student in the online course so that they all must read, reflect, explain, defend, refute, question, self-assess, summarize, synthesize, and analyze course content. The online environment strips the verbal/non-verbal and social dynamics of face to face interactions from the equation, freeing all students in the course to make thoughtful reflective contributions safe from rejection or ridicule. The result of this is enhanced quality of interaction that is far more than simply “class participation.”

The Problem:
Online discussion/interaction does not equal “class participation.” Previously, I would recommend that faculty value discussion at least 30% of the total grade. I would also recommend that anything you have students do as a part of the course be factored into the grade. If it is worth assigning, it is worth assessing. We have research to back that up. There is a significant correlation between the percentage of total grade in discussion and the student's reported satisfaction and perceived learning. That means that the higher the percentage of the total grade placed on discussion, the higher the student's satisfaction and perception of learning in that course.

How to Avoid It:
The main thing is to engage the students with the material, with you, with each other by making them do something! It is not enough to say, "Familiarize yourself with the concepts in chapter 1.” Or, “Be sure to know these terms, or understand these theories…”

- Make them think about the issues, and then have them tell the class what the main points are in the readings.
- Make them discuss the material and support their own opinions, not just respond with "yup, I agree.” Make them agree or disagree with you, the readings, or each other and support their positions.
- Add competing theories or a controversial topic to stir interest.
- Make them show references that support their positions.
- Make them make their thinking visible by explaining it in writing and to others in the class.
- Make them come up with the questions to be discussed.
- Ask them questions, rather than giving them answers.
- Have them do an offline observation and report back to the class or to you on it.
- Have them critique a procedure they observe offline and report back.
- Have them give other students feedback on course work.
- Have them collaboratively develop something or explore an issue.
- Have students work in groups, ask/answer each other’s questions, evaluate each other’s work.
- Use questions to stimulate thought and engagement with the course content.

Make them do something! Think, engage, apply, defend, refute, report, self-assess.

As you create activities designed to elevate class interaction beyond class participation the more specific you can be the better. This is important because what you think a discussion is, what your students think, and what any other instructor might think, may not be the same thing. You have to tell them what you want in order to get it. It is important to set the expectations very explicitly for any of your online learning activities. Netiquette, respect for others' opinions, types of acceptable responses, time frame for the discussion, types of unacceptable responses, what you are looking for, what constitutes successful completion of the activity, and how you will evaluate the activity complete with rubrics, etc., can be detailed for the students. I would even recommend that you tell students what is not acceptable. For example, if the response, "Yup, I agree," is not sufficient/acceptable, the student should know that. Tell them qualitatively what you are looking for. You can also model for them what an appropriate response might look like, or you could specify that they must agree or disagree with a posted item, but that they must support their position or opinion with a reference. Encouraging critical thinking, evaluation of online references, thoughtful discussion, those are the things you want to cultivate in the design of your online interaction activities.

Evaluating your online activities and interactions will then be a matter of quantitative and qualitative assessment based on the criteria established for the activity. Though you will not be able to evaluate body language, you can assess how well a student meets your stated criteria for successful completion and contributions to the activity.

The Scarcity of Class Community

Our most current research shows that online collaborations between the instructor and students, and between students themselves, positively and significantly influence student satisfaction and perceived learning. Reconceptualizing your classroom activities for the virtual classroom and building opportunities for such interactions into the design of your course, as in the collaborative projects and small group work and interaction with you as online activities, will be your challenge- the fun part, and the key to success.

The Problem:
Think about the isolated learning experiences involved in a classic correspondence-type course… enough said.
**How to Avoid It:**

Our research supports the definition of learning as a social process. Online courses that are designed to promote a sense of class community, where there are ample opportunities for interaction and the social construction of knowledge, result in online teaching and learning communities of satisfied students and faculty. Interactions between students, and in particular the quantity and quality of interaction between the student and the instructor, affect faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction and their perception of learning.

Encourage a sense of class community in your online course; provide community building opportunities, and activities that involve interactions and collaborations

- Provide students ample opportunities for interaction with the instructor and with others in the course.
- Provide students with opportunities to engage and interact with the content actively.
- Directed learning activities.
- Create opportunities for interaction with students and between students.
- Create/use activities that build a sense of class community: e.g. personal profiles, introductions, areas in the course for non-course related interaction, areas in the course that support access to and interaction with the instructor and others in the course.
- Build/design activities that create a sense of connectedness between the course participants and with you, that build social/group spirit, and that foster a sense of trust
- Create a learning environment that is engaging with supportive contact and interaction and that permits the sharing of and reflection on educational expectations and experiences.

When designing online collaborative learning activities consider these:

1. How big are the small groups? More than 2 or 3 people may not be as effective depending on the nature of the activity.
2. Are the students prepped to work in small groups? Make sure that they know up front at the beginning of the class that they will be doing this kind of activity. You may want to model the activity right at the beginning of the course with the students so they see what it is like in a non-threatening activity.
3. Are you letting them choose their own groups? In an online course unless you manage it extremely well, it could take them the whole term for students to get themselves into groups. : ) I recommend assigning groups... you can ask the students questions in the beginning of the course, if the groups would be better organized by common interest... Also, don't assign groups as the students enter the course, otherwise you will have all the early bird overachievers in the first group.
4. Is your online group activity well explained in terms of instructions, expectations, etc.? Do students know what to do, when, what you expect, and how you will evaluate them and the group? An ambiguity is amplified in an online course. Creating explanations in various places and at various times would be good. Model the activity and the skills necessary with "warm-up" activities to get team members to know each other, or to practice the skills necessary that will be required in the team/group activity. If your students are having problems finding the area where you want them to do the activity in your course, then you need more explanatory documentation in the course. Create a page in the module that gives them links right to the page you want them to go to initiate the activity. Make one link for each group of students. Be redundant with your explanations. If your students are used to following the course linearly and you then ask them to go to another spot in the course to do an activity, it may throw them some confusion resulting in decreased participation... if a collaborative activity is not turning out as you expected, it likely needs more instruction, explanation, and direction.
5. Is the objective of the group activity clear? Are there discreet milestones to achieve it with a clear role identified for each member of the team? Are there documented timeframes associated with the activity? Is there a required outcome or out put for the group/activity? Are the evaluation criteria for that detailed? How will the activity be evaluated? How will the work of individual team members be evaluated? What constitutes successful completion of the activity? If one student obviously ends up doing all the work for the group, then it was not a well designed
activity. Are their directions and locations built in to the course to organize, contain, and display the group’s work and final output? How will the activity wrap-up?

6. Do you assume things you shouldn’t? You can’t just put a bunch of people together tell them to work in a group and then hope it will succeed. Groups need to be designed to succeed. There is a lot of attention to detail that had to go into designing the activity and then managing it to make sure it is successful. Do the students have the cooperative skills to do the activity? Can they handle the complex tasks required? They need practice leading up to complex group work... Can they coordinate their work with the others in the group? Do they know each other? The instructor must design the activity, manage the activity, and monitor it for each individual to teach them how to successfully interact in a team/group activity.

Learning is social in nature and online learning environments can be designed to reflect and leverage the social nature of learning. Community can play a critical role in building and sustaining productive online learning and satisfying online teaching and learning experiences.

The Purloined Pearls
You have to consider cheating in the design of your online course. Contrary to popular belief though, I dare to posit that the real issue is not cheating. The real issue is how do you assess online learning? Actually, more specifically, how do you assess learning online authentically?

The Problem:
Duplicating or recreating classroom-based analogous methods of evaluation and assessment in the online environment (i.e., online timed multiple choice tests) gives the impression that they are equivalent/effective to a F2F proctored testing experience, and, or course, they are not. In fact, I would contend that online testing actually supports cheating.

How to Avoid It:
1. Tell them. Explicitly tell students that cheating of any kind is unacceptable in your online course, and let them know what in your mind constitutes cheating in your course. It sounds simple, but if you don't tell them, they won't know -- assume nothing. Your campus, department, and/or course should have a “no tolerance” for cheating policy. It should be clear, documented, and up front in the course information documents for your course.
2. Back the policy up with measures to insure it and use them. Use tools such as Turnitin.com, for example. Make sure students know that you will be using such tools to verify the integrity of their work. Have students check their own work for plagiarism prior to turning it in.
3. Be clear about the consequences for cheating in your course and stick to them.
4. Design your online activities course to make cheating difficult.
5. Do everything you possibly can to create a rich student-centered teaching and learning environment that provides multiple opportunities for students to engage with each other, the content, and with you, and tie course interaction, daily work and understanding, and direct references from course activities into assessment, evaluation, and feedback.... and then let it go. Accept the fact that if someone really wants to cheat, regardless of whether the course is online or F2F, they will find a way to do it. Breathe.

I would never discourage you from using tests online, as long as you know that the activity will be open book and potentially collaborative. Self-tests, for example, are an awesome way to give students the ability to check their understanding of your content or of reading material. They engage the student and give immediate feedback. In a F2F class lecture you can draw out the main points from the reading to highlight them. And look to see if the stares are blank or nodding in comprehension. Online, the students read the chapter ---how do you know they got what you think is important out of it? With a self-test you can ask the right questions-- pointing students with your questions and with the immediate answer feedback to what the important material is. Self-tests are a very effective online tool. But, if you try to implement a timed final MC exam online, and it is worth 25-50% of the grade, you are missing something. Understand it for what it is, use it appropriately for the environment, and weigh it accordingly.
The truth is cheating happens - online and in the F2F classroom – no retinal scans, finger prints, timed or randomized mechanisms, or proctoring centers are going to prevent it. The truth is also that for some courses, faculty, and programs a completely online evaluation is not appropriate, or possible/realistic. (At some point, I want my surgeon to get in front of someone who will certify her skills.) However, if you are developing an online course, plan for it, design activities and assessments that make it difficult to do, and recognize that if a student chooses to cheat in any of your courses, that they are only hurting themselves. Also, if you are reading this, you are a fine attentive committed educator trying to learn more about how to be effective in an online teaching and learning environment, and that says a lot about the kind of learning environment that you will create for your students, and the learning experience they will have.

The Penultimate Peril
One of the very first courses I supported was a business course that had a big role-play component to it. The class was divided into small groups. Each student took on a specific role in a business organization and throughout the course were asked to function as members of the organization from their specific roles that were outlined by the instructor to tackle certain scenarios, in various online activities (create a mission statement, decide on policies, solve problems, etc.) This was not how she taught this course in the classroom. . . It had been a self-paced one-on-one correspondence type course. I mention this course often, cuz it had a big impact on me and was key to my understanding of what contributes to success in online teaching and learning. Because it was the first time, and this was back at the beginning when everything was a first time (1994) . . . it was one of the most challenging, creative, and fun experiences I've had. It was as a result of that experience that I realized that you can't and should not try to recreate your traditional classroom course online. What you have to do is to reconceptualize how to achieve your instructional objectives in ways appropriate for the new kind of learning environment! She wanted to teach her students how organizations function, and about the different roles in organizations, and about how those roles, personalities, and circumstances can affect things in organizations. . .

The Problem:
It is tempting, easy, and possible to simply duplicate "traditional" learning activities for the online classroom. It is not possible to do that effectively.

How to Avoid It:
Faculty must convert instruction, rather than try to duplicate the classroom online. Conversion requires “rethinking" how to achieve learning objectives and how to assess learning within the options and limitations of the new learning environment. You are NOT recreating your classroom online. You are reconceptualizing and converting your materials, content, and learning objectives to a new learning environment.

There are options and limitations to any learning environment, including the one with real 4 walls. You need to observe, and explore and play with the "walls" of the online learning environment to see how it can work for you and experience that what I am talking about in terms of you and your course is so much more than the presentation of information. Online courses live and breathe and evolve and have personalities just like your traditional courses do.... it depends on a lot of things... some similar to the classroom, --like the make up of the students, and some a bit different, like how you sequence, pace, organize, and evaluate the activities for your course.

Typically, in an online course module there is the presentation of information by the instructor, reading in a textbook or other media, activities devised by the instructor to engage the student with the content, such as a written assignment, self-test, small group activity, online simulations or research, off line activities such as observations, data collection, etc., presentation to the class or the instructor, some form of assessment, multiple opportunities to interact with the instructor and others in the class on questions or topics designed by the instructor or by others in the class.... and there you have it, a typical module...

This will all get clearer as you create your own online course. The understanding that there are different options and limitations in the online teaching/learning environment than there are in the 4-walled classroom is a vital first step.

There you have it. If you yourself are unfortunate enough to have made it entirely through this illiterate, un-academic treatise, it is not recommended that you admit it to anyone. The information in this article
may be of some assistance, but probably not. It is probably best if you don’t consider, much less actually incorporate any of the suggestions made here into your current or future online courses. ; )

Alexandra M. Pickett’s work usually prevents her from being even remotely interested in academic intercourse or technology-mediated contact. However, if you feel you must send word to her, you can email her at alexandra.pickett@sln.suny.edu

It is not recommended that you visit http://sln.suny.edu or http://sln.suny.edu/developer. And, you should definitely not look up or read any of the articles listed below on which the drivel in this article is based.


1 This percentage is based on 77,000 Fall 2005 SUNY Learning Network student responses to the question, What is the speed of your internet connection?
Alexandra M. Pickett is the Associate Director of the SUNY Learning Network (SLN), the asynchronous learning network for the State University of New York under the offices of the Provost and Learning Environments. A pioneer in instructional design and faculty development for asynchronous web-based teaching and learning environments, Ms. Pickett has since 1994 led the development of the instructional design methods, support services, and technical resources used by SLN to support the development and delivery of full web online courses by SUNY campuses and faculty. She has spent the past 14 years conceptualizing, implementing, and refining scaleable, replicable, and sustainable institutionalized faculty development and course design and delivery processes that in the 2006-2007 academic year resulted in the delivery of 4,000+ fully asynchronous online courses, 107 degree and certificate programs, with 100,000+ student enrollments. One of the original SLN design team members, she co-designed the course management software and authored the 4-stage faculty development process and 7-step course design process used by the network. Her comprehensive approach to faculty development includes an online faculty resource and information gateway, an online conference for all faculty with the opportunity to observe a wide variety of online courses, a series of workshops for new faculty, instructional design sessions for returning faculty looking to improve their courses, a developer's handbook, a course template, a faculty HelpDesk, online mechanisms for faculty evaluation of SLN services, and an assigned instructional design partner. Her leadership and direction of this area of the program were recognized when in 2001 SLN was honored to receive the first Sloan Consortium Award for Excellence in ALN Faculty Development. In 2002 SLN received the Sloan-C award for Excellence in Institution-Wide ALN Programming, and the Educause award for Systematic Progress in Teaching and Learning for 2001. Most recently SLN was honored with the 2006 USDLA 21st Century Award for Best Practices in Distance Learning. Today, working with 40+ of the 64 SUNY institutions, she has directly supported or coordinated the development of more than 3,000 SUNY faculty and their web-delivered courses. Her research interests are in faculty satisfaction and the effective instructional design of online courses, and student satisfaction and reported learning. She has co-authored a number of studies on these topics and has published and presented the results both nationally and internationally.

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