

Tool Kit for Online Instructors

Our previous learners share practices and tools their groups considered to be most important in teaching an online course. Working in small groups, they developed the following guidance for online instructors based on our joint exploration of practices and tools. We provide a portion of their ideas and recommendations for an online teaching and learning tool kit with their permission.

Setting Expectations

Developed by Sharon Lyon-Paul, Julie Robinson, Chuck Stickelman, and Jessica Wells.

Setting expectations is an effective tool for face-to-face and online courses. Creating an online environment that promotes motivated and engaged learners can be challenging, and the lack of face-to-face meetings that is typical of online classes can increase those challenges. As an ice-breaker, you can share your thoughts and feelings about the course, your role in the class, and what you expect of yourself and the learners. By sharing your expectations you help the learners develop their own expectations and how to express them. Additionally, you are opening an important dialogue between yourself and the learners that actively includes them in the design of their personal learning experience.

What to Share

To cooperatively develop a shared set of expectations between you and the learners you will need to share your expectations and then require the learners to respond with their expectations. When you and the learners are sharing expectations consider using the following categories.

Expectations for the Course

You can use this as an opportunity to paint the big picture for the course. You can refer to the course's learning objectives, as these are usually set in advance as part of the curriculum and are integral to the course's goals. The learners are going to use these expectations to tell you why they are in the course and what they expect to get out of it.

Expectations for the Instructor

You can use this space to outline how you see your role in the course, clearly identifying how you intend to participate in the course. The learners are going to tell you what they expect and want from you.

Expectations for the Learners

This is big! Do not skimp on the details in this section. You will find that many of your expectations are common from one course to another. That's ok. The learners will respond to your lead.

How to Share

There are several tools and methods that you can use to begin an expectations dialogue with the learners that can be combined as desired.

Telephone. You can call each learner and begin discussing expectations with them then, or you can use the call as an opportunity to direct the learner to the e-mail or the course management system (CMS) such as Canvas, Blackboard, or Moodle.

E-mail. The initial contact with the learners can be via e-mail. This is a great opportunity to share your expectations and then solicit e-mail replies. The e-mail can also direct the learners to the CMS.

CMS. The CMS is the core of many online courses. Using this tool to communicate expectations is natural. Most CMS solutions include the ability to support surveys and discussion forums. Creating a survey that asks the learners to identify all three sets of expectations can be effective. The discussion forum can be used to discuss the results of the survey and cooperatively develop a shared set of expectations.

Fostering a Community of Inquiry

Developed by Laura Bockbrader, Tiffany Halsell, Jacquelyn Lewis, and Kelsi Soneson.

A community of inquiry (COI) is a distance educational model based on three elements of collaborative learning: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. Each of these three elements works in tandem to help create a community where instructors and students share ideas, discoveries, and experiences to create a meaningful learning experience.

Why is it important to understand the COI model? The COI model provides a means for students to use higher-order thinking skills to negotiate new understandings of content while challenging preconceived unsupported positions; Garrison (2011) cites work by Lipinan to explain the importance of COI. Students are more likely to participate in discussions when they feel welcome as a part of the group. This leads to higher grades and more in-depth interactions during the course. The following are the elements of COI:

- Social presence is the ability of participants to identify with a group, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities.
- Cognitive presence is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical COI.
- Teaching presence is the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes.

Using COI Elements in a Course

- Design the course with clear expectations, guidelines, and appropriate use of technology.
- Structure activities and assignments to build collaboration and comfort among the students.
- Respond to students' posts and e-mails according to guidelines established at the onset of the course.
- Create a welcoming environment, which encourages and supports students.
- Allow thoughtful and meaningful exploration of course content by students through use of guided discussions and group assignments.
- Establish clear evaluations and assessments for assignments, which align with stated objectives.
- Know when to be the sage on the stage or the guide on the side.

Selecting Appropriate Activities

Developed by Garren Cabral, Blythe Jones, Lindsey Luther, Caitlyn Riederer, and Marissa Stewart.

As an online instructor, you may wonder what types of activities you can use in an online environment to make sure students are engaged and learning at the same level as in a traditional classroom environment. Luckily, technology gives us many options and it is easier than you might think to create equivalent activities in an online course. Here are some great ideas that work well in an online classroom.

Introductions

As a part of creating social presence and teaching presence, encourage your students to make introductions at the beginning of the course, and introduce yourself as well. On the discussion board, you can guide the introductions with questions similar to the ones you might use in a traditional classroom. Ask students about their background and their expectations for the course. Encourage students to post a picture. Ask your students how they prefer to learn. Finally, throw in some fun questions to create a social atmosphere and help people get to know each other!

Reflective Activities

The class discussion board is a great place to encourage reflection and critical thinking. There are a variety of prompts that you can use to get students to integrate course content. One option is to use a case study and ask guiding questions to allow students to apply what they have learned in the course. Another idea that is often successful is to have a debate in which students are assigned a position to defend. Discussion board activities are useful because they allow students to interact with content as well as with each other, increasing social presence and cognitive presence. Be creative and you can come up with a variety of discussion activities that suit the goals of the course.

Guest Speakers

With advances in technology, it's easier than ever to incorporate videos into your online course. One great application of videos is to have guest speakers. If there is someone who has extensive knowledge in the subject of the course, or someone who has an interesting perspective, you can film the interview and post the video on the course site. To make it even more interactive, you can collect questions from the students before you do the interview. Videos provide a great alternative to the text-based activities that usually dominate online discussion spaces.

Wiki Spaces

Wiki spaces are areas where multiple parties can contribute to one document. In a CMS, the instructor can track who contributes to the wiki and who edits the document. This allows you to assess participation through multiple drafts of a document, and see who contributes to different areas. One excellent use of a wiki is to encourage students to post links to current events and applications that they have noticed in the real world. For example, in a science class, students could post a link to a magazine article that relates to what they have learned in class. It is a great opportunity for students to practice application of course content, and it enhances social and cognitive presence by allowing students to interact with the material and with each other. Respond to students' wiki posts with your own ideas to further the discussion.

Managing Behavior Problems

Developed by Caryn Filson, Laura Kohlhurst-Jones, Jamie McConnell, Jamie Seger, and Heather Usher.

Behavior issues that prove to be challenging for the instructor may arise in online classrooms. Instructors should deal with issues as soon as they arise to prevent the behavior from escalating and affecting the learning outcomes of other students.

Behavior Problem: Talkers

These students like to hear themselves talk. They spend their energy making noise, often raising unnecessary issues. They may create new threads of discussion or make comments that could fit into existing threads. These students thrive on personal attention, especially from the instructor.

Solution: The instructor can ask the student to reply to existing conversations rather than starting new ones. A personal e-mail with specific suggestions to get the student on track can help the situation. Set an example of behavior you want to see and remind students of proper protocol for the course. Be gentle with this student; he or she may be your saving grace when you need someone to participate without prodding.

Behavior Problem: Shy or Quiet Students

These students do not post on discussions or threads. They are difficult to read in an online setting because of the absence of body language (nodding of the head, etc.). You see little interaction or engagement from this student.

Solution: These students can be urged to participate more often by sending them a private e-mail. The student may be having technical problems, so ask if you can help overcome any issues he or she may have. Get to know something about the student that you can use to engage him or her into a discussion later. If you have the proper software to track the student's online log time, check to see if the student could be logging on and reading other comments and learning more passively rather than actively.

Behavior Problem: Disruptive Students

These students attempt to take over the class. They may address questions or comments made toward others, including the instructor. They may use foul language, be rude, be abusive, or even be threatening to other students.

Solution: To help avoid these situations, instructors can post codes of conduct at the beginning of the course to set guidelines. To deal with a disruptive student, instructors should act quickly to prevent the behavior from escalating. The professor should file all documentation of the student's behavior and address the student privately. Instructors should reassert their authority and ensure students understand expectations. If the student becomes too unmanageable, notifying proper authorities or technical personnel could be a solution.

Behavior Problem: Overachievers

These students make it known from the get-go that they have to get an A in the course. These students may exaggerate their achievements or claim credentials they do not possess. These students may question grading on assignments or challenge your grading system. Some of these students may try to harass you into giving them an A.

Solution: Acknowledging the motivation these students have can help alleviate the intensity of their behavior. Convey to the students that the class will be rigorous and as the instructor you have established the grading criteria and requirements. Let the students know that they must work hard to

earn their grade, as grades will not be awarded without being earned. Keep all correspondence with these students and choose working wisely in e-mails or discussions. It is likely that these students are also keeping a record of your conversations, which could be used against you at a later time.

Building the Online Classroom

Developed by Naomi Adaniya, Brent Grilloit, Brenda Kraner, Regina Mosier, and Ella Smith.

Regardless of the format an instructor opts to use in his or her teaching (blended or hybrid, virtual or physical environment, asynchronous or synchronous), the online virtual classroom has the power to greatly complement and facilitate learning. As the opportunities for online education have grown, instructors have many more tools at their disposal; however, as the number of tools increases, instructors will need to know which ones are worth including.

Although this may be your first opportunity to teach online, rest assured that online education has now become much more commonplace, and, consequently, instructors are far more supported. You will not have to start from scratch. As online education has evolved, relevant software has too, and your home institution may already be providing supportive resources for online instructors (Ko & Rossen, 2010). In addition, "There is no prototypical experience of teaching online," so you have the flexibility to design your online classroom to what works best for you (Ko & Rossen, 2010, p. 8).

Although your online classroom can be designed however you wish, here are some general guidelines to follow that have been developed by experts in this field:

Space

Don't be afraid to use online space. Create or make use of a space for every activity you devise (Ko & Rossen, 2010). At the beginning of the class, you can have a syllabus area, designate an announcements and grading area, and open access to the first lesson or class. By allocating a separate area for each activity, you instantly have more control over the timing of student access and pacing. It allows you to guide students' learning better (Garrison, 2011).

Discussion Boards

Using discussion boards is fairly common in online classes because it allows students to interact with one another and gives students an opportunity to reflect on the lesson, which is one of the strengths of the online learning environment. Familiarize yourself with this tool, its structure and user options, and determine how you want you and your students to view and sort messages.

Other Tools

Teaching moments and interactions with students are definitely not limited to discussion board instruction. In fact, it is recommended that you rely on more than one form of graded assignment, so plan on using other tools (Ko & Rossen, 2010). However, do not introduce tools until you are familiar with them and have determined that they are worth the effort.

Chat rooms and whiteboards. These tools allow students to interact in real-time and even make presentations to all their classmates or a smaller group. Adobe Connect, Wimba LiveClassroom, and DimDim are examples of software that provide this sort of tool.

Group sharing. Tools that facilitate group interactions allow students to gain more from group class work. This can be done as simply as opening a group discussion board, or you can use additional online software like Ning, a sort of social networking site that allows blogs and uploading files. Wiki software may be better as it provides any instructor with the ability to see a page history.

Quizzes and tests. Many of the classroom management programs colleges and universities have purchased or developed already have the tools to allow instructors to design and post online quizzes. However, if you do not have the tool, the following are some online quiz-building resources: SurveyMonkey.com, ProProfs.com, and EasyTestMakers.com.

Voice or audio messages. This can be done through a basic MP3 recorded digitally or through a podcast. Another example is the program VoiceThread, which allows students to draw on an image (or document) and leave a voice message called a doodle. Effective audio messages need to be very clear, so you may need to purchase a higher quality microphone and download a recording and editing program, such as Audacity. A simple way to include audio messages may be through PowerPoint, which allows embedding audio files.

Web 2.0. If you are considering Web 2.0 tools, note that these tools are continually in development. You will need to keep up with these changes, and before you introduce them to your online classroom, consider the tool's availability, time necessary for students to learn the software, overall ease of use, and purpose. The tools included in Web 2.0 are the following:

- Social networking: Facebook
- Virtual worlds: Active Worlds, Second Life
- Avatars: Voki
- Animated movies: DoInk, Digitalfilms

Determining Value

Although some of the additional tools listed here or found online do add to the online classroom, it can be overwhelming for instructors to learn about all the available tools. Online instructors need to determine quickly which tools are worth the effort and which ones are not. Ko & Rossen (2010) offer a helpful list of rules to follow as you determine when to use and not use multimedia tools (see pp. 278-282).

Helpful Links

The following are several useful websites you can access to introduce the various software and tools available to you when teaching in an online classroom:

- EduTools: www.edutools.info/course
- Ohio Learns: www.estudentservices.org/ohiolearns
- Sloan Consortium: sloanconsortium.org