

Best Practices

Online Teaching Course Design, Communication, and Management

Online courses must be equivalent to face-to-face courses in content and quality—but what does that mean? It's more than just using the same class plans in an online format. Aligned with CCC ISP (Instructional Standards & Procedures) 150: Online Courses, this handout explores how you can create and run an online course with student engagement, interaction, and reflection in mind.

Course Design

DESIGNING THE COURSE Crucial elements of a well-designed online course leading to high-quality education and student success include:

- Deliberate focus on the learning outcomes, especially while choosing readings and materials and designing assignments. Active learning and student engagement are key for student success. Consider the sequence of readings, materials, and assignments in order to scaffold learning toward attainment of the outcomes. Additionally, visually reflect this sequence in your course (e.g., Label, Book, Completion Tracking).
- Awareness of both accessibility and copyright law, making sure that all readings are legally available for students and that proper means of access are provided for diverse learners (e.g., closed caption videos, webpages that will work well with screen readers, and so on). Consider a variety of modes and instructional materials to align with the nontraditional delivery method.
- A prominent and easily navigable syllabus. This must meet all requirements listed in CCC ISP 160A: Course Syllabus Information and Format, including the following:
 - a. Schedule of readings, assignments, and tests with accurate and current dates;
 - b. Clear parameters and expectations for grade calculation;
 - c. Office hours for the instructor, as well as contact information (email and office phone);
 - d. List of readings, texts, or course materials;
 - e. Learning outcomes for the course;
 - f. Available resources such as the Disability Resource Center and the Learning Center;
 - g. Other important policies such as academic honesty and late work.
- An online gradebook so that students have access to their progress.

Course Start

STARTING THE COURSE To set students up for success in the potentially difficult beginning of an online class, instructors should:

- Check all links and video/audio clips to make sure they are current and functioning properly before making the course visible to students.
- Open the course by (at the latest) the start of the first day of the course. The course syllabus information, especially the means for contacting the instructor, should be visible on that first day.
- Notify students that class has started (for example, via email, through a News Update on Moodle, or through other means), with particular attention to their expectations for interaction, as well as to the fact that they have access to technical and academic support should they need it.
- Provide an introduction to the course, including its overall objectives, its general operating structure, and a clear path for getting started. This can be on the course homepage itself, though it can also be provided in an email. An introduction to the instructor is also recommended.
- Make the syllabus both prominent and online-friendly. Students should be guided through reading the syllabus and showing they understand the requirements (as a face-to-face class might take the first class session to discuss the syllabus).
- Provide an introduction activity for students. Online learning can be isolating, but it is both possible and desirable to build a community for learners to relate to and interact with one another.
- Communicate actively with students as they begin the course. This includes frequent check-ins with the class website, but also vigilant email communication in the opening days. See also the next point, “Communicating.”

Course Communication

COMMUNICATING WITHIN THE COURSE To maximize student engagement through effective online communication, instructors should:

- Make your presence a visible and integral part of the class, participating in discussions and responding directly to student questions.
- Respond to emails and discussion board questions in a timely matter, ideally within 2 business days.
- Make every effort to provide grades and feedback on assignments within one week of receiving completed work so that students are able to apply and build on course concepts and skills.
- Promote a sense of community within the class, encouraging students to respond to each other to deepen understanding and engagement.
- Consider online office hours as well as in-person ones.

Course Management

MANAGING THE COURSE How an instructor manages an online class requires as much mindful attention and effort as any face-to-face class. It is important to consider both how course materials are delivered and how student progress is monitored. To manage online courses effectively, instructors should consider the following:

- Contact inactive students, in a timely manner, ideally no later than the end of the first week.
- Pay particular attention to student progress early in the course. Communicate directly with students when they fall behind or seem to be underperforming.
- Make weekly announcements, reminders, or posts of new material to help keep students engaged.
- Facilitate discussion with strong instructor presence, including meaningful response and commentary.
- Intervene to re-direct inappropriate behavior or unsatisfactory comments.
- Refer students to the appropriate learning services and resources as needed.
- Design learning opportunities to promote interaction and active learning.
- Provide timely and personalized feedback early enough for students to adjust their performance.
- Perform frequent assessment of student learning, and be willing to make changes based on such assessment.
- Provide access to current grade status and keep the gradebook current.
- Fix broken links, typos, and mistakes or otherwise update the course content as appropriate.
- Provide opportunities for students to ask questions about or give feedback on the course and be willing to adapt as necessary.