

Best Practices of Online Teaching

Researchers have studied student performance and satisfaction in online versus face-to-face classrooms. Both are comparable and, not surprisingly, the instructor can make a big difference. What follows are just some of the results and things to consider when teaching online.

Be Present

- Students tend to drop out of online classes for reasons that include busy schedules, self motivation, a feeling of isolation, and lack of interaction with teachers (Deris et. al 255-6). Drawing students into the class can help them succeed.
- Students reported the highest levels of satisfaction when their instructors provided prompt feedback, were highly present in their classes, made themselves readily available, and provided clear expectations so students knew what they needed to do to succeed (Finlay, Desmet, and Evans). High instructor presence also contributed to students feeling more connected to the course and each other (Shea, Li, and Pickett 184).
- Online presence includes
 - responding to emails promptly
 - participating in and monitoring discussion boards
 - contacting students who fall behind, need extra help, or need reminding about course policies including netiquette, deadlines, etc.
 - grading assignments promptly or acknowledging submitted assignments and giving a timeline for returned work
 - maintaining accurate and up-to-date grade books
 - sending announcements or emails to the class that clarify, expand on, and/or explain the purpose of assignments; answer frequently asked questions; offer words of encouragement; and provide reminders about deadlines, policies, and other important information
 - sending private emails or including comments in grading feedback that provide positive encouragement; for example, saying a discussion post “is appreciated because it demonstrates in-depth thinking or a substantive point...builds a nurturing environment that encourages future participation and enhances the quality and depth of overall discussion” (Durrington, Berryhill, and Swafford 191).
- One study noted that students define “timely” responses differently: some want immediate feedback, some expect a response within twenty-four hours, and others look for responses before the next assignment is due (Boyd). It helps to inform students of when they can expect to hear from you and to let them know if this time frame will change (such as if you will be out of town, etc.).

Be Proactive

- Getting students involved early is key. According to one study, “The most significant finding from system-generated course statistics was related to first access and successful course completion. We found that students who failed or withdrew from the course logged in and began to participate later than most of their classmates. No late joiners

completed the course successfully. Early participation is not a sure indicator of success, but late initiation of participation was found to be a clear indicator of an unsuccessful completion in these online first-year writing classes” (Rendahl and Breuch).

- At the beginning of the semester and periodically thereafter, reach out to students in multiple ways: via course announcements that you can set to forward to campus email; via emails to all students within the course; via individual emails to students; and on the discussion board and in grading comments. Let students know what the expectations are but be aware that some lack of participation and dropout tends to be common.
- Instructors can help retain students by checking on them—noting that they missed a post or assignment and asking if they’re okay, or following up on a personal issue they’ve shared, like an ill parent or stressful work situation. Building personal relationships in this way can be rewarding for both the student and teacher. (Greco)

Provide Meaningful Feedback and Explanations

- Instructors can help their students succeed by “focusing the discussion on specific issues, summarising the discussion, confirming understanding through assessment and explanatory feedback, diagnosing misconceptions, injecting knowledge from diverse sources, and responding to technical concerns” (Deris, Zakaria, and Mansor 257). In other words, teachers need to give constant feedback both to individual students and to the class as a whole. For our classes, this may include providing additional guidance on assignments, summarizing common errors on graded papers, and directing students to appropriate resources such as the writing center, tech support, or composition-specific websites or textbook pages.
- Students in online composition courses must feel that the work they’re doing has a purpose. In one study, students expressed dissatisfaction because they did not understand the goals for discussion boards. They saw them as busy work designed to give grades: “Because they did not see the larger value in the assignments, they ended up doing the work because it counted as part of their grade, not because they felt they learned from it. The instructors obviously felt that the discussion boards were pedagogically important but it seems that many of them did not convey their significance to students, which suggests that we may want to examine the methods we use to explain course goals” (Boyd).
- Instructors should provide meta-commentary that explain the purpose of assignments, as well as how they relate to each other (Boyd). Assignments in our EN 101 and 102 courses are scaffolded, so it’s important to be aware of and refer to the arc of the course. We can provide this meta-commentary in our emails or announcements.

Be Mindful of Students’ Goals, Experiences, and Practices

- Many students in online classes have families and jobs; they may be returning to school after many years or be attempting college for the first time. Others may live on campus and bring with them a different set of experiences and perspectives. Relating to them and supporting them as you might in the classroom means a lot. As one online teacher put it, “It is quite amazing how quickly students respond positively to a ‘Hectic week, anyone?’ posted the week before a holiday.... [S]haring little bits of my life—even feelings of

stress and being overwhelmed—can create the feeling of a classroom that parallels the support one might find on the campus. It can also encourage students to share among themselves aspects of their lives that are not class-related but that affect their success in class” (Greco).

- Students in Patricia Webb Boyd’s study valued peer-to-peer interactions: “Three main themes emerged across students’ responses about the perceived benefits of online course environments: online interactions introduced them to multiple perspectives; online space allowed them to share opinions more freely without fear of reproach; and online experiences directly benefited their writing.” Students in these classes used the discussion boards to discuss readings and assignments, to get and give feedback on their assignments, and to peer review; they reported being able to express their real views in ways they might not in face to face classes: they “had created learning communities” (Boyd). Despite this, some students reported that peer interactions did not contribute much to their learning. The author surmises that this is because students place more value on instructor feedback and grades.
- Several studies recommend breaking students into small groups for discussions. This can help keep students accountable, encourage higher participation, and build a sense of community (Baker 13). Our courses aren’t currently set up this way, but it is something to think about for future courses, or teachers can attempt this on their own.
- In terms of technology, teachers should adopt a “student-centered” approach and understand “that students have differing technical competencies, learning styles, and backgrounds” (Baker 17). Teachers should allow students the time and provide the resources for them to figure out the learning system. Blackboard has several video tutorials and written instructions that provide detailed instructions for students. Because technical issues happen, teachers should have a plan for dealing with them, including knowing where to direct students in the event of a technical difficulties—including campus computer labs, libraries, or internet cafes (Baker 17).

Be Positive

- Tone is important: “When responding to queries, something as simple as using students’ names helps personalize communication and contributes to a positive learning environment” (Durrington, Berryhill, and Swafford 191).
- Good learning environments are “focused on assessment in ways that make the learner’s thinking visible, so that it can be examined, challenged, and continue to grow.” The student should feel “secure and comfortable to actively pursue knowledge without fear of unwarranted discouragement or unconstructive judgment” (Shea, Li, and Pickett 176).
- Creating a positive learning environment fosters community and helps students succeed: “teachers must develop student-centered, friendly strategies to enhance wellbeing to minimize learning distractions.... Online students who feel socially comfortable, rather than isolated, exhibit higher order skills in analysis and synthesis” (Baker 13). Instructors can help students “conquer...insecurity while facilitating productive student interactions with the course content” by “setting a friendly, professional tone, encouraging online exchanges, asking questions and clarifying responses, and recognizing contributions. Upbeat, enthusiastic communications help set the tone” (Baker 14).

- Our online classes contain a diverse mix of students who require different types of attention than many on-campus students and who bring lots of experiences to the course. Teaching online is challenging and rewarding. Enjoy the experience and your students!

Works Cited

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