Dispelling the Myths of Teaching an Online Class

Myth 1: Teaching online will take less time since you don't have to be physically in a classroom.

The Reality: Designing and teaching an online class, especially for the first time, can be time consuming. Just like with a face-to-face class, you still need to prepare effective class materials, engage your students, and assess their learning. Although student interaction is handled differently, online classes should be just as complex and intense as campus-based classes. Therefore, the instructors' energy and creativity are essential to successfully create meaningful online learning experiences.

Myth 2: There will be little class participation.

The Reality: A well-designed online course can increase participation from students who might not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts in a campus-based class. These students now have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and strengths through student-to-student and student-to instructor conversations.

Myth 3: I can just put up my PowerPoints, a discussion board, and some tests, right? Or maybe record my lectures for an hour and put those up?

The Reality: PowerPoints are ineffective in a fully online environment because they should be guided. Without you guiding the presentation, there is no power, and no point. Relying entirely on recorded lectures also decreases student engagement. Students expect the same level of engagement, standards, and professor involvement that they would get in a face-to-face class.

Myth #4: Students in an online course do not learn as much as students in a face-to-face course.

The Reality: Learning objectives should be the same for online and face-to-face classes, and in either case, assignments support the learning objectives. Research suggests that students can learn more in an online course when collaborative learning approaches, critical thinking prompts, and discussion boards are used.

Myth 5: My classroom is a very interactive environment, so it would not translate well online. I am a charismatic instructor, and I connect personally with each student. I am concerned that I will lose this rapport.

The Reality: With an online class, the professor doesn't have to rely entirely on what she or he can present. A whole world of resources that can address different learning styles is available to develop student engagement and foster an interactive learning environment. Additionally, online students may have more opportunities to engage with and learn from each other than in a face-to-face class. You can design your online course to highlight your strengths and expertise using digital tools, spaces, and objects of study.

Our knowledge about effective online teaching and learning is growing rapidly. Research and experience suggest that these effective practices contribute to a satisfying teaching and learning experience for faculty and students.

Effective Practice 1: Build to be present

Plan your course with consistent online presence opportunities. Liberal use of communication tools such as announcements, discussion board postings, and forums communicate to the students that you care about who they are, will address their questions and concerns, and are generally available. The best online faculty, according to students, are those who show their presence multiple times a week. At the beginning of a course, set clear expectations as to when you will be present. Setting regular times when you can meet in an online environment further establishes your availability to students. If students feel abandoned or alone, they may post questions, such as "Is anybody there?" This is a clear signal that students believe you are not sufficiently present.

Effective Practice 2: Build for a supportive online course community

A good strategy for developing a supportive online course community is to design a course with a balanced set of three dialogues: faculty-to-student, student-to-student, and student-to-resources. In most online courses, the faculty-to-student dialogue occurs through mini-lectures presented in text, video, or audio, weekly mentoring and reminder announcements, and interactions with students. Dialogue between students can be encouraged through the use of an open student forum where they can to post and request help from each other. Make it informal—call it a "lounge" or a "café"—so students are encouraged to engage in conversations. Students can connect to resources if you provide links to tutorials or other materials that will help them complete their projects. For example you may provide links to online writing labs, the Kahn Academy for math questions, and videos that provide step by step instructions. Keep in mind that learning in an online community will work better for some students than for others; however, providing student-to-student and student-to-resource connections sets a supportive tone and environment for your course. This can greatly impact students' willingness and motivation to work through their challenges.

Effective Practice 3: Build with clear communication and time management expectations

You will need to identify a clear set of expectations for your students and for yourself as to how you will communicate and how much time students should be working on the course each week. Include a set of expectations for how students communicate with you. For example, many faculty tell students that they can expect a response within 24 hours during the week. Often before a major test or assignment, some faculty will agree to hold additional virtual office hours, being available either by chat, Skype, email, an LMS function, or phone. In the interest of time and community, consider using a tool where responses and content can be shared with everyone and archived to allow for ease of access and review. Online learning is just as intensive as learning face-to-face, and students must schedule adequate time to complete the work. Identifying how much effort and time will be required on a weekly basis helps students plan their study time.

Effective Practice 4: Build a variety of large group, small group, and individual work experiences

A learning community works well with a variety of activities and experiences. Online courses can be more enjoyable and effective when students have the opportunity to brainstorm and work through concepts and assignments with one, two, or more fellow students. At the same time, some students work and learn best on their own. Build options and opportunities for students to work in groups and individually. Group work is particularly effective when working on complex case studies or scenarios. Wikis, journals, and blogs can be valuable collaborative tools to facilitate group work.

Effective Practice 5: Build using both synchronous and asynchronous activities

When online courses were first introduced, they were almost totally asynchronous - an updated version of correspondence courses. Now we have course management systems, videoconferencing, and audio tools that make it possible to do almost everything we do in campus classrooms. We can often engage learners in more collaborative and more reflective activities, and collaborative activities can be recorded and archived for faculty to review, revise and make available to students. Sometimes real-time interactive brainstorming and discussion are ideal activities; other times effective individual learning requires the student to think, plan, write, and summarize independently. The variety of activities makes it possible to create many types of effective learning environments.

Effective Practice 6: Build-in regular feedback

Early in the term, ask for informal feedback on how the course going and whether students have suggestions. Feedback surveys and informal discussions enable students to provide feedback on what is working well in a course and what might help them have a better course experience.

Effective Practice 7: Build a discussion forum that invites questions, engagement, reflection and dialogue

Discussions in an online course are the equivalent of class discussions in a face-to-face class. A key difference, of course, is that these discussions are asynchronous, providing time for thought and reflection and requiring written and/or audio responses that become part of a course archive. Here are a few recommendations from experienced online faculty to post discussion prompts that foster reflection and dialogue:

• Create open-ended questions where learners can explore and apply the concepts they have studied.

• Model good Socratic-type probing and follow-up questions such as "Why do you think that?" What is your reasoning? Is there an alternative strategy?" Ask clarifying questions that encourage students to think about what they know and don't know.

•Provide students with staggered due dates to encourage robust discussions. For example set one due date for the initial post and a second due date for posts responding to one or several of their classmates' comments.

•Provide guidelines and instruction on responding to other students. For example, suggest a two-part response where students initially indicate what they agreed with or what resonated with them and then pose their own questions.

•Post questions that encourage reflection, analysis and connection with course objectives. To test for fact-based proficiency, consider quizzes instead.

•Be there! Log in to your course consistently - answer email, monitor discussions, post reminders, and hold online office hours.

Effective Practice 8: Build-in digital connections

When possible, link to content resources, current events and examples. Students enjoy seeing how their learning relates to current events. You might enlist student assistance in identifying high quality online content.

If content is not digital, it is practically non-existent for many students. Students are more likely to use material and applications that are easily accessible from their computers, tablets, and smartphones.

Effective Practice 9: Build-in customized and personalized learning

Support learners' professional goals by linking course performance goals to students' disciplines or interests. You can build options and choices in assignments and special projects to foster students' in-discipline exploration.

Present concepts individually and in small clusters so that students can apply concepts within case studies, problems, and analyses within disciplinary or professional contexts. This is especially important for students who are new to a field of study or discipline.

Effective Practice 10: Build-in a good closing activity for the course

As courses come to a close, it is easy to forget the value of a good closing experience. Capstone assignments can include student presentations, summaries, and analyses which provide insights into the knowledge students are taking away from a course. Capstone projects also provide faculty with a final opportunity to remind students of core concepts and fundamental principles. Consider a project that helps students not only review major course concepts but also envision how these concepts contribute to their future learning and work.

As with face-to face courses, your online course syllabus should convey information students need throughout the semester including course structure, assignments, and grading criteria. The syllabus sets the tone for the course, establishes the expectations you have for your students, and articulates University and instructor policies.

How is an Online Syllabus Different from a Face-to-Face Syllabus?

In face-to-face courses, you have multiple opportunities to answer questions about the syllabus. You do not have similar opportunities in online courses.

Take time to develop clear
• Course objectives;
• Descriptions and guidelines for assignments and their assessment;
• Course calendar;
• Grading policies —rubrics are particularly helpful and may reduce the time spent on assessment;
• Communication expectations – how you expect to communicate with students, and how quickly will you get back to them.

Add sections that explain
• Technology requirements so that students can make sure that they have adequate equipment and software to succeed in the course;
• Guidelines for online posting and etiquette (netiquette);
• Policies about collaborative work and discussions.

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Essential Elements of an Online Syllabus

Here is a checklist for creating your online syllabus. You needn't include all of these items (some may be more appropriate for one class than others), nor do you have to include them all in one document called a "syllabus."

• Course title, authors' and instructor's names.

• Course instructor's contact information, plus contact information for technical support.

• Course description, perhaps the same as the description used for a course catalog listing, but more detailed; should list any prerequisites or special technical requirements for the course.

• Course objectives or expected outcomes; what students can expect to learn by completion of the course.

• Required texts or materials: any books or other materials, such as software, not made available through the learning management system but required for the course.

• Explanation of grading criteria and components of total grade: a list of all quizzes, exams, graded assignments, and forms of class participation, with grade percentages or points; criteria for a passing grade; policies on late assignments.

•Participation standards: minimum number of postings per week in discussion boards, wikis, journals or other forums and any standards for quality of participation.

• Explanation of course geography and procedures: how the online course is organized; how students should proceed each week to complete class activities; how to label assignments; where to post materials in the course.

• Plan for your students to follow should Moodle go down for maintenance or other LMS interruption. Consider how your students can reach you if they are having trouble accessing course information or submitting assignments. For example, your strategy may include creating a Dropbox or other cloud service where students can submit their assignments.

• Access to student support and acceptable documentation should students encounter LMS problems. For example, you may instruct students to take a screen shot of the specific screen that is causing them problems to document the issue and forward to the UTEP Help Desk.

• Week-by-week schedule: topics, assignments, readings, quizzes, activities, and web resources for each week, with specific dates.

• A statement on plagiarism.

• A statement on accommodations for disabled students.

Whether your course calendar is a separate document or included with your syllabus, be sure to also include the CRN and starts and end dates for the course.

It's difficult to anticipate every issue that may arise during the class and to address that in your syllabus. Your syllabus must balance brevity and completeness. Remember that you have other means of communicating detailed information to your students. You may use announcements, weekly e-mails, or postings in an appropriate forum. You will also want to use these means to reinforce important elements of your syllabus as the course progresses

A course map identifies and communicates how the course flows and how the components interact with each other so the learning outcomes are met. The map becomes a visual representation of how the elements fit to create a coherent sequence that's most effective.

The Use of Modules

You can begin to conceptualize your online course in various ways. Some faculty begin to think about their course in terms of content themes, while others will contextualize their course by competencies, skills, and learning outcomes. Some faculty will think about their course in terms of weekly content and still others by a larger influence: department, college and university goals. One benefit of using a learning management system is the ability to organize and group content in any of the ways previously mentioned. Through the use modules, a class can be compartmentalized yet remain cohesive. In addition, content modules facilitate modifications to course delivery timeframes.

Diaz and Strickland (2009) identify a process to map a course through modularization, which may be a good starting point for faculty transitioning to an online format for the first time. These are the five key steps Diaz and Strickland recommend:

•Identify the module's objectives. Note that objectives are typically granular, action-oriented, and more specific than course goals, which may be more general in describing what students are meant to accomplish. Consider what you will do to support or meet those objectives and what the students will be asked to do to meet those objectives.
•Identify student-to-instructor, student-to-material, and student-to-student interactions. For instance, an instructor may use a mix of the following strategies: mini-lectures, readings, videos, group or individual activities, research, writing, projects, discussions, demonstrations, multimedia, cases, team work, or assessments.
•Define the components of your module. Identify activities that students may be required to complete on a regular basis such as case-studies, readings, or discussion posts.
•Determine how you will measure student learning and the assessments that effectively show learning objectives are being met.
•Determine the relationship of your objectives to the course goals or other content in the course and identify how the module's content aligns or supports the rest of the course.

Creating a table, or using another graphic organizer, can help you visualize this information and facilitate the mapping process.

Course Module:				
Objective	Online Delivery	Activities/Assignment/Interaction	Assessment(s)	Relationship to course goals and content

Diaz & Strickland. (2009). Mapping your course: re (Designing) a course into modules for blended delivery. http://www2.pvc.maricopa.edu/hybrid/docs/crsemaptemplate.pdf

Students can easily feel isolated in a face-to-face classroom despite being surrounded by 20+ students at a time, so you can only imagine how this could be heightened in an online environment. Thus, establishing a strong online presence for both instructor and peers is important. Your goal is to create a virtual space where students feel as though the instructor and classmates are with them, guiding them in a safe environment where they can freely share their thoughts and learn from each other without being judged or criticized in a negative way. This can be tricky for faculty because our inclination is to "jump in" if we feel not enough interaction is occurring, or because we know the "right" answer. If the instructor is too present, however, the course can feel stifling to students and they may be less willing to share their thoughts and ideas and construct knowledge on their own.

Implementing the following techniques can improve a sense of presence for your students:

• Let your students get to know you and incorporate your own personality where appropriate. You might record a video for the first week of the course introducing yourself, your teaching style, student expectations and goals for the course, or start off each week with a personalized announcement detailing your learning objectives and what assignments or tasks need to be done for the week.
• You also want to show your presence by checking in to your LMS as often as possible and leave timely "evidence" that you have been there such as posting new announcements or discussion board postings. If you only post every other week, the students may feel that the course is on autopilot. Being silent is the equivalent to being invisible for both faculty and students.
• Rapport and faculty presence can be further established through the Discussion Board. You don't have to respond to every student or every post, but you can, for example, summarize the discussion postings every week, while adding your analysis and connection to the learning goals of the class. Model how you would want students to respond to you and each other. And, yes, it can be enjoyable to use a quick video now and again to liven up the discussion from time to time.

It is important to set expectations at the beginning of the course for your students of how often you will be checking in and your response time. You may even create a space on the discussion board where students can share information and announcements on things outside of class and allow them to develop a rapport among themselves.

Ultimately, studies consistently show that the most common indicator for student satisfaction and perceived learning was instructor presence which helps raise student learning especially with regards to individualized corrective feedback and support for problem solving (Swan, 2004). The most important thing your students may ever remember about you is your presence in their learning.

Swan, K. (2004). Learning online: current research on issues of interface, teaching presence and learner characteristics. In J. Bourne & J. C. Moore (Eds.) *Elements of Quality Online Education, Into the Mainstream* (pp. 63-79). Needham, MA: Sloan Center for Online Education.

Student behavior can be, for better or worse, very different in the online portion of your class than in the face-to-face environment. On a positive note, you may receive participation from students who never say anything in a FACE-TO-FACE class, but participate consistently online.

Here are some recommended practices to foster productive online interaction.

Establish and communicate discussion board ground rules. To help your students understand discussion board expectations, communicate the ground rules at the beginning of class. Let them know:

• Your expectation for writing styles;
• Required length for each post;
• Number of responses to classmates;
• Permitted editing or deletion of posts; and
• Ability to start new discussion threads.

Encourage students to contact you if they don't understand the assignment or are having technical difficulties with the discussion board.

Engage your students by using open-ended questions that challenge thinking. To encourage informal interaction and connection amongst your students, create an area in your discussion board for personal introductions and discussions. Your students may learn more about their peers than they would in the classroom, thus fostering connection and community.

Determine and communicate how you will evaluate students' participation. Students must know how their contributions will be assessed to participate effectively. To encourage substantial and serious participation, use a grading rubric and share it with your students when you introduce assignment(s).

Communicate guidelines are needed for:

• The number of times students are required to post per prompt;

• Required posting length;

• Information or references to be included in the post; and

• Analysis that is thoughtful and thorough.

Consider including the following (N)etiquette rules on your syllabus to remind students that their postings are permanent and affect their grades.

• Always consider audience. Remember that members of the class and the instructor will be reading your postings.

• Respect and courtesy must be provided to classmates and to instructor at all times. No harassment, flaming, or inappropriate postings will be tolerated.

• Do not use inappropriate language, all capital letters, or language short cuts. Online entries should be written in Standard English with edited spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

• When reacting to someone else's message, address the ideas, not the person. Post only what you would comfortably state in a face-to-face situation.

• Be sure to read everyone's responses before posting. Avoid repeating what someone else has already said. Add something new to the discussion.

• No credit will be received for yes/no answers. Posts should justify positions and provide specific examples. Students must demonstrate that they have read the assignment and their classmates' comments carefully and thoughtfully.

• Be sure to post in a timely fashion to receive credit for attendance and for the discussion. Pay close attention to the posted deadlines.

Student Recommended Practices

You might also share the following tips with students on your syllabus or another space on your online course.

Review language: Given the absence of face-to-face clues, written text can easily be misinterpreted. Avoid the use of strong or offensive language and the excessive use of exclamation points. If you feel particularly strongly about a point, write a draft in a separate document, take time away from the draft, review it, revise to remove any offensive language, and then post the final draft.

Be forgiving: If someone states something that you find offensive, mention this directly to the instructor. The person contributing to the discussion is also new to this form of communication and what may appear offensive may quite possibly have been unintended and can best be cleared up by the instructor.

Consider the medium: Think carefully about the content of messages before contributing to discussions. Once sent to the group, there is no taking the posting/discussion back. Compose and check comments in a word-processor before posting them.

Test for clarity: Messages may often appear perfectly clear to the student composing them but may confuse the reader. One way to test for clarity is to read the message aloud to see if it flows smoothly. Another useful check is to read it to another person to check for clarity before posting it.

Remember the context: A web-based classroom is still a classroom, and comments that would be inappropriate in a regular classroom are likely to be inappropriate in a web-based course as well. Treat your instructor and classmates with respect.

Follow parameters/ Stick to the point: Follow the posting requirements and parameters set up by your professor. Contributions to a discussion should have a clear subject that you discuss. Don't waste others' time by going off on tangents.

Read first, write later: Don't add your comments to a discussion before reading the comments of other students unless the assignment specifically asks you to do so. Ignoring the ongoing discussion is rude and counterproductive. If you are responding to a specific comment, acknowledge the comment's author in your response and post your discussion to the same thread to keep related topics organized.

Cyber-harassment

Despite your use of recommended practices, sometimes the online arena can be too "liberating," and cause concern about what has been posted or the appropriateness of how students are interacting with you or each other. The "appropriateness" of interactions found on discussion boards and e-mail exchanges between students and faculty, and students with other students can be quite subjective. This is made more difficult in classes where the content may include provocative or controversial topics. How far can someone go, then, before it is considered "too far?" The descriptions below may help you determine if a posting has gone too far.

The use of a computer to cause a person harm such as anxiety, distress or psychological harm, including abusive, threatening or hateful emails and messages and the posting of derogatory information online is going too far and is unacceptable in any online interaction.

Specific types of cyber-harassment include:

Cyberbullying is intimidating messages sent directly to the victim's via email or other internet communication, and/or the use of technological means to interfere with a victim's use of the internet such as hacking or denial of services attacks. This also includes spreading rumors about the victim in internet forums and discussion boards, subscribing the victim to unwanted online services, or sending messages to others in the victim's name.

Cyberstalking is threatening behavior or unwanted advances directed at another using the internet and other forms of online and computer communications.

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Flaming is hostile and insulting interaction between internet users. It frequently results from discussions about polarizing issues, but can it also be provoked by seemingly trivial differences. Deliberate flaming or trolling involves posting inflammatory messages in an online community with the primary intent of provoking readers into an emotional response that disrupts productive, on-topic, discussion.

If you are concerned about the appropriateness of students' online behavior you may communicate with the student first if you believe the behavior is unintentional. In more extreme cases, contact the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution at studentconduct@utep.edu.

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Identifying the most effective assessment is directly related to the selection of well-defined learning outcomes and goals. The design of an online course will require that you review the current instructional strategy and analyze all its components.

Effective Assessments and Feedback

Assessment plays a crucial role in your efforts to improve student learning and is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional. Assessment should be correlated to the learning objectives and scaffolding required to achieve learning outcomes. Assessment works best when it is ongoing (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996).

For students, high-quality feedback consists of the following:

• Clear criteria against which to judge the feedback. A feedback rubric articulates criteria and relative weights for assignment components and can be shared with students when the assignment is introduced so they are aware of how you will assess their work.
• Comments that are detailed and related to specific aspects of their work. Consider developing a master feedback form that can be used on multiple student responses. This way, the students receive individual and consistent attention.
• Comments that are improvement-focused.

Assessments

Including a variety of assignments and assessments in your course can increase the student-to-student interaction and address multiple learning styles. The assessments listed below allow students to evaluate their own and their peers work.

Peer Review: Peer reviewing can help in two ways: the reviewers see classmates' responses to the assignment e assignment and can then gauge if their understanding of the assignment is clear, and same assignment and can then gauge if their understanding if the assignment is clear, and students receive feedback from classmates prior to submitting the final assignment thus allowing them to revise their work. Peer review works well when you provide clear guidelines and/or questions that need to be answered by the reviewer. Set up a rubric, identify how peer review groups will be formed and then let them share and assess each other's work. Include guidelines for student-to-student feedback and student-to-instructor requirements or reflection.

Self-Reflection/Self-Evaluation: This assessment can take the form of journaling, blog posts, an assignment, or responses to discussion questions. This assessment type is useful because it allows students to develop metacognitive thinking. Further, students take more responsibility for their own learning in the process of evaluating themselves. While some students will not always take self-evaluation seriously, those that do will benefit greatly from it.

Group Projects: Another way to create connectivity for students is assign group projects. When students work together to solve a problem or complete a project, they also learn from each other, expanding learning for all. Group assignments increase student-to-student interaction which in turn increases student completion. Whenever you assign a group project, plan to require students to develop a team/group charter that establishes group expectations and conflict-resolution procedures. Following up with group member evaluations at the project completion also allows students to peer-evaluate each other's work and contributions to the group project. Both elements foster effective group experiences for all members while providing you with insight into group members' learning and contributions.

Quizzes: This is a typical, formal assessment and is helpful when material must be mastered by students to advance in class. Consider developing your test/quizzes so that this assessment is also closely correlated to course goals and objectives.

The Division of Student Affairs offers several resources for assessment. Although these are provided for students to review, they are also helpful sources for instructors and are available at http://-sa.utep.edu/assessment/resources/

Academic integrity is an issue in both face-to-face and online learning environments. Concerns may include, but are not limited to:

Plagiarism occurs when a student presents another person's work as his or her own, whether meaning to or not (i.e. copying parts of or whole papers off the Internet).

Collusion occurs when a student lends his or her work to another person to submit as his or her own.

Fabrication occurs when a student deliberately creates false information on a reference list.

As instructors, we are challenged to find or develop effective practices for preventing academic dishonesty and to inform our students about the consequences of compromising their academic integrity. Faculty must establish clear policies, use technology effectively, and serve as ethical role models.

Establishing Policy

A clear policy statement in your syllabus is necessary. Not only will it define academic dishonesty for your students, but it should also alert them to consequences. Here is one example:

"Academic Dishonesty is NEVER tolerated by UTEP or the Department of _____. All suspected cases are reported to the Dean of Students for Academic Sanctions. These sanctions may include expulsion. All work submitted must be original; students may not submit graded work from another course. Forms of academic dishonesty include: Collusion— lending your work to another person to submit as his or her own; Fabrication—deliberately creating false information on a works cited page, and Plagiarism— the presentation of another person's work as your own, whether you mean to or not (i.e. copying parts of or whole papers off the Internet). See the Dean of Students website at http://www.utep.edu/dos/acadintg.htm for more information.

Students also need be well aware of the copyright and fair use requirements in your class, and of course, for the university. A clear policy statement in your syllabus can help clarify this for them as well. For example:

"The University requires all members of its community to follow copyright and fair use requirements. You are individually and solely responsible for violations of copyright and fair use laws. The University will neither protect nor defend you nor assume any responsibility for student violations of fair use laws. Violations of copyright laws could subject you to federal and state civil penalties and criminal liability, as well as disciplinary action under University policies."

Helpful Tools

Several software programs, such as SafeAssign and Turnitin, are available to instructors. Many of these work by checking students' submissions against content in its database (which includes student work as well as articles, webpages, and books.