Quality Online Teaching
Best Practices
Introduction

In talking with students (those with prior online learning experiences and those going through today’s reality of remote emergency teaching), faculty, instructional designers, and academic technology specialists, Helix Education has identified five “musts” for quality online teaching. Here is the quick list:

1. Manage student expectations.
2. Ensure accessibility.
3. Provide context.
4. Be intentionally organized and consistent.
5. Be present.
Manage Student Expectations

Clear instructions and documented expectations are an important part of a positive experience in online learning for both students and faculty. They reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings and confusion and can prevent frustration for all.

Clear instructions regarding assignments and assessments should include detailed and substantive information such as directions about the content, page length, structure, whether the writing should be formal or informal, required references, and formatting requirements (use of APA, MLA, etc.). In all cases, providing a clear and easy-to-understand grading rubric allows students to establish performance goals while minimizing questions about why they earned a particular grade.

When writing instructions, it can be easy to overlook key aspects of your intended expectations. Ask another faculty member to read your instructions before publishing them in the course. See what questions emerge from that reading and address them adequately in the learning management system (LMS). The more clarity you provide for the student, the greater the likelihood of a high-quality submission.

Establishing other expectations, such as the turnaround time for formative feedback on homework assignments and exams, is also an important part of online classroom management. Students rely on your feedback to make improvements in future work in the course. When that feedback is delayed (or worse, non-existent), students are left without guidance on how to improve their work.

Students should also be given clear expectations about when they will hear back from you after they make an inquiry in the LMS, via email, or contact by phone. Your institution should provide you with its expectations on this matter, but if not, be sure to outline what students can expect from you. Best practices typically call for a response within 24 hours during the week and 48 hours on weekends and holidays. Note that the time frame is given in hours rather than a number of business days since many students will do their work during the evening. It is okay to step away for an evening or weekend; simply inform your students about your availability. It will mean less stress for you and for them.
Ensure Accessibility

Ensuring accessibility through adaptive technologies is a must for students. It is imperative that materials can be accessed with a screen reader and that closed captioning is provided for audio and video resources. Helix’s Online Accessibility Guidelines and FAQs is a quick guide to ways to make your course materials accessible. As mentioned in the guide, we recommend that you take advantage of the tools provided within various types of software such as Office and Adobe (and sometimes within the LMS) to verify accessibility.

For online courses, learning materials should be accessible from a variety of devices students often use such as cell phones, tablets, laptops, and computers. Be sure the LMS and other educational technology tools are adaptive to these hardware devices. Also, be sensitive to bandwidth limitations by avoiding exceedingly long video or audio clips that must be downloaded. Avoid using software that may not be readily available to students; course instructions should specify any special software that is required, and clear directions for accessing the software should be provided.
Provide Context

If you consider the in-person classroom, much is done to create a context for learning. As handouts are distributed, faculty members usually explain their uses and purposes. As students arrive or depart, questions are asked and answered. This context for learning is almost automatic in an in-person classroom, and this context explains why students are being asked to do something.

However, in the online environment, one of the primary concerns voiced by students is the sense that they are alone in the learning process. They are often provided with so little context and a lack of specific instruction that they feel they could have done the work on their own. This can be avoided by taking the time to create a narrative around the resources and activities expected in the course. Tell the “story” by highlighting the following points:

• What are the expected outcomes/objectives for a given unit or week?

• How do the assignments, assessments, and discussion questions align with those outcomes/objectives?

• Why were the resources selected specifically chosen for these given outcomes/objectives?

This context will go a long way toward improving the students’ experience and ensuring they are able to make the connections necessary for learning. It can also save you time by preempting questions asked as a result of any confusion or lack of clarity.
Be Intentionally Organized and Consistent

Really good online instruction starts with intentional design. So much of excellent in-person instruction comes from the experience and knowledge held by the faculty member. You may use a course outline or lecture notes in the classroom, but for the most part, the rich learning experience is provided by your expertise. It is possible to convey that same level of richness in the asynchronous learning environment, but this requires a high level of intentionality, organization, and consistency to create context and to deliver the learning story. This is where the emergency remote teaching response to COVID-19 fundamentally differs from the creation of a quality online learning experience.

As discussed in the previous section, context is the connection between activities, resources, and the course as a whole. The best online courses are consistent, week-by-week, and unit-by-unit, in their learning structure. Due dates should not vary and, if they do, reminders about the change should be provided often and with emphasis. Allow students to get into a rhythm for your course. Develop consistent pacing so that students can focus on learning and synthesizing new content. You would not want to change classrooms, buildings, or class times/days for an in-person course without also providing advanced notice and clear communication to students. The same applies to online classes. Consistency in the structure of your online course facilitates student success.
Be Present

Students want to know you are present in the online classroom. We call your presence in an online course your “footprint” in the LMS. There are a number of low stakes ways to demonstrate your presence, such as using weekly announcements and reminders, participating in discussions, and posting short weekly videos.

Weekly announcements and reminders are helpful prompts for students, and you may want to use them to emphasize the things most critical for the coming week. They also serve as a way to encourage students to stay on task for staged assignments or to connect on group projects. They are an easy way to say, “I’m here!”

Your participation in the discussion question should model expectations for students. Discussion instructions often state that student posts must say more than “Good job” or “I agree.” While that expectation is set for students, far too many faculty fail to model this best practice when responding to students in discussions. Discussions are a great way to spur critical thinking and engagement when you ask leading questions to scaffold learning or direct students to important learning outcomes. You might even provide a contrary view to encourage additional conversation. Your engagement can also ensure that the discussion stays on track and is appropriate as well.

A weekly video is another effective way to show your engagement in the learning process. It is important that the emphasis is on a reflection of what is happening “real-time” rather than providing a canned introduction or summary. These videos don’t have to be flashy or long. Consider commenting on the discussion from the prior week or providing an answer to a question that a student asked. Use the students’ names. Hearing their names can encourage and engage students and strengthen connections to the course. You may even wish to provide an introduction to what will happen next in the course, creating a bridge between the previous week’s activities and those to come. This engagement demonstrates that you’re involved in the dynamics of the course and are staying current with the work in progress.
Be Present (continued)

Synchronous activities can also be leveraged to demonstrate your presence in the online classroom; however, careful attention should be paid to whether the activity is mandatory or not. If it will be, that requirement should be stated during the registration process to allow students to make a fully informed decision about enrollment in the course. If participation is not required, consider allowing the synchronous time you have selected to serve as drop-in office hours. Alternatively, record the activity so those who are unable to attend it can access the conversation and information at their convenience.

Finally, as with an in-person course, things may not always go as planned. Despite your attention and best efforts, a resource link may break or students may interpret your instructions differently than you intended; or perhaps you’re not able to return an assignment as quickly as you hoped. Cut yourself some slack if something goes wrong. Transitioning to intentional online teaching that follows the best practices outlined in this document takes time. If something goes wrong, take a few moments to “reset” with your students. They will appreciate the honesty, and you will appreciate the grace; most students are keenly aware that online learning and teaching may be just as new to you as it is to them.

Happy teaching!

Questions?

If you want additional insights on this or any other topic related to your online transition, reach out and let us know!

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