

Online Teaching at Its Best: Merging Instructional Design with Teaching and Learning Research

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Linda Nilson (Director Emerita of the Office of Teaching Effectiveness Innovation at Clemson University) and Ludwika Goodson (Associate Director of the Center for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning at Purdue University Fort Wayne) are experienced educators and authors who created this research-based guide to prepare faculty for online teaching. While online educational offerings have expanded rapidly at many institutions, faculty professional development in online education has often lagged behind. This practical text contributes to the wider discourse on online education by integrating research on teaching and learning from learning theory, cognitive psychology, and instructional design. The authors argue that while most publications about online instruction are skewed toward the use of technology without integrating learning theory, “good teaching actually transcends the environment” (202). As a result, the book outlines specific ways in which faculty can transfer research-driven teaching practices to the creation of online courses.

After providing a review of the research literature concerning effective teaching practices, chapters 2-7 address a specific practice and how faculty can incorporate the concept into online teaching. These principles will be familiar to faculty with even a basic knowledge of teaching and pedagogy literature, including practices such as “Setting Significant Outcomes” (chapter 2) and “Designing a Coherent Course” (chapter 3). Chapter 5 tackles the topic of motivation. The authors provide examples for capturing student attention, ensuring relevance, fostering social belonging, and encouraging students to set and achieve goals. Chapter 6 focuses on interaction. It shows how meaningful student-instructor, student-content, student-student, and student-technology interactions can be cultivated in an online environment. Finally, a technical chapter on universal design and accessibility (chapter 7) provides helpful guidelines for course design and material preparation to overcome obstacles to accessible content.

Each chapter includes extensive interaction with existing literature, making the book a good resource for additional reading. However, this orientation limits the space in each chapter for practical examples and explicit connections to online education. Few of the specific examples for implementing the principles will be applicable to instructors in religious studies or theology, but the general suggestions will inspire instructors to use deliberate strategies to make their online teaching equal to, or even greater than, their teaching in the classroom environment.

There will likely be a variety of responses to the book. Faculty newer to online teaching, instructional design, and cognitive psychology will discover principles that not only support and inspire quality online education, but also enhance student learning in classroom settings. More experienced faculty may want to see more incorporation of the larger humanistic narratives around what it means to learn. Additionally, instructors in contexts that prioritize teaching for a multi-faith and multicultural world would benefit from integrating perspectives on student and instructor positionality and pedagogies that support culturally diverse and racially just pedagogies with this book’s practical orientation.