

Fully Online Handout 1: Considerations for Teaching a Fully Online Course

True For Any Course, Online or Not

Start with student-centered learning objectives and work backwards with assignments and activities to achieve those objectives

For good engagement and deep learning, all students need three things:

- 1) To feel competent in the learning environment
- 2) Autonomy and choices, some control and voice
- 3) Relationship with others, sense of community

Also, there are three kinds of engagement you need to foster in any class, and these might look different in a fully-online course than they would in face-to-face or blended:

- 1) Learner – Instructor
- 2) Learner – Content
- 3) Learner – Learner

Prepare Long Before Day 1

- Answer for yourself: Why are **you** teaching **this** course online?
- Stage everything in advance, thinking through the course pathway and pacing or chunking course content.
- One recommended way to do this is Unit-Module-Topic (UMT) approach. Unit = 4-5 weeks of instruction, Module is major subdivision of the unit equal to 1 week, and Topic is a single lesson, assignment, quiz or learning experience.
- Will it be asynchronous, or have any synchronous parts (chat, “office hours,” instruction or discussion)?
- Decide what you’ll do with students who are more advanced or want to work ahead AND those who will struggle and fall behind or need remedial support.
- Respect students’ busy lives and help them plan for success by laying out clear course goals and due dates from the beginning so students can track progress and plan for the whole semester from the start.
- Think about what “attendance” looks like, and how to make that clear to students.

Get students up to speed on Day 1: Orientation

- Instructor welcome video or supportive / friendly welcome in some other format
- Clarify technical considerations (software / hardware needed, acceptable file formats and skills) and how to get support if something isn’t working. Students should use official university email and Blackboard.
- Set up a Very Obvious “Get Started” or “Start Here” landing spot
- Clear pathway to what’s next
- Reach out to those who don’t check in on Day 1
- Syllabus, grading policy, and course policies
- Accessibility and academic support services and resources

Setting Expectations and Creating Community

- Introductions – of them to you, and of them to each other
- Create a “help desk” or “Ask me” forum for general questions that arise at any point
- Make your approach to the content and to your teaching style explicit up front

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- Provide an estimate of how many hours a week students should be putting in (without reference points of “contact hours” it may not be obvious to all of them).
- Emphasize from the start the rigor and commitment involved. Online is not “easier” than other kinds of course formats.

Staying On Top of Things

- Structure and then monitor online discussions. Good ones don’t happen organically, they are a learned skill for everyone. “Scholarship shows that online discussions [when properly designed] enable social interactions essential to both cognition and critical thinking: social learning theory claims that learners construct knowledge by experiencing multiple perspectives of others through social interactions and collaboration.”¹ Rubrics help.
- Academic honesty – this matters, if anything, more so than in face-to-face settings, but requires some special considerations. (Is your student doing his/her own work & how do you know? Assume that no exam is “closed book.”)
- Align discussion board prompts to what you want students to learn or develop and communicate it clearly. Vary this, so it’s not always just open-ended responses. For example:
 - Improving comprehension or retention of key concepts
 - Building argument: analyze logic or persuasiveness, build and defend one’s own position. Be aware that debates or controversy, while they can generate engaged discussion, can devolve into swapping opinions or accusations; guide students back to basing comments on course principles or evidence so they avoid personalizing it.
 - Knowledge construction: encourage deeper understanding, applicability of course concepts in different concepts, relation to other concepts, acquire new meanings
 - Collaborative learning: enable students to learn from each other, to share knowledge and experience
 - Critical thinking: engage in critical analysis of ideas, concepts, philosophies, processes, and to form, defend, and reflect on their own positions
 - Create learning community: develop sense of belonging to a group with similar learning interests
 - Problem-Solving: offer a problem (or have students generate one) that students can work to solve in the context of an online discussion.
 - Feedback for Instructor: to enable instructor to hone in on how learning is happening, identify areas of misunderstanding or confusion, and provide opportunity for additional support of clarification
- Prompt, responsive and constructive feedback is essential in online learning environments, to provide both information and acknowledgment. Quickly address issues with aggressive or underperforming students, usually in one-on-one communication.
- Allow time! Time for them to learn, and time for moderating and participating in online discussions, and time for grading and responding and giving feedback on student work. Expect everything to take LONGER because it has to be done asynchronously and much of it will be in writing.

¹ Beverley McGuire, “Principles for Effective Asynchronous Online Instruction in Religious Studies,” *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 20, no. 1 (Jan 2017), 28-45, p. 36. See also “How to Prepare and Moderate Online Discussions for Online Learning,” Contact Nord: Ontario’s Distance Education and Training Network, 2013.