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BLACKBOARD

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Designing to Learn: Best Practices for Building an Online Course

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Our knowledge about what works well in online teaching and learning is growing rapidly, yet it also means that it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Academic Technologies @ UTEP is happy, then, to provide you with some tips to consider as you build, and eventually, teach your online course. Research and experience suggest that these practices contribute to an effective, efficient, and satisfying teaching and learning experience for both faculty and students.

Best Practice 1: Build to be present

Build your course with the idea of consistent online presence in mind. Liberal 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, their questions and concerns, and is generally available to do the mentoring and challenging that teaching is all about.

The "best online" faculty, according to students, are those who show their presence multiple times a week, and at best, daily. Setting clear expectations as to when you will be present and when you will not at the beginning of a course with course policies is very helpful, and can reduce the need for daily presence if that is not your particular style. Setting regular times when you can meet in a virtual classroom or be available by email or texting, and thus be available, similar to office hours, can be invaluable.

Students who feel abandoned or who feel alone may even post questions, such as "Is anybody there?" This is a very clear and unambiguous signal that not all is well.

Best Practice 2: Build for a supportive online course community

As you are building your course, note that an online instructor wants to develop three types of presence: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive/content presence.

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 resources are about equal. In most online courses, the dialogue of faculty to student is provided with (1) mini-lectures in text or video or audio podcasts, (2) weekly mentoring and reminder announcements and (3) explanations/interactions with the students. Some specific strategies include:

Launch the class with a personal introduction posting or short video so that students can get to know you and one another.

Encourage use of a general open student forum for students to post and request help and assistance from each other.   Make it fun—call it a "lounge," a "café," something they can associate with being informal and conducive to conversation.

Keep in mind that learning within the setting of an online course community will work better for some students than for others; however, the tone and environment you set for your course can greatly impact their willingness and motivation to stay and work through their challenges.

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

You will need to identify 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 a set of expectations for how students communicate and dialogue online and how they 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 special office hours by computer, being available either by chat/live classroom or email, or phone. In the interest of time and community, it is best to use a tool where responses and content can be shared with everyone and archived for flexibility in access and review.

Online learning is just as intensive as learning face-to-face, and time to do the work needs to be scheduled and planned for, just as if one were attending face-to-face classes. Being clear as to how much effort and time will be required on a weekly basis keeps surprises to a minimum.

Best Practice 4: Build 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. At the same time some students work and learn best on their own. So, building in options and opportunities for students to work together and individually is highly recommended.

Working in teams is particularly effective when working on complex case studies or scenarios for the first time. Group settings in the learning management system allow for both collaborative and individual opportunities for learning—tools like Wikis, Journals, and Blogs can be invaluable in this.

Best Practice 5: Build using 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, videoconferencing, 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 for faculty to review and occasionally revise.

Sometimes there is nothing better than a real-time interactive brainstorming and sharing discussion; other times the requirement to think, plan, write and summarize is what makes learning most effective for an individual. The variety of activities that are now possible online makes it possible to create many types of effective learning environments.

Best Practice 6: Build-in regular feedback

Early in the term, perhaps about week 3, ask for informal feedback on "How is the course going?" and "Do you have any suggestions?" Use a survey tool to make this easy, anonymous, and immediate (Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey).

Course evaluations have been called "post mortem" evaluations because they are done after the fact, and nothing can be changed to increase satisfaction or facilitate learning. Early feedback surveys or just 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.

Best 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 hints for discussion postings culled from many conversations with experienced online faculty:

Create open-ended questions that learners can explore and apply the concepts that they are learning

Model good Socratic-type probing and follow-up questions. 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.

Stagger due dates of the responses and consider mid-point summary and /or encouraging comments

Provide guidelines and instruction on responding to other students. For example, suggest a two-part response: (1) what you liked or agreed with or what resonated with you, and (2) a follow-up question such as what you are wondering about or curious about, etc.

Don't post questions soliciting basic facts, or questions for which there is an obvious yes/no response. The reason for this is obvious. Once one student responds, there is not much more to say! Very specific fact-based questions that you want to be sure that you students know are best used in practice quizzes.

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

Best Practice 8: Build-in digital connections

Link to content resources, current events and examples (i.e. NBC Learn and YouTube) or are easily accessed from learner's computers (i.e. UTEP Library databases/LibGuides).

If content is not digital, it is as if it does not exist for many students. This means that the content that students will more likely use is the content and applications that are available easily from their computers. Students want to be learning anywhere, anytime and often while they are doing other things. Carrying around large, heavy textbooks and even laptops sometimes feels like an anachronism. Content that is mobile and can be accessed via smartphones and tablets are welcome additions for many students.

Students enjoy seeing how what they are learning links to current news events. Thus, building into a course discussions and links to current

events is often motivating to learners. You might enlist student assistance in identifying high quality content that is available online—NBC Learn is a great resources to disseminate, analyze, and apply news stories to courses for example.

Best Practice 9: Build-in customized and personalized learning

Supporting learners with their professional goals that are closely linked to the performance goals of a course, and even beyond the course parameters, is a win-win for the learners individually and as a class. How does one do this? You can build in options and choices in assignments and special projects.

We might present concepts individually and in small clusters, so that we can also apply concepts within case studies, problems and analyses where students have to work within a context. This is especially important for students who are new to a field of study or discipline.

Best 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. These can often include student presentations, summaries and analyses, which provide insights into just what useful knowledge students are taking away from a course, and a final opportunity for faculty to remind students of core concepts and fundamental principles.

Extra Best Practice: Attend Academic Technologies Learning Community Workshops

Every Fall and Spring Semester (every 3rd Thursday, 12:00-2:00, in UGLC 306) AT invites speakers from across UTEP to share expertise, strategies, and pedagogical approaches in using technology to facilitate online teaching and learning. Sessions are held every third Thursday (each month) during Fall and Spring semesters. The format is informal, conversational, with AT staff in attendance to answer any ongoing questions faculty may have. Membership is given automatically for any faculty teaching tech-enhanced, hybrid, or fully online courses. A full schedule will be posted at http://at.utep.edu/uteppros for Fall and Spring.

Any questions, concerns or challenges your face in building your course, please don't hesitate to contact the Instructional Design team or the Teaching and Learning Lab at Academic Technologies.