Best Practices for Teaching Online

Best practices for teaching online at WSU should be based on those long-established in the field of distance education. If you plan to teach an online course, using these guidelines will help ensure both you and your students' engagement, enjoyment, and success in the course.

Engage with your students early and often.

- When the class begins, connect with each student as they begin the online course to **establish "teacher presence" in the course. Connect with students right away – and throughout the course.** It is CRITICAL to give your students the sense of "teacher presence," and make the students feel welcome and engaged in the course. You would not ignore students as they entered your classroom would you? Of course not! It's the same online.
- To help you in your course, you may want to include a **"Get to Know Each Other!" discussion forum** as one of the students' first assignments. You can learn a lot about your students at the start of your course that you might not learn in the face-to-face environment if this discussion is well-designed.
- In addition, if you **request that students post their bio** to the course site, you can use this info to comment on their interests and get a connection going, just as you would in the face-to-face classroom.
- You could also **create a survey** to get to know our students better: What are their interests? Why are they taking the course? What do they know about the subject matter?

Review and comment in discussion forums daily.

- If your students see that you are putting time and energy into discussions, they will do the same. The key is to budget your time in discussion boards to ensure you make your presence felt, without dominating the discussion. So, how do you do this?
  - Most experts recommend that you **check in twice a day**, perhaps for just **30 minutes at a time.**
  - You don't have to post a response to every comment in the forum, but you should **make specific comments to student posts you find particularly well thought-out or provocative in order to encourage more discussion** from others around a student's post. Encourage deeper discussion. Include a question for the student to research and answer, or ask students to answer one another's questions.
  - You can also leave "general" comments at the top of the discussion forum to address the whole class.
  - Of course, if a student seems to be getting off track, you could nudge them back on track in the discussion forum if appropriate, or in a private email if need be.

Provide effective feedback.

Written feedback is just one way to provide student feedback in the online environment. In some cases, you may decide to discuss more complex or delicate issues with a student over the phone or video chat, rather than using email or discussion forums. Bottom line: be sure to select the most appropriate and effective method for each situation.

Manage your time wisely

- As part of an initial assignment, ask students to describe how they will manage the course work and to detail any activities that may cause them to have difficulty completing work on time.
- Set expectations with students with respect to instructor response times. Indicate when you will be grading assignments, responding to email, and posting to discussion boards. Also tell students if late assignments will be graded on the same or on an extended timeline.

As you design your online course, consult with an Instructional Designer (ID).

- You may wonder: **What is the role of the Instructional Designer? How does the partnership of faculty and ID work?**
- Faculty have mastery of the course content and valuable classroom experience to inform online course development.
- Instructional designers (IDs) bring experience in learning theory and online teaching methodologies, an understanding of Blackboard (WSU's learning management system) as well as creative ideas about how to incorporate the latest web tools and technologies to engage your students, enhance their overall experience in the course, and most importantly – their ability to learn.
- To begin, faculty and their ID should **develop a shared understanding of the course content and course flow**.
- Faculty should have a syllabus, or course outline, prepared for their initial meeting with their ID. For subject areas in which the instructional designer has limited exposure or expertise, faculty may want to spend some time at the educating the ID on the course content.
- **Establish clear course learning objectives:** One key contribution of IDs is to tie all course content and activities back to learning objectives and outcomes. Prepare learning objectives before engaging with the instructional designer. This will make course development far more efficient, and will serve as the guide the overall course development. To get started, use this **Course Development Worksheet** to develop your learning objectives and plan out the items you will need to produce your course and meet those objectives.

Help your students to be successful online learners.

- For many of your students, this will be the first time they've participated in an online course. As you might guess, learning in an online environment is different in many ways from learning in a physical classroom. In an online environment, **students must be more self-directed, manage their time efficiently, and assume greater responsibility for their own learning**.
- For example, one trap online students may fall prey to is to mismanage their time and attempt to complete and submit multiple assignments in batches, rather than on a well-paced schedule. You can help your students to be more successful by encouraging them to be mindful of this, and to practice good online learning behaviors.
- Post **Performance Evaluation Criteria and Rubrics:** If I were a student in your course, would I know what you expect of me? In other words, would I know how to succeed in your course?
- If an activity is crucial to learning outcomes and is required, **incorporate it into the students' grade or course completion criteria, and post that information in the Performance Evaluation Criteria** section of your course. You may wish to establish a rubric for the course and course assignments to help students to know how to be successful in your course.
- Take a moment to review the **Strategies for Online Learning Success** document. Encourage these behaviors among your students to help keep them on track. We all need a nudge every now and then.