

Ten Online Teaching Best Practices¹

Best practices are not intended to interfere with academic freedom or faculty individuality, but to improve course consistency, student perceptions, and learning outcomes. The guidelines below all have exceptions, but exceptions should be defensible and meet standard professional norms.

- 1) **Learning goals/outcomes:** Learning goals/outcomes are more critical to be clear in online courses and should be listed in the syllabus or on your Learning Management System (LMS, e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, etc.), along with corresponding assignments that will assess the learning goals. Having a clear, transparent Gradebook is also particularly important in online courses.
- 2) **Accessibility:** All classes should be - to the extent possible - accessible to the differently abled. Your campus instructional consultants and LMS provider can assist. Auxiliary steps may be required for individual students with special needs on a request-as-needed basis. Improved accessibility aids regular students too (universal design for learning). For example, providing captioning assists regular students when an instructor has an accent or uses a word that they are not familiar with. Some “regular” students are eager users of video transcripts.
- 3) **Welcome video:** Students expect to be greeted when they come to class, no matter whether it is face-to-face or virtual. Fully online classes should provide a “welcome and start here” video. The video should include the greeting, a basic explanation of the technological components of the course (e.g., the sidebar tabs), and first steps. It may or may not include a review of the syllabus (which is sometimes a second introductory video) or “tips for success” in the class.
- 4) **Seat time:** For a 3-unit semester course, faculty provide approximately 150 minutes of instructionally facilitated teaching/learning methods per week in the face-to-face classroom for three credit courses. This includes lectures, large group discussions, small group breakouts as a part of the instructor time, student presentations, guest speakers, quizzes and tests, and short, in-class video presentations used as examples of content. This does not include readings, student practice which is not reviewed by the instructor (e.g., study guide questions and on-your-own activities) or papers, and projects to be completed individually by students. With the ease and variety of online instructionally-related teaching methods today, the virtual “seat time” should be equivalent. However, the methods, strategies, and proportions will often be significantly adjusted in the “seat time” equivalence. In many cases, lecture time will be reduced while requiring students to participate in monitored activities will increase. Activities not monitored or carefully-reviewed by faculty are generally not appropriately classified as part of the seat time equivalent.
- 5) **Lecture time:** As a general guide, instructors should ensure that *at least* one hour of the seat time per 150-minute week is devoted to lectures led by the instructor by Zoom (or lecture-captured), or pre-recorded lectures, or a combination of both. Students in fact-intensive disciplines (STEM, accounting and finance, health professions, etc.) will likely want more than an hour of some mix of lecture types. Lectures should be chunked; 20-minute chunks are preferable, but 30-minute chunks are ok.
- 6) **Responsiveness:** Instructors should be prompt in their grading, when providing feedback on student work, as well as responding to student inquiries. The most frequent criticism of

instructors (in all instructional modalities) is about response times to inquiries and grading. Generally, the goal is to have responses to simple inquiries by the following day, and responses to grading the following week. Slower response times are *very* frustrating to students and demonstrate poor instructional practice.

- 7) **Student-Student engagement:** Online classes have numerous mechanisms for students to engage with each other beyond the individual posting of reports or assignments. However, not all classes need to utilize student-to-student engagement depending on the nature of the content and instructor preference. When student-to-student interactions are meant to provide a weekly product and that product is monitored/graded by the instructor, it may be considered seat time. If the instructor feedback is superficial, students generally call the activity busywork. When the students interact for a substantial project such as a group report or class presentation, it is generally not considered a component of seat time.
- 8) **Encouraging engagement:** Students learn better when they are constantly being engaged and integrated in a learning community. Merely sitting in a face-to-face class creates a sense of learning community and demonstrates the commitment to come to class, which is not present in, say, a synchronous class when all the students turn off their cameras. There are many tools and techniques to enhance engagement and community in virtual environments. Good instructors think through how best to use a variety of strategies to encourage engagement and discourage passivity, or outright nonparticipation. For example: Request students keep their cameras on (you can request them to keep cameras on unless they seek an exception which you generally *must* grant); Do polls using the reaction features (thumbs up versus clapping hand); Use PlayPosit to embed questions and record participation in your pre-recorded lectures; Review usage statistics and post highlights so that students know that you are really paying attention. Early in the term, review usage statistics and reach out to non-attenders and very low participators with a gentle (or not so gentle) reminder of participation requirements. Use the break-out function in Zoom sessions; Require students to produce short, high-quality videos in teams; and so on.
- 9) **Office hours:** All courses should require one hour of online “office hours” per week. Virtual office hours should be on the syllabus and rigorously adhered to. Office hours may or may not employ “waiting rooms.” Alternately, 15 minutes of virtual office hours before and after synchronous classes is more likely to generate traffic. Also consider making some of your office hours “review sessions” to encourage students to drop by and perhaps get some extra attention.
- 10) **External review/reference:** Ask the instructional designers on your campus or a colleague who you feel is well versed in online teaching for a review of your class site and for some suggested improvements. Also, you can Consult the Quality Matters Guidelines for best practices <https://www.qualitymatters.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/StandardsfromtheQMHigherEducationRubric.pdf>.

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