**A Dozen Online Teaching Best Practices[[1]](#endnote-1)**

(9/6/2024)

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**: It is more critical for learning goals/outcomes to be clear in online courses than F2F courses, and they 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 of particular importance 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. Since automatic transcript programs are quite inexact, it is very important to go through the transcript to correct mistakes (e.g., words that are wrong such as “police” for “policy”) and smooth out awkward chunking because of pauses in speaking.

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. Seminar-style courses are one exception or when courses have a heavy reliance on student presentations. 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) **Enthusiasm**: You can be an international academic celebrity, but if you are not enthusiastic, students don’t care. However, enthusiasm tends to be communicated slightly differently in the three major modes: F2F, synchronous, and asynchronous. Enthusiasm is experienced by students in lectures by physical activity, facial expressions, tonal inflections, interest expressed in the students, ability to draw students into the discussion from time-to-time, and content currency, among others. Enthusiasm in synchronous lectures has similar qualities, but sound and video quality are more important (e.g., a “tinny” sound quality is tiring after a while), the ability to efficiently navigate/use different screen settings for variety (i.e., full screen, various shared screens, video, etc.) is critical. Also, student engagement must be programmed into the course, rather than a casual aside as it can be in F2F classes. Enthusiasm in asynchronous classes is most challenging. Recorded lectures must be ample and of high quality. Announcements about course activities should be frequent. Customized reminders for those lagging should be employed and customized nudges for those doing poorly for nonperformance should be used throughout the course. A few optional synchronous sessions can be employed. And response times should be short and the messages provide a sense of empathy.

8) **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.

9) **Encouraging engagement (active learning)**: 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. Note that our research indicates that students prefer graded formative learning over optional activities! 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);

Provide low stakes (low points) quizzes (defined answer to increase response speed and minimize instructor effort) to encourage reading comprehension and a distributed learning environment;

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.

10) **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.

11) **Academic dishonesty**: Academic dishonesty, according to students themselves in institutions without an integrity code, is very high. Academic dishonesty can be made even easier by lax teaching in online settings. There are three major approaches to reducing dishonesty substantially that can be used separately or together.

Hybrid courses can have students meet for occasional exams in face-to-face sessions with live monitoring. In some cases, lockdown browser may also be used in F2F sessions. Non-prime time can be allocated to classes that only meet two or three times.

Online proctoring is inevitably necessary in online courses that have major defined-answer assessments with only a couple of test versions, and the internet can provide quick generic answers for essays or problems. Lockdown browser technology can provide authentication and disable split screen, internet access, most toolbar functions, and so on. Despite the fact that the *lockdown browser technology* can be circumvented when not augmented, research indicates it is still relatively powerful at curbing dishonesty because of the additional effort it takes, especially when auxiliary methods are used. The other major tool to reduce academic dishonesty is the use of *webcams* which monitor the student’s environment. If the student finds this invasive in their home environment, they can choose another, but you can require a webcam as long as it is clearly stated in the syllabus as a course requirement. Webcam technology has become very sophisticated so that unusual movements can be automatically flagged for review. Questions of integrity can trigger a retake of the exam (this should be noted in the syllabus of course as an unfortunate but necessary measure of academic integrity).

Distributed and customized testing: It is possible to have rather high levels of academic integrity when the course distributes grading over the formative learning stage (in additional to a more summative assessment stage) and student testing is highly customized and questions are protected from easy circulation or aggregation by sites that can be used as cheating syndicates (e.g., Course Hero, Chegg). First, it is necessary to distribute much of the grading—perhaps up to 50%--over many small assignments: lecture attendance through quizzes (e.g., embedded questions), weekly reading comprehension quizzes (perhaps allowing students to take the quiz multiple times, graded small group discussions, graded practice or homework (perhaps on a full credit/no credit basis for grading simplicity and efficiency), etc. Second, test integrity for major tests is maintained by making questions as customized to the text as possible, having a question large question pool from which to draw so there essentially different tests, randomizing questions, randomizing answers, and importantly, setting strict time limits on the testing window. Even greater test integrity is likely when the testing window is as restricted as a F2F exam. In asynchronous classes, this must be highlighted in the syllabus, the first class, and preferably placed in the class notes in the academic schedule.

12) **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.

1. ©Online Learning and Education Research (https://www.csusb.edu/online-learning-education-research), developed based on surveys of over 1000 students. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)