



Best Practices in Online Teaching

Guidepost for the Instructor

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When preparing to teach online there are various best practices you should consider incorporating into your teaching strategies. In this short paper, we will discuss a few of these time-proven, research-based practices. But, before you start, there is one best practice that deserves highlighting.

Best practice #1 is the recognition that teaching Online is not the same as teaching face-to-face ... so don't try to do it the same way.

Keeping this in mind, let's examine some of the globally recognized best practices for the e-learning environment. This list is by no means inclusive.

Chickering and Gamson

Despite the age of the *seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education* (1987), these principles remain best practices in the classroom, regardless of the method of instruction. However, as you will note, their application in the e-learning environment has been expanded with the acquisition of new technologies, changes in learning and teaching theories, and the growth of the Internet and learning management systems. The seven principles for good practice ...

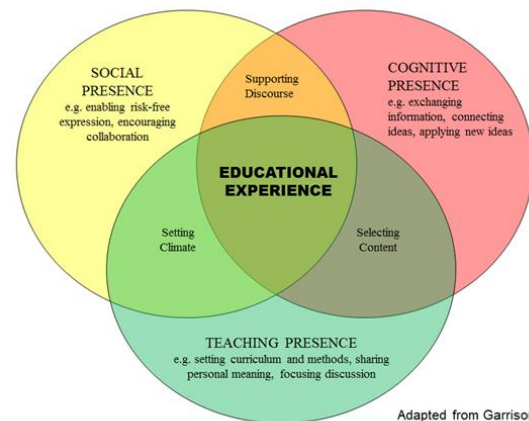
1. Encourages contact between students and faculty
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Encourages active learning
4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes time on task
6. Communicates high expectations

7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Build Online Community

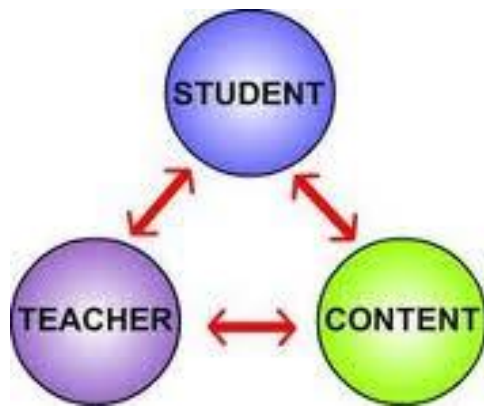
There is a growing trend in the e-learning community to use the first week of class to develop an effective online student community before advancing into content. This emphasizes its importance as part of the e-learning experience and student success.

The online community is a communication network where students can safely communicate with their peers and the instructor about matters of content. As shown in the diagram below (Garrison and Vaughn, 2008), the groups form within the social space, but focus on specific discourse (content) developed by the instructor. It is within this space that student can work together to confirm or debate mutual assumptions about the content. It is not about socializing, but rather, engaging in an educational experience.



The online community also serves a system of support, trust, and continued motivation. Research reveals that courses with effective community networks have higher student success rates and lower drop rates. But building a successful online community within a course does not happen automatically. It takes cooperation and continued effort by everyone involved with the instructor at the heart of the endeavor.

Be Engaged and Interactive



The Instructional Core

There are many things an instructor can do to create a course with engagement and activity. These functions should be part of the design process, but some will be the result of student feedback, instructional shortcomings, assessment validation, and efforts to build community.

Many of the methods used to make an engaging, interactive course also are used to show instructor presence, which will be discussed next. But in engagement, the endeavor is to focus on three levels of engagement.

1. Student to Instructor
2. Student to Student
3. Student to Content

Examples for online courses include:

Make sure your course has a welcome message from you. It should be genuine, first person, and contain your expectations. Video is preferred, but text is acceptable.

Every course must have an introduction forum so students can introduce themselves to each other. A good online instructor will use this opportunity to find and build connections and meaningful working relationships.

Be first in activities, when possible. Set the tone for events, discussions, and meetings. Be upbeat and enthusiastic. Make your expectations transparent.

Be responsive as possible by frequently checking your email (in and outside the course) and respond to student inquiries. As noted by Errol Sull (2010), quick response conveys three things to students about yourself;

1. YOU are active in the course.
2. YOU are interested in them.
3. YOU can be depended on.

If the opportunity for feedback exists, use it. It should be frequent and meaningful. Feedback should address what is wrong but more importantly, why it is wrong. You should also include the positive. Too often we provide the bad news and fail to provide the good side of things.

Offer online office hours, encourage study halls, or periodic overviews of key concepts or material the students are finding difficult. Again, these convey your interest in them and their success in the course.

We also encourage occasional surveys on course functionality and checks on student's understanding of course material. You will find this is appreciated by students, especially when they see you act on their feedback.

Create Presence

Many online courses lack an instructor's *presence* (visibility) beyond the syllabus. This equates to participating and attending to evolving conditions in the course in a way that students are aware of your presence, since your actions are visible.

Presence contributes to student motivation levels, fosters a sense of community, and successful student learning ... the point of it all. We can break down presence into three categories: design, facilitation, and direct instruction.



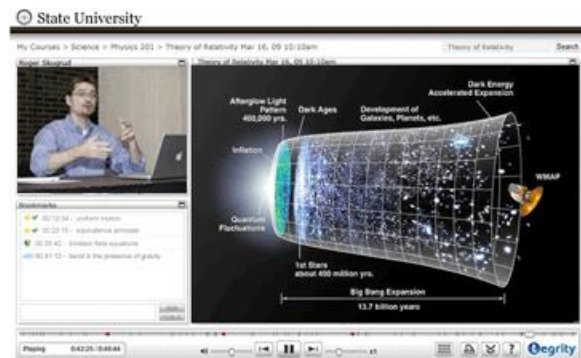
Three categories of instructor presence in online courses. Image courtesy of EdTechTalk.

Examples of presence in design include incorporating personalized graphics and photographs, a bio, a professional or favorite personal photo in the Blackboard Profile, and a welcome video. It includes designing content that is personalized from your experiences and expertise. It also should include transparent expectations and norms for the class.

Facilitation involves frequent communication within the course's online community. When operating in this mode, remember to address students by first name, initiate conversations, provide frequent feedback (private and public), and by investigating and questioning. You can send weekly announcements, a course e-mail, or video updating students on key course events with an overview of material or areas of difficulty. Create a sense of attentiveness ... I am here and engaged with you.

In regards to presence in direct instruction, it serves as part of the foundation for e-learning. Direct instruction goes beyond prepared and digitized instructional materials in one format or another during the design process. It includes discourse on evolving issues encountered in the learning path, current events that contribute to learning outcomes, addressing misconceptions, rewarding success, new knowledge or relevant information, and summation. It is about establishing and maintaining a *sustained* discourse on content.

To achieve presence there are many tools in the Blackboard Learn and Web 2.0 toolbox for you to use. They include Announcements, Discussion, Collaborate, Tegrity Lecture Capture, Video Everywhere, whiteboards, FLIP cams, PowerPoint with voiceover, Voice Thread, Show Me, and many others.



Tegrity Lecture Capture session, image courtesy of Tegrity McGraw-Hill®

Lastly, present yourself in a professional but friendly and inviting way. Of fundamental importance, find ways to incorporate your passion of the topic in your materials and conversations. Watch your text-tone and reread everything before you send it out.

Promote Student Participation

Both Taylor (2002) and Fristchner (2000) have emphasized how students who interact in the classroom perform better than those that don't. Managed communication between students and faculty facilitates critical thinking, discourse, and student success.

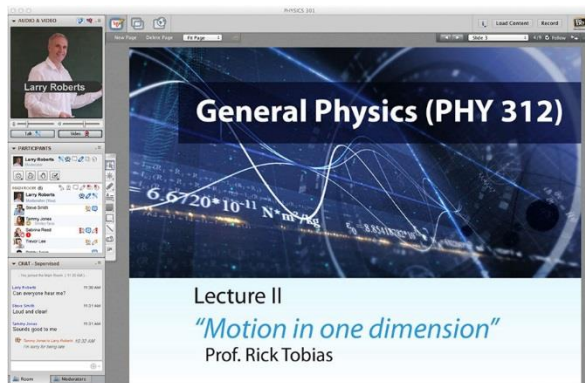
Make sure your students understand the importance of playing an active role in the activities and the learning functions of the course. Provide plenty of opportunities for students to reflect on course materials and to use the Internet to further their research. Ensure they understand digital literacy.

Regardless of the assignment or project, individual or group, if you clearly articulate your expectation, your students will seek to achieve it. Tell them to submit their course work on time, to participate in

discussions, and when working in teams, to carry their share of the load, cooperate, and collaborate.

This *expectation* can be transmitted in the syllabus, assignment instructions, and in directions before discussions and even synchronous sessions. Rubrics work best since they clearly define the levels of participation. Ideally these requirements should be transmitted before events, giving students the opportunity to prepare mentally and intellectually.

Remember, the nature of your questions has a significant impact on the level of participation. Use problem-solving, provocative questions, ask for opposing or different views or solutions.



Blackboard Collaborate session, image courtesy of Blackboard®

Once in the environment, regardless of the medium (chat, discussion, or synchronous Collaborate session) adhere to your own policies and rules and help students understand them and achieve them. Periodically, it might be necessary to re-emphasize a policy or guideline. Do it with some compassion but with firmness ... make it a teaching moment.

Offer online office hours, one-on-one or small group voice conferences using Skype or Blackboard Collaborate. These type of sessions create opportunities for students to know you and each other while they strengthen communication skills and master course materials.

Create discussion forums or web conference sessions for specific projects or assignments. These create a space for students to seek ideas or support from

their peer group. They can also be used to generate or exchange information and ideas. The instructor can allow students to manage the forums and in turn earn praise for effective cooperation and collaboration.

When traditional discussion forums are used, they can be amplified by selecting and rotating students as moderators or topic leaders. This motivates students to become involved and better understand the associated content knowledge. Additional roles can be added, for instance, time keeper and note taker.

Monitor progress of discussion. Provide general feedback to the group as a whole, but specific, detailed feedback to individuals, when necessary. Provide a final summation or wrap-up before moving on to the next topic. When possible, set the stage for the next discussion or event.

Student participation in the e-learning environment should be designed up front and built into the fabric of the course with planning and focused intent. Maximize your efforts of peer review, helping students understand they are responsible for their learning, and that they have an influence on each other.

Design an In-depth Syllabus

The syllabus is one of the most important documents in the online course. It reveals your unique performance expectations, any special course policies and procedures, as well as any special instructions on how you want things completed. It also provides your contact information outside of the course.

It should list any prerequisites, special equipment needs, textbooks, and other learning materials. Of course, it should describe special projects required during the course and instructions on how they are to be completed. When feasible, examples should be provided. Rubrics have also become popular in e-learning. They provide a clear path for grading and expectations to achieve excellence.

Course learning outcomes must be listed, as well as any special department objectives. Assessment methods must be covered in detail, along with point

values, and a grading scale. For support with issues outside of content, students should be provided help desk information. Use current terminology for the learning management system you use and make sure the language in assignments matches those of the course tools you have employed.

The syllabus is a contract between you and the student. No one wants a vague contract. You want details, requirements, methods, and the outcomes expected. You can preempt complications and save valuable time by providing the answers to frequently answer questions by providing detail upfront.

Assessment Strategies and Methods

One of the principle concerns in academia with online assessment has been cheating. There are many ways to detect and combat this in the e-learning environment.

First and foremost, the instructor must emphasize their attention to the issue by fostering an environment of academic honesty. Actions to be taken in violation of the trust must be clearly outlined.

We also recommend that you mix it up and not tie all your assessments in typical exams and quizzes. Use discussions, blogs, wikis, papers, presentations, varied assignments, along with the traditional examination.



High stake exams can be constructed using question pools where unique questions sets are selected for each student in the course. Exam results can be denied until a certain date passes or everyone completes the exam. Other restrictions include

allowing students to see all the questions at once or one at a time, and even the ability to allow or deny access to already saved questions.

If you remain suspicious, consider the use of proctors when high stake exams are part of your plan.

We also encourage, when possible, that students be given the opportunity to fail without grading. This is accomplished through the use of self-tests, peer exercises, robust feedback, and reinforcement assignments.

Don't forget the value of regular, reflective surveys designed to gauge student understanding of learning objectives. The results can direct real-time change and instructional modifications in the course.

The use of tracking and analytics tools to look deeper at student performance and adjustment of your interaction, feedback, and direct instruction is critical.

Maximize Your Technology Savvy

Few technologies are static. Blackboard is in a constant state of innovation and change. Regardless of how you view this growth, it is how things work on the technology side. In consequence, it becomes necessary to keep your tech skills current with changes, as well as your computer operations.

When technology training is offered, faculty should make attendance a priority. Normally, more than one session is offered or a single session is archived for viewing by those unable to attend. At a minimum, departments should seek out faculty that can attend, which can later serve department mentors or trainers.

As a last resort, faculty should seek help via walk-in services or practice with the technology using web-based resources. Telling students you don't know how to use a technology employed in your course is the wrong thing to do. Best practice demands you understand how it works for you and the student.

Demand Reflection and Critical Thinking in Homework

Research has revealed some very interesting results concerning the use of cognitive intervention assignments. For instance,

- when students complete an assignment,
- receive feedback
- and are required to act on the feedback,
- and then complete a follow-up assignment,

... they performed better in course exams, compared to students completing traditional assignments.

In short, students participated in retrieval and knowledge application. The assignment also takes more time than the traditional assignments, requiring them to keep focused and use critical thinking skills.

Another strategy involves the online student's advantage of time and space and the development of assignments with a connection to current events or contemporary applications in their fields.

In the traditional classroom, students must often answer questions with no or little time to think them through. An online student completing a properly constructed assignment, can walk away, read, research, and reflect before responding. In short, the responses you receive should show signs of reflection and critical thought, not spontaneity.