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Become An Effective Teacher & Save Your Valuable Teaching Time and Energy

Center for Effective Undergraduate Teaching (864) 388-8426

Ten Best Practices for Teaching Online
Quick Guide for New Online faculty

{Complete Article Here}

OUR KNOWLEDGE about what works well in online teaching and learning is growing rapidly and that is very good news. Yet it also means that it is easy to feel overwhelmed.

Here are ten best practices for anyone just getting started in the online environment. Research and experience suggest that these practices contribute to an effective, efficient and satisfying teaching and learning experience for both faculty and students. Using these practices can help develop confidence, comfort, and experience in teaching online.

Best Practice 1:
Be Present at the Course Site

Liberal use of a faculty's use of communication tools such as announcements, discussion board postings, and forums communicate to the students that the faculty member cares about who they are, cares about their questions and concerns, and is generally "present" to do the mentoring and challenging that teaching is all about.

Best Practice 2:
Create 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 dialogues. This means designing a course so that the three dialogues of faculty to student, student to student and student to resource are about equal.

Best Practice 3:

Share a set of very clear expectations for your students and for yourself as to (1) how you will communicate and (2) how much time students should be working on the course each week. - This best practice cannot be overemphasized. Include on your course site a set of expectations for how students communicate and dialogue online and how they communicate with you.

Best Practice 4:
Use a variety of large group, small group, and individual work experiences

A community works well when there are 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 either one or two or more fellow students.

Best Practice 5:
Use both synchronous and asynchronous activities

When online courses were first introduced, they were almost totally asynchronous - an updated version of the distance learning courses by correspondence. Now we have course management systems and virtual live classrooms and audio tools that make it possible to do almost everything we do in campus classrooms. Plus we can often engage learners in more collaborative and more reflective activities, and what happens is recorded and archived and there for review and occasionally revision.

Best Practice 6:
Early in the term - about week 3, ask for informal feedback on "How is the course going?" and "Do you have any suggestions?"

Course evaluations have been called "post mortem" evaluations as they are done after the fact, and nothing can be changed to increase satisfaction or facilitate learning. Early feedback surveys or just informal discussions ask students to provide feedback on what is working well in a course and what might help them have a better course experience.

Best Practice 7:
Prepare Discussion Posts that Invite Questions, Discussions, Reflections and Responses

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.

Best Practice 8:
Focus on content resources and applications and links to current events and examples that are easily accessed from learner's computers

If content is not digital, it is as if it does not exist for students. This means that the content that students will more likely use is that content and applications that are available from their computers. Students want to be learning anywhere, anytime and often while they are doing other things, such as driving, exercising, etc.

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Fall Semester classes begin - Sept 3
Registration-Drop/Add ends - Sept 7
Individual course withdrawal begins - Sept 10-Nov 2
Faculty Meeting - Sept 19
Open House - Sept 29

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ONLINE TEACHING

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Best Practice 9:

Combine core concept learning with customized and personalized learning

This best practice combines a number of basic learning principles, explained in length in other resources. Very briefly, it means that faculty identify the core concepts to be learned in a course - the performance goals - and then mentor learners through a set of increasingly complex and even customized projects applying these core concepts.

Best Practice 10:

Plan a good closing and wrap activity for the course

As courses come to a close, it is easy to forget the value of a good closing experience. In the final weeks of a course, students are likely to be stressed and not take the time to do the lists and the planning that can help reduce stress and provide a calming atmosphere. A favorite image of mine is from David Allen of Getting Things Done. Allen notes that making a list helps us to clear the "psychic ram" of our brains and we feel more relaxed and more in control. Once we have made our list and schedule, we don't have to continually remind ourselves of what needs to be done and when.

Concluding Thought

Traditional courses have long focused on tools and techniques for the presentation of content. Traditional concerns from faculty focused on covering the material, getting through the book and meeting expectations so that faculty in other courses won't muse and wonder, "Didn't you learn these concepts from faculty X?" And "Didn't you study the work and contributions of ____ (Fill in your favorite who)"

A major drawback with designing for content as a priority is that it focuses attention on what the faculty member is doing, thinking and talking about and not on the interaction and engagement of students with the core concepts and skills of a course. The new focus on learners encourages a focus on learners as a priority. The new focus on the learner is to develop a habit of asking, what is going on inside the learner's head? How much of the content is being integrated into their knowledge base? How much of the content and the tools can he/she actually use? What are students thinking and how did they arrive at their respective positions?

Additionally, we are seeing a shift to looking at the student not only as an individual, but as an individual within the learning community. Other questions that we are now considering include: How is the learner supporting the community of learners and contributing to the overall growth of the group?

We have much to learn about teaching and learning and specifically about teaching online. The good news is that in 2011 we now know much more than what we did in 1990 or even 2000. The list of references that follow are starting points for both general teaching and for teaching online.

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Lander University's White Board

Throw Yourself into the Unknown! Inviting Students to Determine Course Content

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WITH THE APPROACH of a new semester, the task of shaping syllabi emerges. Sometimes, the crafting of a course syllabus is comparable in complexity to the completion of a jigsaw puzzle. Tricky and toilsome can be the task of neatly fitting together lectures and assignments which comprise a cohesive and comprehensive whole and successfully address various course objectives. One often finds oneself pulled in apparently conflicting directions, such as that between teaching the fundamentals of a subject versus teaching to students' interests.

One way that I have addressed this issue involves devoting a portion of my syllabus to student presentations, with the content of these presentations being determined, in significant part, by the students. Such presentations occur only after bedrock material has been learned, and involve reinforcement of this material via creative analysis and application in the context of the presentation. Students thus reinforce their learning of the essential material in a way that is personally engaging. A body of knowledge that might otherwise seem to reside in a discipline to which they have no personal relation becomes theirs, applicable to situations that do or could confront them in "real life."

For a course in Ethics (PHIL 302: Fall 2011), I spent the opening weeks teaching classical and contemporary philosophical theories in ethics (e.g., utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, contractarianism, feminist ethics). As a way of rendering more concrete what might otherwise seem abstract theory, I framed the course in terms of ethics in professional life, provoking students to identify, analyze, and evaluate ethically salient dimensions of various situations arising in the world of work. To embolden the practicality of this application, I invited students to have a hand in determining how they would apply the theories. Students were asked in the second week of the semester what professions they wished to deliver a presentation on, and were then assigned recent literature addressing ethical dilemmas arising in the context of their chosen professions. These presentations would serve as the content of three weeks of the course.

In most cases, the students' majors were reliable indicators of their interest. In some cases, however, students were considering a change in major and used the presentation as an opportunity to learn something more about the new field under consideration. In total, there were five presentations on ethical issues arising in the context of health care (inclusive of nursing, counseling, and health care management), four on ethical issues in business (inclusive of management and advertising), four on ethical issues in education (inclusive of lower, middle, and higher education), two on ethical issues in military service (inclusive of matters on the battlefield and off), and two on ethical issues in professional athletics (inclusive of matters on the playing field and off). Presentations sometimes bridged professions (e.g., a presentation on ethical dilemmas arising in the context of nursing in the military). While students in attendance might not have interest in the profession being discussed during a particular class meeting, the ethical dilemma related to that profession was sure to elicit a response from the class at large. Indeed, one lesson learned from this approach to the course was that as much as types of professional life vary, what is required of an ethical employee, employer, or coworker in these professions is often much the same.

Structuring the course in this way afforded a good deal of flexibility in terms of course content. While this feature of the course was very appealing to the students, it did pose something of a challenge to the instructor, as I had do some crash research on recent literature in professions with which I did not have familiarity. The time and effort required to find the most suitable selection for a student to engage in a presentation may be considered a hazard to organizing a course in this way. I would suggest, however, that instructors embrace the idea of throwing themselves into the unknown. The quality of the presentations was generally very high, with students typically demonstrating clear understanding of the philosophical theories that they had learned and thoughtful application of those theories to navigate the ethical problems they had chosen to address. Class discussion was equally lively, with students engaging in sophisticated dialogue utilizing the terminology from the course while comparing and contrasting various considerations that had been made in addressing ethical dilemmas arising across the chosen professions. Some students who had never taken a prior course in philosophy could have been mistaken for advanced majors in the field. The students clearly benefited from this personalization of the course, and they were not alone. I learned very much from listening to their philosophical reflections about their chosen professions, and I was proud to see them working through tough issues in dialogue that was as reflective as it was energetic.

This approach worked well for my philosophy course, but I see no reason why it could not be effective in courses for other disciplines. Moreover, student presentations are not the only vehicle by which these results could be produced. For instance, one could reserve a portion of the course's lecture contents as "To Be Determined," inviting the class–perhaps at a strategic juncture in the course's trajectory–to select from a menu of options the topic to be discussed. Perhaps the instructor is equally prepared to teach any of the options, and the throwing of oneself into the unknown is more of a nudge into the unforeseen. The more adventurous instructor might include topics that they have wanted to tackle but have not yet found the time to. The time will quite possibly find you!

As you tinker with your syllabi for the upcoming semester, consider adopting an approach that allows students to put more of the pieces of the picture in place. Although it may initially sound a bit unnerving, throwing yourself into the unknown can be a key to facilitating a mutually fulfilling class experience.