

## Designing to Learn: Effective Practices for Building an Online Course

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 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.