

Best Practices in Online Teaching

In 2006 Curtis Bonk in his article entitled *'The Future of Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: The Survey Says...'* made reference to something called a “perfect e-storm” that is facing online education. The e-storm that he is referring to is the challenge of linking pedagogy, technology and learner needs in the online learning environment. That was in 2006 but it is still relevant today. Therefore, online instructors are faced with the question of how do I create an online course that is pedagogically sound, makes proper use of the technology that is available and meets the needs of my learners? This is no small feat and it takes a lot of thought, time and preparation to achieve this but it can be done. Here is a list of ten best practices in online teaching. These practices are based on years of research and if implemented will contribute to a satisfying teaching and learning experience for both faculty and students.

1. Be present

When teaching a face-to-face class your presence facilitates interaction and engagement with students and the same is true for online classes. You can achieve this in a number of ways through weekly check-in emails, reminders, participating in discussion forums, hosting webinars, providing prompt feedback and having online office hours. The online environment can be very isolating, so students will need to know that you are there to support and guide them.

2. Manage Your Course

An instructor can create a successful learning experience by employing a few course management strategies. It doesn't have to be anything excessive or time consuming but should include monitoring assignment submissions, sending reminders to students, managing student rosters, monitoring student performance, posting grades and adjusting course progress. Blackboard is built to make doing this easier with email, tracking and early warning features.

3. Create a learning environment that promotes inquiry, critical thinking and the transfer of knowledge

There are a variety of teaching strategies that can be used to teach an online course such as problem-based learning, case studies, collaboration, guided learning etc. Whichever strategy you choose it should foster deeper student learning and engagement. Consider

including a variety of activities that require reflection and real-world problem-solving which if done properly will help students explore and make sense of the content.

4. Provide ample opportunities for instructor-student, student-student and student-content interaction

Creating these kinds of opportunities for interaction will help to promote a supportive learning community which is very important in the online environment. To create instructor-student interactions think about including mini video lectures, podcasts, weekly reminder announcements, and weekly wrap-ups. To create student-student interaction think about creating a ‘Get To Know Your Classmates’ forum on the discussion board and ask students to answer 3 simple questions about themselves to share with the class, have students work in groups on a project or create discussion forums around topics and make it mandatory for students to participate. In creating student-content interaction you need to create a variety of opportunities for your students to engage with the course material in a deep and meaningful way. This can be done through discussion questions based on assigned readings that focus on the analysis and interpretation of the material being studied, case studies, presentations, simulations, games and peer reviews. Your students will have different learning styles and so you should cater to that by giving them a variety of learning activities. Here’s a link to a learning styles quiz that your students could fill out at the beginning of the course <http://www.edutopia.org/multiple-intelligences-learning-styles-quiz> .

5. Be very clear about your expectations

The online environment doesn’t provide the luxury of being able to conduct in person dialogue about expectations such as feedback time, due dates, grading scale and plagiarism policies; which is why these expectations have to be made very specific in writing. Preferably in the syllabus and the course schedule. If the discussion board is going to be a major part of your course make sure to include a section on Netiquette. Here’s a link to a few Netiquette rules that you can share with your students. <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html> . A ‘Question and Answer’ forum can be set up in the discussion board for students to ask questions about the course.

6. Get to Know and Keep Abreast of Technology

One of the things that promoted the expansion of online courses in schools was course management systems like Blackboard. Blackboard has come a long way from being just a tool that manages courses to one that can facilitate learning. In order to use Blackboard effectively one will have to know about its features and functionality. You don't need to know how to use all of the features so only focus on the ones that will be useful in helping your students achieve the objectives of the course. Technology changes rapidly and in addition to Blackboard there are many **free** web 2.0 technologies that if incorporated can provide a rich and fulfilling experience for your students. Here's a link to a website that has a list of free web 2.0 tools <http://edjudo.com/web-2-0-teaching-tools-links>. Video tutorials on Blackboard are available from the control panel in each course and on the school's website.

7. Use resources that are easily accessible and of the highest quality

One of the benefits of taking an online course is the flexibility and ease of accessibility of the course content. Students nowadays have laptops, smartphones, iPads and other electronic devices that they use to access digital content. In other words students have gone mobile so keep this in mind when deciding on the types of learning resources you will want your students to use. Electronic textbooks, podcasts and videos are a few things to consider using, which can be posted on Blackboard. Blackboard also has a mobile app that can be downloaded at a small cost and will make all content posted to Blackboard accessible from mobile devices. High quality course content is important for a positive learning experience so make sure to check accuracy, editing errors, confusing information and broken links.

8. Develop learning activities that are rich, relevant and support learning objectives

Learning activities range from assigned readings to answering questions in a discussion forum. Students like seeing how what they are learning connects with what's happening in the real-world. As the instructor you don't necessarily have to do this yourself, you can ask your students to source YouTube videos or newspaper articles that relate to what is being learned and share it with the class. Use case studies or journal articles and incorporate it into online discussions.

9. Assess student learning throughout the duration of the course

In a face-to-face course students are often given 2 or 3 exams but in the online environment assessment is continuous. This can be achieved through quizzes, online discussions, essays and projects.

10. Use the first week of the class to help get students acquainted with the course.

The first week of class sets the tone for the rest of the course. Help get them acquainted with the course by designing activities that will require them to use the tools and features of Blackboard that they will be using throughout the course. For example, if the discussion board is going to be an integral part of the course ask them to introduce themselves to each other by answering a few simple questions and post it to a discussion forum.

References

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