10 Best Practices for Teaching Online

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This handbook is compiled and edited from hundreds of teaching tips drawn from a wide variety of Web sites that provide resources for faculty teaching online. It is not intended as a tutorial – only as a guide to acknowledged best practices for faculty new to teaching in an online environment.

Contents

1 Preparation

- Expect to spend more time than you would on a traditional course the first time you teach it online.
- Seek out successful models. Even the most seasoned classroom instructors need help transitioning to online teaching.
- Go one step at a time, carefully assessing what works and what doesn't.
- Expect to receive and respond to lots of email from your students.
- If possible, get some first-hand experience as an online student. Keep a notebook of ideas and observations about the role of online students.
- Experience the technology from a student's perspective. Try to see your class as your students will see it.
- Know your students' names and use them!
- Know your students' needs and do your best to fill them.
- Consider the challenges your students will face in your course Would you want to take the course?
- Keep your interactions professional, but light; make your students feel comfortable communicating with you.
- Know your students abilities and skill levels so you can design appropriate materials. Make no assumptions about what they know.
- Provide numerous resources for students and help them find the help they may need.
- Wrap your learning elements in a context that will be meaningful to your students.
- Teach to your learners. Find out how they like to learn and adjust accordingly when you can. Learning online shouldn't seem like "page turning."

2 Planning

- Plan carefully, but stay flexible so you can react to feedback.
- Prepare. Prepare. Prepare. Then prepare.
- Be as familiar with the technology as possible; make using the technology as transparent as using a chalkboard.
- Test the technology and solve any problems before you start so you can focus on your content and your learners.
- Make sure you know how to log in, connect, and open applications. Make sure you have all the plugins you need.
- Learn to use highlighters, pointers, and annotation tools.
- Plan how you will teach and how much time it will take.
- Expect the unexpected. Prepare for technology failure and have alternatives in place. Know where to go for help.
- Test all exercises and activities before sending them out to students. Test computer-based activities on a computer other than your own.
- Read all assignment descriptions as if you were a student looking for loopholes.
- Develop routines for managing your course effectively; set a schedule for online communication.
- Learn how to troubleshoot the technology from your students' point of view so you can help them with simple issues.
- Know what support resources are available to you and let your students know how to find the help you can't give them.
- Consider the difference between self-paced study (all materials available at once) and group-paced learning (materials made available in step with a syllabus or schedule).
- Maintain equity between your in-class students and those studying online. Make sure all your activities are equally engaging and accessible to both audiences. Provide comparable alternatives for those studying online.

3 Expectations

- Never expect an online student to do something you cannot do yourself; don't assume all your students are tech-savvy.
- Prepare your students for success in the online environment by establishing clear expectations and guidelines.
- Use a multiple-answer survey (check all that apply) to learn about your students' technology skills so you can spot potential trouble.
- Take time in the first class or assignment to introduce students to the tools you will be using. Make sure they understand and feel comfortable with them.
- Create a "scavenger hunt" or similar activity that leads students through your course Web site.
- Provide students with a means to download and print important course documents; provide documents in more than one format.
- Define requirements for student participation clearly and set ground rules for interactions with you and with other students.
- Send out lots of information as far in advance of the course as possible; make sure students are prepared for the online environment.
- Create clear metrics; tell students how you will grade them.
- Tell students how to find academic resources and where to go for help with technology.
- Create a discussion thread where students can ask you and other students for help on class issues. This can save you a lot of time answering individual emails.
- Make sure your students know and understand your learning objectives, performance expectations, participation guidelines, and grading criteria.
- Set clear parameters for computer use, instructor availability, online etiquette, and email conventions.
- Answer all email and phone calls as promptly as you reasonably can.

4 Presence

- Create a nurturing environment; let students get to know you and each other. Make time for introductions.
- Establish a friendly and meaningful atmosphere. Think talk show, not lecture.
- Use interactive and participatory activities as often as possible.
- Be there virtually! Even though you are teaching online, be present and contribute to the dynamics of the class. Don't disappear from the learning environment.
- You are still the instructor, not the technology. Make your teaching as personal as you can; let your students "see" you and know who you are.
- Listen closely and learn to read the "intonations" of online communication. They can impact your students' learning.
- Be patient, positive, and supportive. Never show your frustration if a student has difficulty using a technology tool.
- Read your postings and emails before you post or send them. It is easy to turn students off when you communicate online.
- Correct without sounding harsh or critical. This is sometimes harder to do online that in the classroom because students can't read your body language.
- Remember that a lack of questions does not always signify understanding or consent.
- If you are recording your lectures, gesture and smile as you speak; keep your voice expressive.
- Inject light humor where possible, but be careful. It is difficult to keep humor in context online. Make sure you don't come across as condescending, sarcastic, or angry.

5 Presentation

- Be very specific when giving directions -- e.g., "First do this, then this, then this. Ask questions here. Give feedback here."
- Always describe what you are doing on screen. Say where you are going and exactly which link or value you are selecting.
- Repeat instructions. Then repeat them again.
- Use whiteboard and annotation features to help students focus and add visual stimulation.
- Always summarize what has been discussed or demonstrated.
- Speak slowly and clearly, but with emphasis and energy; pay attention to pacing, diction, and tone.
- "Listen" carefully – to both spoken and written communication. Be sensitive to nuances in what your students are "saying."
- Require that your students respond to you, the content, and each other.
- Test your graphics and media on-screen beforehand so you know how they will look to your students.
- Don't just read your slides; break up screen text with graphics to help students visualize your topic.
- Always provide resources to back up your lectures.
- Know and exploit the relationship between text, sound, motion, and graphics.
- When you create materials outside the classroom, imagine your students in front of you to make them less abstract.
- Avoid the "Happy Mouse" syndrome; don't move your mouse too rapidly or click all over the screen without explaining what you are doing. Enlarge the mouse icon if possible.
- Establish a good pace, rhythm, and energy. Mix it up. Keep your students guessing.
- Don't get carried away with the "wow" factor of the technol-ogy. Focus on your instructional objectives and making your instruction relevant.
- Wait for slides to load and screens to refresh before speaking. Summarize frequently.

6 Interaction

- Construct your assignments so students interact with real-world scenarios.
- Don't overdo your participation in discussion threads, but don't be invisible — there is a happy medium.
- Assign forum moderators (students who get extra credit to monitor the threads and write weekly synopses) to your discussions. This saves you work, rewards extra effort, and encourages students to review.
- Set up a "Student Lounge" where students can discuss any topic and "meet" informally to share common interests.
- Use a blank PowerPoint slide or a whiteboard slide to list topics brought up in discussions. Then discuss them.
- Set up course discussion protocols and follow them. Make discussion a part of the grade. Refer to discussions in class.
- Begin your course with an ice-breaker discussion that asks students to post bios. Do yours first.
- Provide a separate forum area for each discussion and integrate readings and projects into them.
- Set criteria for evaluating discussion posts—for instance, a good post relates to the course material, is around one screen long, encourages others to respond, expands concepts or connects ideas in new ways, occurs in a reasonable time frame, supports a point of view with reasons and evidence, and is well written.
- Encourage or require group interaction to diminish some of the isolation of students learning online. Watch for possible group interaction problems and intercede when necessary.

7 Engagement

- Understand the differences between online and in-person student engagement, including the increased availability of distracters, the openness afforded by anonymity, and the safety of lurking.
- Engage students by raising their curiosity and encouraging full participation. Be inclusive and encourage diverse views.
- For Web-based self-study, include frequent activities that test understanding.
- Involve your students to keep them from multi-tasking.
- Use games, competition, and multimedia (voice, video, and data) to keep your students' attention.
- Interact with students regularly and by name to promote engagement and attention.
- Encourage learners to learn from each other.
- Develop collaborative groups that take responsibility for delivering some of your content. Emphasize their responsibility to the learning community.
- Ask students to assess their learning styles and try to create balanced groups before assigning projects.
- Keep your students active by assigning them online tasks.
- Use breakout rooms with facilitators to encourage students to work together.
- Arrange student role-plays. Use peer-review for projects. Motivate students to display their work publicly.

8 Communication

- Use both synchronous and asynchronous interaction.
- Provide online office hours and phone appointments; make sure you respond promptly to inquiries.
- Be aware of differences in time zones and accommodate all your students' needs.
- Get your students talking to you, and to each other.
- Be accessible, flexible, adaptable, and as available to your students as is practical.
- Be courteous, no matter what.
- Be sure to involve each student individually in some way during the course; evaluate the amount of facilitation your students will need.
- When possible, use other voices to teach and lead. Make every student contribute to the learning experience.
- Email students often and attach interesting articles; distribute materials via discussion forums.
- Review your emails and discussion postings every day.
- Be visible in your online classroom. Make frequent appearances in discussions and workgroups.
- Let students know if you will be away for any length of time.
- Develop as many communication channels as possible, and put important messages out over all of them.
- Respond to inquiries as soon as possible — within 12 hours if possible. Answer all questions.
- Always prepare content-specific chats ahead of time. If possible, distribute questions or topics beforehand so your chats are productive.
- Always provide a place for sharing resources.

9 Feedback

- Provide timely and meaningful feedback to learners.
- Ask your students questions that indicate whether or not they understand.
- Don't suggest answers to questions. Let people use their own words.
- Don't finish ideas for students. Let them struggle to find their own words and solutions.
- Don't accept the first answer. Let the group exhaust all possibilities.
- Don't judge, compare, or contrast one student with another.
- Never give insincere praise or unwarranted criticism.
- Don't assume what is best for a group. Help them to decide for themselves.
- Ask frequent questions to determine whether learning is really taking place.
- Provide students with multiple methods for asking questions-- voice, chat, email, discussion, etc.
- Start each session with a call for questions.
- Ask questions that encourage synthesis and evaluation "Listen" to your students' answers—spoken and written.
- Ask students to identify themselves when they speak. Repeat questions before answering.
- Let your students know specific times when you will answer questions.
- Respond to posts and assignments as quickly as possible; give constructive and substantive comments.
- Ask your students often what is working and what is not. Don't wait until the end of the course.

10 Assessment & Evaluation

- Remove any answers or notes you don't want students to see from your handouts.
- Provide multiple opportunities and modalities for students to demonstrate skill and/or knowledge mastery.
- Adapt classroom review exercises for online delivery.
- Consider adding at least one peer-evaluated assignment or activity to your mix of assessment activities.
- Send announcements about important activities or deadlines.
- Include offline assessment activities in your plan.
- About half-way through the course, get a rough feeling for learning outcomes to spot potential problems. Consider addressing at-risk students differently.
- Create quick reference guides students can use to prepare for major assessments.
- Track each student's progress on a regular basis.
- If you are using online quizzes or tests, create a "sample" test for students to make sure they are familiar with the testing environment.
- Never schedule a test or assignment during a support "black hole"--times when students cannot access support.
- Follow up each lesson with a knowledge assessment. If your online system has a survey tool, use it to create pre- and post-tests.
- Evaluate early and often.
- Use surveys to get student feedback throughout the course, and then follow up on it.
- Incorporate students' suggestions or feedback in your planning, and acknowledge to them that you have done so.

Top 10 Tips
for
Online Course Design

1. Keep it simple.
2. Plan ahead.
3. Know your audience.
4. Personalize your materials as much as possible.
5. Be precise and explicit in your expectations.
6. Build simple and logical navigation.
7. Provide easy access to support and resources.
8. Block your content into small, accessible pieces.
9. Avoid the "wow" factor; use only appropriate media.
10. Stay present to your students.

Top 10 Things Students Want
in
Online Courses

1. Specific deadlines and comprehensive instructions
2. Calendars and checklists for time management
3. Whole course available at once so they can plan ahead
4. Detailed syllabus with information about the course
5. Assignments that are related to testing
6. Study guides and practice tests
7. Strong sense of presence from the instructor
8. Discussion forum where they can talk to each other
9. Clear paths to technical support and academic resources
10. Study groups where students can help each other

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