Online Teaching Best Practices

Teaching online, like any new technology, requires us to rethink our approach to teaching, learning, and engaging with each other. Thankfully, online teaching and learning have had a couple of decades of test runs where potentially many of the hurdles we may encounter can be mitigated by following best practices—practices that are informed by pedagogical research and practical experience.

The first thing you should consider is that online teaching is not the same as face-to-face (F2F) teaching. That isn’t to say that online teaching is less effective, but that it requires a different set of skills which can be learned and perfected over time.

Reading through the following entries will highlight how you can optimize your online teaching and deliver a quality learning experience for your students.

Create a Netiquette Policy

A netiquette policy helps to focus student behavior in an online course. A netiquette policy can refer to behaviors in discussion forums and Zoom sessions. Consider the following examples:

Zoom Live Sessions

Participation & Communication

- Strive to learn from one another and build on one another's contributions.
- Do not drive while zooming into a classroom
- Use the chat feature to pose a question or comment to the entire class. If you want to address a single participant, use the chat feature to address that specific person.
● Be respectful and inclusive of one another both verbally and in chat.
● Be aware of strong language, all caps, and exclamation points
● Don’t post or share (even privately) inappropriate material.
● Once class begins use group chat for class content only.

Professionalism

● Log-in to the session on time. Just like a face-to-face course, you are expected to arrive at the scheduled time.
● Refrain from eating while participating in a breakout room or engaging in a Q&A session. If you need to excuse yourself for a snack, disable your video.
● Dress as if you are out in public. If you are attending from home, please maintain the same level of presentation as you would in the workplace or at the university.
● Attend the presentation from a sitting position. Laying down is not acceptable.
● Find a professional location for your zoom classroom (i.e. desk, table, quiet room); if not possible consider using a green screen.
● Most importantly, remember that this is a professional environment, and presenting yourself professionally is a sign of respect to other students as well as your instructor.

Audio and Video

● Mute your microphone when you are not speaking. Unmuted microphones can cause disruptions to the lecture or the discussion.
● Have your camera on by default. Being present in the Zoom room visually encourages interaction and social presence.
● If possible, position a light behind your camera but directed toward you such as a window or desk lamp. Lighting from the side is acceptable, but if the source comes from behind, you will be in shadow.

Discussion Forums

● Check the discussion frequently and respond appropriately and on the subject.
● Focus on one subject per message and use pertinent subject titles.
● Capitalize words only to highlight a point or for titles—Capitalizing otherwise is generally viewed as SHOUTING!
● Be professional and careful with your online interaction.
● Cite all quotes, references, and sources.
● When posting a long message, it is generally considered courteous to warn readers at the beginning of the message that it is a lengthy post.
● It is considered extremely rude to forward someone else’s messages without their permission.
• It is fine to use humor, but use it carefully. the absence of face-to-face cues can cause humor to be misinterpreted as criticism or flaming (angry, antagonistic criticism). Feel free to use emoticons such as 😊 or 😌 to let others know that you’re being humorous.

Gather Feedback

Similar to a F2F environment, you will change your approach based on the feedback you get from your students, whether that feedback is direct, or if it’s observed. In the online sphere, you can get direct feedback by asking students in a Zoom session, through email, or through a survey. Observed or indirect feedback will be apparent in online student behaviors such as whether or not they participate, how they perform on assignments, projects, and other tasks.

Be Consistent

Consistency in the online world is key.

Whether you are using bCourses, Zoom, or any other tools, try to be as consistent as you can in how you use your technologies. Students will appreciate getting used to one way of working and sticking to it. If students have to learn a new way of accessing information for every session, then this may frustrate them and compromise the learning experience.

It’s okay if you try something that doesn’t work out at first. Adjust and refine your approach but be certain to communicate changes with your students.

Communication

Communication isn’t immediate in an online course unlike in traditional courses. You can’t read your students reactions and they can’t read yours so it’s important to find ways to share reflections, ideas, and expectations in an ongoing way.

Aside from Zoom, you can use communication tools in bCourses to increase your social presence as well as the social presence of your students. You can maintain ongoing communication using the following tools:

• Discussion forums
• Announcements
• Feedback in assignments using SpeedGrader and quizzes
Discussion Forums

It's important to note that although Discussions are a student engagement and assessment tool, that there is functionality within the tool that allows you to guide the conversation, to refocus tangents, and to provide clarifications.

Canvas guides (bCourses) have identified two types of discussion forums (using the same tool of course): focused discussions and threaded discussions

1. Focused Discussions

Focused Discussions are relatively short-lived interactions that tend to disappear as the course progresses, such as a weekly forum for questions related to that week’s activities.

Use a Focused Discussion for single posts and related comments. One discussion leader typically posts a message and multiple learners comment on it. Participants may leave a side comment to a reply, but cannot develop the conversation beyond two layers of nesting.

When looking at Discussion Forum settings, you'll notice that there is no box to click to make it a focused discussion. What makes it a focused discussion is the way you apply the tool and the parameters set around it. For example, weekly discussions in every module are focused because they’re aligned with a specific module or week, have a due date, and will be closed for comments after that due date. Let's look at the difference with a threaded discussion.

2. Threaded Discussions

Again, getting back to the Canvas resource,

Threaded Discussions lend themselves to the refining of complex ideas. Responses and different lines of inquiry that can be quickly navigated due to its hierarchical structure. Threaded Discussions may be long-standing spaces for thoughts that persist throughout an entire course.

Use a Threaded Discussion for multiple posts and related comments. One or more discussion leaders post a message and multiple learners comment on it with the freedom to create any number of related discussion topics and comments (infinite layers of nesting).

The passage implies that the difference between a threaded discussion and a focused discussion is that threaded discussions lend themselves to “infinite layers of nesting.”
Again, the difference is in how the tool is used and how the experience is facilitated. For example, if you wanted your course to have nothing but focused discussions as they are embedded in the modules, you can remove the Discussion link from the navigation panel in your course. However, if you want to have longstanding threaded discussion boards, you can leave the link in the panel and post your discussions in the Discussions Index Page of your bCourse site and not in the module. Of course, there’s nothing to stop you if you wanted to do both.

Announcements

Announcements are a great way to open the lines of communication between you and your students when you want to communicate something about the course, and you want that communication to be centralized in an easy to access place. Searching for important information through an email thread can be frustrating so it’s nice to have communication that is available to everyone simply by clicking the link in the navigation panel.

Announcements can be used for the following reasons.

- Send out a welcome email to your students during the first day/week
- Reminder for upcoming due dates
- Outline the expectations for the upcoming week
- Include links to useful websites and articles
- Share exemplary discussion comments and replies (this could possibly elicit better student responses in the future)

Provide Detailed Feedback

Providing feedback to student work can be done in several ways.

Discussions

First, as an instructor, you can moderate discussion forums to highlight key points or themes. Not only does this increase social presence online, but it’s a way to gather indirect feedback on how your students are doing.

Assignments and Speed Grader
Using the Speed Grader, you can provide feedback to student submissions through the comments box, or you can annotate directly on a document if one was submitted.

See the SpeedGrader Overview Video

Use feedback in quizzes

When creating quizzes, you can provide feedback for correct or incorrect answers.