

# **Online Classes That Work!**

**Discovering the Secrets  
to Teaching Online**

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## 2 – Frustration

Tony's problems with the online class began almost immediately. The HR people had contacted Tony that afternoon to start the paperwork. Since Tony was to be a new employee of this college, several days were spent on employment paperwork and getting Tony the necessary access to the college's computer systems.

It took another few days for the IT people to copy the course into the learning management system.

### **Busywork**

Almost a week had passed before Tony had the opportunity to review the class. The basic core structure was six weekly modules with a different topic covered each week. Within each of these modules were written lecture notes, several discussion questions, and a weekly assignment. There were also grading areas for class participation, attendance, and the discussion questions and assignments. These were created in the basic structure that the IT department copied over.

The course setup was also to include a course syllabus, the instructor's policies on late work, and a series of documents with information about services available to students such as writing assistance, accommodation of special needs, and access to the college's virtual library. As the instructor of this class, Tony was responsible for this part of the class setup.

Although each of these documents was based on a template, Tony found the process of customizing these documents, submitting them for approval to the course design specialist, and then copying them into the course to be tedious busywork.

Even though Tony was thankful that the IT department copied over the basic core materials, he found it odd that they did not copy the other documents as most of these are common for all courses throughout the college.

Tony's opportunity to review the class was also limited by the absence of the course textbook. The college's bookstore had to order a copy of the text for Tony from the publisher. Although Tony was an expert in subject matter, he had never used this particular textbook before and needed to review the content to help him get comfortable with the class. The textbook took ten days to arrive.

Overall, Tony found the course setup experience to be anything but smooth. It was a busy two weeks, but his time hadn't been spent on the course material, he'd been wasting time on what should have been simple paperwork. As an adjunct, Tony had a limited amount of time to allocate to this course, and he felt that his upfront time was somehow misused.

### **Misaligned Content**

Tony finally had the opportunity to begin reviewing the course material during the weekend before the course officially opened to the students.

Tony sat down Saturday night and began looking through the textbook. He quickly became concerned. Rather than being a typical college-level economics textbook, the textbook for the course was in fact an inexpensive study guide that was designed not to be used as a textbook for an economics course at all, but rather as a supplemental guide to help students who were having trouble understanding the basics of economics.

This text included many mathematical formulas but had limited written explanations of many of the key concepts, yet many of the review questions in the book asked students to apply the concepts.

Tony noted that unless these concepts were explained more fully, it would be difficult for the students to follow the review questions at all. The text included no case studies that would have allowed the students to apply the knowledge from the readings.

Although Tony felt the textbook was not sufficient for the class, this was the textbook that had been mandated by the course designer, and since the course was to begin in two days, Tony had no opportunity to change to a different text.

By Sunday, Tony began looking at the course content that had been posted in the learning management system. He immediately saw the same problem in the course modules that he saw with the textbook. Each module included a written lecture, but these lectures were only two or three pages long and appeared to come directly from the course text.

In other words, the lectures simply presented the basic technical material that could be found in the course text, and no effort had been made to enhance this material or present it in the context of the arts and design background of this particular student population. The lecture notes were as dry and colorless as the material in the text.

Between the text and lecture notes, Tony noted that numerous economics concepts were presented mathematically, including some that were highly abstract. Tony feared that much of the math and many of the concepts would not be understood by the students as presented.

## **A Slow Start**

The course opened to the students that Monday morning. The first assignment asked that students post a Word document with a brief bio into the introductory discussion forum by midnight Tuesday. This assignment served two purposes: to allow the professor and each of the students to become acquainted and get to know each other and to allow the professor to identify the students who had not shown up for class.

Tony began to review the student introductions on Monday evening. As he clicked and opened the forum, the first thing he noticed was that instead of having a nice threaded discussion in which he could scroll through to read about each student, he instead had a list of student posts with an attached Word document. In order to read a student's bio, Tony had to click on each document and wait for it to open in Word.

What Tony thought would be a quick review took more than an hour as he found himself continually toggling back and forth between Word and the learning management system. If it took him all this time and effort to review the student intros, he wondered how many of the students were actually taking the time to read any of the intros.



With the course roster came a list of student e-mail addresses and phone numbers. One of Tony's responsibilities as an instructor was to contact any students who had not posted or been active in the class by that first Tuesday.

By Tuesday evening, fifteen of the twenty students had posted their introductions.

On Wednesday morning Tony began reaching out to the five students who had not posted. Tony called the phone number for the first student.

"Hello," said a woman's voice.

"Is this Janelle Evans?" asked Tony.

"Yes."

"This is Dr. Brown, I'm the instructor for the Introduction to Economics class at Western State School of Design."

Click. The phone went dead. The student had hung up on the professor.

Tony called the number for the next missing student.

An automated message said the number had been disconnected. Tony checked the number and dialed again. Once again the automated message said the number had been disconnected. Tony e-mailed the student using the personal e-mail address he had been provided. A few minutes later, the e-mail bounced back.

Tony was 0 for 2. The day wasn't starting out well.

Tony dialed the next number.

There was no answer and the call rolled to a voice mail message, "You've reached my voice mail. You know what to do." Tony left a message in the voice mail, wondering if he had actually reached the student. As a backup, he also decided to e-mail the student.

Tony made the fourth call.

“Hello, this is Kimberly Gregson.”

“Hi, this is Dr. Brown. I’m the instructor for the Introduction to Economics class at Western State School of Design. I noticed you hadn’t participated in the class yet and I’m just calling to follow up.”

“I’m at work right now and I can’t talk,” Kimberly whispered quickly. “But yes I’m going to participate in the class. Thanks for the reminder.”  
Click.

Tony made the fifth and final call.

“Hello.”

“Is this Dieter Ward?” asked Tony.

“Yes, it is. Who’s calling?”

I’m Dr. Tony Brown. I’m the instructor for the Introduction to Economics class at Western State School of Design.”

“Good morning, Dr. Brown. You’re probably calling about the class that just started.”

“Yes, that’s the purpose of my call. I noticed you hadn’t participated yet, and I’m just following up.”

“I get this phone call with all the classes,” said Dieter. “I work a lot of hours early in the week and usually get to my class work on weekends. I’m planning on participating, but I won’t be able to start until Friday. I keep telling the school about my work schedule, but they don’t seem to remember.”

“I’ll certainly remember,” said Tony. “I look forward to having you in the class.”

After this last call, Tony looked at the clock. He had spent an hour of his day chasing down five missing students, and he wasn’t sure he had accomplished the goal of actually bringing these students into the course.

After this exercise, Tony made a note to mention this process to Leah. He didn’t think that chasing down missing students was a particularly good use of his time. He was hired to teach, not be the secretary.

## The Absence of Discussion

A key component of the online courses at Western State were weekly discussion questions in which students and the instructor were expected to engage in a discussion of the theories and concepts from the course. According to Western State's online faculty guide, the discussion forums were designed to engage the students with the subject matter and replace the discussion found in the traditional face-to-face classroom.

The discussion forums for all classes in this program used the same structure. Students were required to make an initial post in each forum and to respond to two other posts, and the instructor was required to review student posts several times during the week and respond to each student's initial post in each forum.



Wednesday evening of that first week, Tony began to take a good look at that week's discussion forums. He didn't want to get too far behind with his responses to the students.

Tony's first reaction to the discussion questions was not good. The primary discussion questions asked about technical issues from that week's course material.

The first question asked, for example, "How do you define economics?" All of the students answered exactly the same way by quoting the definition that appeared in the introductory chapter of the textbook.

The second discussion starter was a basic question about supply and demand taken directly from the text. Almost all students answered this question the same as well, drawing their answers from the passages in the text on this subject.

It seemed that once the first few students posted, all of the other responses mimicked the first answers.

As Tony looked at these discussion questions, he wondered, *How are these questions engaging the students and helping them learn the concepts of economics?*

Thinking about his contract and the instructors' posting requirements, he wondered how he could provide an individual response to



each of the students while at the same time actually having a discussion of the subject?

He tackled his posting obligations first, by posting some generic responses to all students, thanking the students for their responses, and complementing them on the content of their posts. Since all of the responses were essentially from the text, there wasn't much opportunity to correct errors or redirect the discussion with these initial posts.

When he finished the required response posts, he thought of the techniques he used to introduce economics to students in his on-ground classes. One question he always found effective the first night of class was this: "How has economics affected the decisions you have made this week?"

When he posed this question in the classroom, a few students would usually speak up and talk about the decision they made when choosing a gas station or place to eat lunch in their daily routine. At times, they would mention how they analyzed decisions they made on home improvements or other major purchases. This question always led to a lively class discussion.

Tony decided to try to redirect the discussion forum to the students' use of economics. On Thursday morning, he posted the general follow-up question that had worked so well in the classroom: "How has economics affected the decisions you have made this week?"

When he checked the forum posts again on Friday morning, Tony noticed that only one student had responded to his follow-up question. Tony responded to this post with some comments linking the content of the post to this week's course concepts.

By Saturday afternoon, there had been only one other response to Tony's question. Once again Tony responded with comments and a follow-up question.

When the forums closed on Sunday, Tony reviewed that week's posting activity. Almost all the students had made the required initial posts (to the technical questions) and the required response posts. Only a handful had made more than the required posts. Tony's

follow-up question on the use of economics in this week's decisions only received a total of three responses.



This was not the student engagement Tony had hoped for or was used to in his classes. He looked through the forums trying to figure out what happened. He noticed that the forums were sorted so that the earlier posts appeared first with each subsequent post being added at the end. Many of the response posts were to the early posts, with few responses to the later posts.

Tony's follow-up question appeared near the end. He wondered if this had anything to do with the lack of responses.

Tony also noted that his posts just listed his name. There was no indication he was the instructor.

Finally, Tony wondered if the students were truly interested in having a discussion in the forums, or if they had been conditioned to meet the minimum posting requirements and were not prepared to use the forums for a true discussion.

Overall, Tony felt the first week's discussion forums were a waste of everyone's time. Most of the students had met the posting requirements, but he wasn't sure that their understanding of economics had been increased in the process. They certainly didn't have an engaging discussion.

## **Stale Content**

As the course progressed, Tony began to realize that poorly structured discussion questions were not the only problems with the class. It was beginning to appear that many of the assignments were off base as well.

The third week began with a phone call from a student asking for clarification of that week's written assignment.

"Professor Brown, I'm not sure I understand this week's assignment. The assignment asks for a two-page paper discussing the International Monetary Fund's response to the recent events in Argentina. I'm not sure what events the assignment is referring to. I searched for 'recent events in Argentina' on the Internet, and I found lots of stories about

Argentina’s World Cup Team and some stories about the Governor of South Carolina running off to Argentina to see his mistress. Are these the events we are supposed to write about?”

Tony quickly opened this week’s assignment and laughed as he read the question. He knew the question wasn’t intended to be about the Governor and his Argentinean mistress, but rather about the IMF’s response to the latest Argentinean debt crisis.

“That question isn’t as clear as it could be,” Tony acknowledged. “One of the roles of the International Monetary Fund is to assist countries that are having financial and currency difficulties. The question is actually referring to the events that began in 1999 when Argentina couldn’t pay its foreign debts and had to receive assistance from the International Monetary Fund.”

“So if I search for Argentinean debt crisis,” the student asked, “I can find the information to help answer the question?”

“Yes. I’ll post a clarification to the assignment later this morning.”

“Thanks, professor. I knew it had to be about something other than the World Cup.”

The most recent Argentinean debt crisis had occurred between 1999 and 2002, more than a dozen years ago. The event wasn’t included in any of the content for the week, and Tony quickly realized that many of the students in his class had been in grade school when this “recent” event had occurred.

*When was the last time this class was updated,* thought Tony as he hung up the phone.

## **Murky Assignments**

Week four proved even more interesting. The main assignment for the week asked students to prepare a two- to three-page paper arguing for or against a U.S. return to the gold standard as the basis for its currency.

Tony realized immediately that this assignment was going to be a problem for the students. Any questions about the use of the gold standard were anything but simple. Although gold standard discussions

were relatively commonplace in economics journals, the arguments for and against were quite complex. Tony felt that asking students to develop arguments about the appropriateness of the gold standard was well beyond the scope of an introductory economics class. This was a subject where he treaded lightly even in his graduate-level classes.

The text included a limited discussion of the gold standard by giving mainly a historic overview of the use of gold as a currency and some historic facts about the value of gold. Certainly not enough information for an art or design student to develop a coherent argument for or against its use. The lecture notes for the week repeated the material from the text.

The U.S. had last used the gold standard in 1971, more than forty years ago—a period that must have seemed like ancient history to these students.

The students' questions began almost immediately. Most asked for additional resources that might help them answer the question. In response, Tony posted some links to additional material he thought might help them develop an answer.

All students had a difficult time with this assignment. The better responses seemed to come from the students who had read the additional sources that Tony had posted. Some students repeated the material from the text and lecture notes, even though this material did not directly answer the questions the assignment posed.

Many students simply were unable to provide a coherent answer to the question. One student naively noted that gold was “such a pretty metal that it would be a shame to use it for anything but jewelry.” Another wondered how difficult it would be to carry around all these bags of gold instead of just using a debit card.

While Tony had been frustrated with many of the discussion questions and assignments during the first few weeks of the course, the results of this assignment left him feeling frustrated. The question was well beyond the scope of the students and the depth of the text. Therefore, many students submitted answers that made no sense. This proved a tough assignment to grade.

Were students learning anything from their time in his class? Given his past classroom successes, he wasn't used to classes in which the students were not engaged.

### **Valuing Activity, Not Outcomes**

By the sixth week of the online class, Tony was exhausted. His favor for Leah was turning into a nightmare.

The discussion forums had never gotten on track. It seemed that each of the questions asked for technical answers. It had been difficult to get a discussion going. Tony spent much of his time in the forums posting responses to each of the students. He thought this was creating a silo effect. He was interacting with each student one on one, but he was not interacting with the class, and the students were not interacting with each other.

Instead, students were just making required posts in an effort to get credit for the assignment. His efforts to post follow-up questions and get a true discussion going had failed.

Each week, the text and lecture notes had basic written information on the course concepts, and students were being asked to write essays applying these concepts, but there were no discussions or case problems that allowed students to practice applying the concepts.

As a result, the weekly essays were difficult to grade. Many students struggled with understanding and applying the concepts. The more successful students did a bit more research and brought other resources to the discussion. Those who did not dig deeper had trouble writing their essays.

Given the technical focus of the text and lecture notes, Tony wondered if quizzes and problems would have provided a better assessment than the essays. They certainly would have been easier to grade.

As week six ended, all that was left to do was grade the final paper. The final paper asked students to conduct Internet research and prepare a three- to five-page paper further explaining one of the economics concepts from the course.

The choice of topics and of research sources was left up to the student. The topic had to be "from the class," and the material to be

used was broadly defined as “from the Internet.” The assignment established no parameters for the topic and provided no criteria for selecting supporting resources or distinguishing between appropriate resources and inappropriate resources.

This assignment too proved to be a disaster.

Almost all students had difficulty with this assignment. Many repeated the content from the course text or found content on Internet sites that defined and explained economics terms. A few repeated economics arguments from articles in business magazines or newspaper op-ed pieces. Few were able to explain the concepts in any more detail. None of the students seemed to have used the college’s online library in an effort to research the final assignment.

The result was a series of papers that ranged from not good to bad. Tony had difficulty following many of the arguments in the papers, and it seemed he was reading mostly material rehashed from the first few websites that showed up in a Google search.

Tony’s biggest surprise came when he went to apply the assignment rubric. The rubric for this assignment, like all the rubrics for all the assignments in this course, had been part of the standard course setup, and individual instructors were not free to modify these rubrics.

The final paper rubric had five criteria, each worth 20 percent of the grade. However, only one of these criteria dealt with the content and structure of the paper. The other four criteria included on-time submission, the proper use of APA (American Psychological Association) format, using at least two references, and selecting a topic from the course.

So 80 percent of the grade was technical. Even the most poorly written paper would receive a “B” grade if it was handed in on time, properly formatted, included two references, and focused on a topic from the course. Only 20 percent of the criteria focused on grading the student’s understanding of the course concepts.

Tony had a tough time grading this assignment. He felt that there should be a greater difference in grades between the papers where the students had put in the effort (regardless of how difficult and unclear the

assignment) and provided a well-written paper, and the papers where the students had not put forth the effort and had handed in gibberish.

Using the rubric, Tony could give the better papers an “A,” yet he found himself often forced to give a “B” to some of the poorly written papers. Clearly the grade for this assignment did not measure the learning that had taken place.

## Reflections

Once Tony submitted the final grades, the class was over. The class that he had so enthusiastically begun six weeks ago had finally ended.

While Tony felt that he had fulfilled the technical requirements of his contract with his discussion forum posts and assignment grading, he didn’t feel that he had fulfilled his personal goal for the class, which was to provide an engaging and enjoyable course that enhanced the students’ understanding of economics.

That evening, Tony decided it was time to relax. He sat down and poured himself a beer. That first beer turned into another, and then another. By the fourth beer, Tony began reflecting on the class.

As he thought about all the problems and disconnects over the six week course, he took a sigh and thought, *Is there a better way?*

Tony put down his beer and took out a yellow legal pad and a pen. He began by making a list of everything that had gone wrong with the class. When he finished his list, he began thinking about his face-to-face classes.

Tony knew that he had had success in engaging students and making economics an interesting subject when he taught in the classroom, so he began thinking of ways to translate successful classroom techniques to online teaching. If he had the opportunity to do this online class over again, what would he do differently?

He filled page after page with lists and suggestions.

## About the Author

William S. Hettinger is the E-Learning Guru—an author, educator, and speaker on the subject of online education. He is an expert at making the complex simple. In his teaching and consulting, he excels at translating complex concepts and technical material into simple, understandable language. This book is one example of his ability to synthesize and simplify.

Dr. Hettinger is a consultant to educational institutions and corporations large and small. Clients for his consulting practice include colleges and universities, corporate trainers, *Fortune* 500 companies, nonprofits, and individuals developing online courses.

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