

Journal on Empowering Teaching Excellence

Volume 1

Issue 1 *Inaugural Issue, Featuring 2016 ETE
Conference Proceedings*


Article 7

March 2017

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Recommended Citation

Wesemann, Andreas K. (2017) "TAKE OFF! How to Make Your College Course More Exciting," *Journal on Empowering Teaching Excellence*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.15142/T3VH1N

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/jete/vol1/iss1/7>

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TAKE OFF! How to Make Your College Course More Exciting

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Abstract

Learning management systems (LMS) provide many methods for incorporating teaching techniques that help keep millennial learners engaged, excited and entertained while maintaining the educational purpose of courses. Drawing on my experiences as a United States Air Force pilot and watching one of the last Space Shuttle launches, I highlight 10 techniques that have helped my courses take off. This article makes no attempt to capture all the ideas forwarded by research into online learning, but it counts down ten that can be easily incorporated in any existing course. My goal is that each reader will find at least one idea that they can incorporate or improve on that reaches the one student, and helps them start their journey, wherever it may lead!

My Journey to Discovery

I stood on the beach with thousands of other tourists. I overheard three men speaking German and asked from where they were visiting. “*Die Schweiz, Switzerland,*” they said. They had saved for years to travel together for the trip of their lifetime. We talked for hours while waiting for the big event, and then we stood silently as the final countdown finished.

10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1! The excitement was palatable when the crowd finally cheered. STS-133, the final flight of the Space Shuttle Discovery, soared from the launch pad.

I watched the Space Shuttle Discovery launch from Cape Canaveral in the spring of 2011. Even though I was 4 miles away, and our ears and body had a delayed reaction from our eyes, I not only saw, but *heard* and *felt* the thunderous roar in person. I watched



Photo courtesy of NASA

the shuttle launches on TV since 1981, which influenced me to join the Air Force. In person, however, the experience affected all my senses and I was reminded how this program changed my life.

What is Your Journey?

Now I am not going to say that your personally developed courses will have the same level of anticipation, with thousands of people traveling halfway around the globe to view it, but I do think that we all can use some added excitement to our courses. Many modern Learning Management Systems (LMS) technologies, while still new for many folks, have capabilities that can enhance, enlighten and even entertain our students. With a little effort on our part as instructors, we can add some excitement and enthusiasm to our courses. Let us count down 10 simple things you can do to enliven your courses and help your students *TAKE OFF!*

10. Pictures: Instead of plain text, today's LMS have the ability to include pictures in your syllabus, home page, and on every page. You can have full color photos online at the simple click of a button. In the Teaching College Courses Online vs. Face-to-Face, Smith, Ferguson and Caris describe the need for an “online presence” that helps the students connect to the instructor—how much better than with actual pictures of the class members (2001)? Pictures can evoke emotion, add interest and help our students stay engaged and on task.

Many students learn better with visual imagery, and we all know a picture is worth—it *can* be worth—a thousand words.

9. Videos: If pictures add variety than moving pictures are exponentially better. Beyond just adding a video of a lecture, you can engage students with short clips from movies, and take the students to the museums and places around the globe. Again, as Smith, Ferguson, and Caris state that “many informational resources that can be seamlessly integrated into the class” ought to be done, such as assigning Web pages, links to online databases and actual videos themselves (2001). An instructor for a Utah State University class in the art major uses videos from a museum to take the students to see world famous architecture from another country, without ever leaving campus. As an added bonus, students can stop, rewind and re-watch the videos at their leisure.

8. Introductions: In a typical face-2-face class, we often use the first day for class introduction, not only for us to get to know the students and how they want to be addressed, but also for the students to get to know each other better. Curry and Cook, in their article in the *Quarterly Review of Distance Education Facilitating Online Discussions at a Manic Pace*, state that the role of the instructor is to “ensure the participation of students online” (Curry & Cook, 2014, pg. 3). This begins day one with the introductions, so that students get to know each other and the instructor, to open up the channels by seeing common interests and backgrounds. One instructor for an online class I took over the summer, had us each find something in common with each of the students through their introductions and comment on their posts. I have done the same exercise on a discussion post where each student introduced themselves to the group. For an online class, this activity was just as effective as in-person introductions.

7. Discussion Boards: I have used these extensively in my courses. I would write a simple question prompt and let the students go for it! I often require them to post first, and then respond to two of their classmates’ posts. The insight here is phenomenal and as an added bonus, instead of the same outgoing few who always participate in class, this ensures that everyone is involved in the discussions. Curry and Cook (2014) describe the strategy of discussion questions with a recommended shorthand for post responses, where

fellow classmates can go beyond the social media “like” or emoticons, using a single letter. They give a simple guide for students to use on their responses: M = Most important thing in the reading, A = Agree with, N = Not agree with, I = Interesting, and C = Confusing. This is a simple way to introduce discussion helps for the students to take a side, a position, and helps set up some conflict/opposition for the students. In an Empowering Teaching Excellence seminar for faculty, José Antonio Bowen, author of *Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning*, stated that you can take attendance in a face-2-face course by having everyone answer a simple question, even with a single word, on a discussion board (Bowen, 2016). This is especially effective for a large class of well over 400 students as some of the general education courses are prone to have.

6. Quizzes: How about creating a quiz once, typing it in the computer, and then having the LMS administer your quiz—even timed quizzes—and then grade it for you? If you have a multiple-choice quiz, it can! Essay and short answer will still need to be manually evaluated, and the overall grade is automatically entered into your LMS for you once you grade those questions. The added bonus for students is that students can take the quizzes whenever they are able, at night and over the weekend. Even if you have them take it in class or a computer lab at the same time, the grading can be much faster for you. Wendy Ostroff, in her book *Cultivating Curiosity*, discusses the idea of providing choice to the students to help them maintain curiosity, interest and motivation (Ostroff, 2016, 32-33). A great way to do this is on the assignments and evaluations, where you can provide options on essay questions or short answer prompts, to answer A or B, or 2 out of 3 questions. Remember the first two ideas? You can add photos and videos on the online quizzes as well.

5. Files: You can add photos, documents, videos and all your PowerPoints into files so the students can access them. I have found that placing reference material online for writing activities, presentations and other assignments can save you tremendous amount of time and copying—and saves trees too. This was emphasized by Smith, Ferguson and Caris in providing the resources online that you may normally find in the classrooms, which can include movies, pictures, excerpts from texts and supplemental material (2001). Most

importantly as a time saving measure, when you import a course from a previous semester, all your files and supporting materials also transfer.

4. Announcements: Since I reserve the right to modify and change the course, this is one way to notify student of any changes. I always tell my classes that I use the LMS as my primary notification method and to make sure that they can see the announcements on our university's LMS—set up the email notification. This way, any updates due to guest speakers, current events or short notice announcements are sure to reach them. With that in mind, don't send out a dozen announcements a day, or be warned by the example of *Chicken Little*, your announcements will be ignored. Ensure that you only send out critical information, which cannot wait until the next class, or needs to be in writing for the students. This is part of the “online presence” of the teacher, that is “a psychological perception for students that the instructor is out there and is responding to them” (Smith et al., 2001). The sky is not falling.

3. Collaboration: You can set up peer reviews of assignments, papers, and other tasks either randomly or by instructor assignment. Many LMS have Groups and Pages tools, where you can set up sub-groups and collaboration venues for students, which are helpful for online classes. This is also very useful for large classes, where you can divide the students up for projects and presentations. One of the best ideas I have utilized is to have the students present to each other and work together in groups and then post their presentation for all to see. This can be another way to replicate some of the best of the face-2-face methods in an online course. As Zhu, Payette and DeZure write in *An Introduction to Teaching Online*, “The instructor encourages students to share, analyze, and compare their perspectives about various ... issues” (2003, pg. 3). This way, the students interact with each other, and work together on projects despite the separation of the world wide web.

2. Messages: Having trouble reaching a student? Don't know where to find their contact information? Your LMS can make it easy. Most LMS have a file or link to the students in the class, where you can send a message to them, or to a group, and include notes and files as well. There is no excuse for the student not being able to find you either, as they can message you through the

LMS as well. This is another way to establish and maintain the online presence where you can have certain ‘office hours’ a week. As stated by Smith, Ferguson and Caris, online instructors may spend “an inordinate amount of time communicating by email” instead of maintaining traditional office hours (2001). Communication is vital to shuttle crews and so it is for you. You should never need to say “Houston, we have a problem!”

1. Interactive Syllabus: The most powerful way to use a LMS is the interactive syllabus. Now, you can make changes anytime during the semester, and your LMS can make all your assignments links to the correct pages. Students can navigate easily through the assignments, and you can set them up so that they have to complete them in order, and/or unlock on certain dates. In addition, upcoming assignments, activities, and their due dates can be highlighted as links on the screen. The flexibility of modern Learning Management Systems is great to make changes anytime during the semester. You can change the value of assignments, add and delete them, change dates, and update current events.

Once Discovery was out of sight, the smoke trail lingered for some time, as did the throngs of people from all over the world. After many high-fives (did you know high-fives are internationally known?) and auf wiedersehen—or good byes, we slowly moved back to our vehicles, marveling at what was



Photo courtesy of NASA

announced as the last launch. This launch was the end of an era, and we were all witness to one of the most fascinating and awesome displays of human technology. Two days later, Discovery docked at the International Space Station where it set another record: vehicles from the United States, Russia,

Europe and Japan were all connected that day at the same time. I often reflect on the many photos that I took that day in addition to the memories in my mind. I ask myself how I could be so fortunate to have seen this program from the first to the final launch.

Your Students' Journey

Back on earth, we need to ask ourselves, what can I do to help my students feel the excitement and passion that I have for the subjects that I teach? By using some of the tools listed in this countdown, even simple changes can have great impact. A 1-degree course change over 60 miles will move you a mile off course, and a 1-degree correction will bring you closer back to your course. Think of one idea that you can implement in your course, and challenge yourself to implement it today. I am not saying that everything is about entertainment. I know it cannot hurt occasionally to add some intrigue and edutainment. Simple improvements can reach different individuals, just like the introduction in my youth to the first Shuttle mission, by a mentor who saw something in me that I did not see myself. Small changes can keep you as the instructor excited, motivated and engaged as well, despite the years of teaching the same course. Finally, you will know that you have helped your students on their own *Journey to Discovery!*

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About the Author



Andreas “Baron” Wesemann is an Assistant Professor of Aviation, and teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in Aviation Technology. After dreaming of flight since his childhood, he found a mentor in Civil Air Patrol, the late Colonel John Barainca, who not only inspired Baron but also helped him receive a nomination to the United

States Air Force Academy. After graduation, Baron attended pilot training and finally achieved his dream of becoming a military pilot. He served 27 years, traveling to 49 countries, and saved thousands of lives as a combat rescue pilot and rescue force director. Baron loves to tell aviation stories from his adventures around the globe: supersonic flight, low-level formation missions, rescue missions and training student pilots. He inspires the next generation of pilots, to achieve their dreams, and discover their journey to flight!